

FORT ENTERPRIZE



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Hellgate Press



Ashland, OR

Fort Enterprize
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Published by Hellgate Press
(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)

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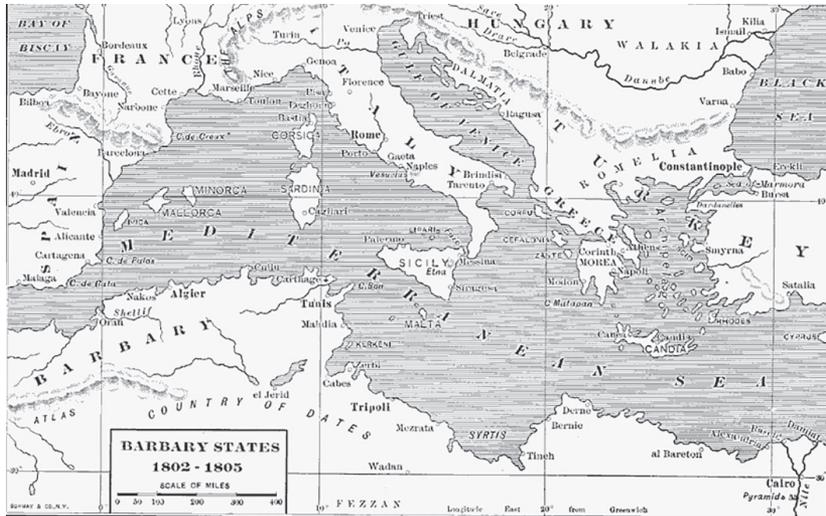
Cover image: Oil painting of Decatur Boarding the Tripolitan Gunboat during the bombardment of Tripoli, 3 August 1804 by Dennis Malone Carter. Courtesy Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, Washington Navy Yard.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the publisher on request.

Printed and bound in the United States of America
First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In Memory of
Lee Roy Howard
United States Marine

IV FORT ENTERPRIZE



❖ PROLOGUE ❖

December 31, 1804

Barrington hung against the limestone wall oozing fetid water as lice crawled through his long matted hair and over his naked body. In the darkness he heard rats scurrying across the slimy cobbled floor. His hands were held over his head, clamped in thick iron shackles that bit cruelly into his wrists. When his back grazed the damp wall Barrington screamed out in pain from the scores of lashes he had received after he attacked the driver.

They were trudging down a hill dragging the wooden sledges loaded with boulders for the breakwater the bashaw's engineers were constructing in the harbor. The harness ropes dug into the bare shoulders and chests of the American seamen, considered slaves by their captors and, worse, beasts of burden. The drivers enjoyed making sport of their misery, forcing Barrington and the others to race the heavy sledges to the waterfront.

Despite the cool winter air, sweat glistened on the emaciated bodies of the Americans. The men in the harnesses closest to the sledges were covered with a fine white dust churned up by the men at the front of the miserable procession.

The only sounds were the buzz of insects, the grunts of the Americans and the high cackling voices of the Arab drivers, who stood atop the sledges brandishing cat o' nine tails.

Barrington watched as the man in front of him, an able seaman named Simms, stumbled and then slowly dropped to his knees on the rocky road,

no longer able to pull the sledge. The driver, angry that his wager might be lost, leapt down from the sledge and raced to the fallen man. He stood over Simms, lashing him with his cat and screaming incoherently at the stricken sailor who lay face down and unconscious on the road.

Perhaps it was the scene of torment before him, one of the countless he had witnessed since he and the others had been captured. It might have been the months of captivity or the crushing work performed without respite day after backbreaking day that suddenly pushed Barrington over the edge.

Without thinking and before his shipmates could stop him, Barrington dropped his harness and strode forward, seizing the driver from behind. The Arab was a head shorter, but wiry and agile. As he struggled, the American violently shoved him to the road. The man's white turban flew from his head as he fell and the back of his bald skull crashed into the sharp edge of a rock, blood splattering earth. The driver was dead.

Barrington stood over the guard, chest heaving, his skin blistered by the desert sun, beard filthy and gone the whiteness of snow from the constant exposure to the elements and the darkness of the Bashaw's dungeon. Simms stirred and Barrington began to help him to his feet when a truncheon struck his shoulders and he collapsed.

Presently Barrington was jolted out of semi-consciousness by the rumble of the dungeon's thick wooden door. It swung open and he saw the silhouette of a turbaned figure in flowing robes backlit by the harsh sunlight flooding the reeking chamber. Barrington blinked his eyes against the pain and then watched as the figure entered the cell and stood before him.

"'Tis a terrible fix you've got yourself into, laddy," a voice said. Barrington recognized the accent of the Scotsman. He said nothing in reply as he hung, chained to the wall, squinting at the face he could not quite see.

More forms materialized from behind the voice. Turkish janissaries unlocked the shackles and Barrington, free, dropped to his knees before being dragged to his feet by two of the biggest soldiers clad in scarlet tunics, turbans and white pantaloons.

“You oughtn’t to have murdered that poor guard,” the voice sneered as Barrington was dragged past. “He was the son of the bashaw’s cousin and well thought of in Tripoli. More’s the pity for you, I’m afraid.”

Barrington was hauled through a bright courtyard and out a barred gate into the streets of the city. Seeing the filthy, naked American, a crowd of merchants and passersby began hurling mud, filth and abuse at the prisoner. The janissaries made no effort to stop them, although one of the huge Turks cuffed a boy who had inadvertently splattered his spotless trousers with a handful of sheep dung. The crowd grew, and now keening women in black veils joined the mob, stoning Barrington who covered his face with one hand and his genitals with his other.

They approached the city wall where Barrington could see stone stairs led to a rampart fifty feet above. There, a group of Tripolitans had gathered. As the prisoner and guards mounted the rampart, Barrington recognized the Bashaw Yusuf Karamanli, a great hirsute ogre in a jewel-studded turban. Above a thick beard the bashaw’s eyes were black as pitch, glimmering as the American stood before him. Yusuf was seated on a plush velvet divan surrounded by his courtiers and six black slaves, each armed with a savage looking lance.

The cold morning wind raked Barrington’s battered body as he glanced to his right at the shimmering Mediterranean Sea. There, at anchor, was the bashaw’s fleet of corsairs, their marauding suspended for the winter. The sailor stood, hands at his sides as the bashaw eyed his bruises and welts and said something in a guttural voice to his attendants who responded with laughter at whatever joke Yusuf made.

Barrington ignored them. His thoughts were on his little red house in Rhode Island overlooking Narragansett Bay, his wife Martha and his

five children. He had not seen them in more than two years when he had shipped out as a first mate aboard the frigate. A warrant officer, the twenty dollars per month he received was more than he ever earned aboard any merchantman. Barrington was also promised a share of any prize should his ship capture enemy vessels.

But now what was left of his ship lay in blackened ruins on the rocks in the harbor. She had burned to the waterline nearly a year before directly below the bashaw's castle. Shortly after that, a flotilla of U.S. ships and gunboats had bombarded the city and Yusuf's castle, destroying or severely damaging many of the bashaw's corsairs and feluccas as well as scores of buildings throughout Tripoli.

Barrington smiled to himself as he thought of how the fat, hairy Karamanli must have raged over the losses.

"His Excellency wishes to know why you are smiling," the Scotsman said. Barrington turned his head to look at Tripoli's Grand Admiral, Murad Reis. The man's complexion was fair, his wiry red hair tied off in a pair of queues, hung from beneath a turban of deep blue satin. His beard was cropped short. He wore green silken robes that fluttered in the breeze like a ship's pennant. A hoop of solid gold hung from his left ear and his teeth were flawless as he smiled at the American, almost sympathetically.

Barrington pointed at the charred bones of the ship he'd once sailed aboard and replied, "I am amused that the Grand Admiral wasn't able to protect the greatest prize ever taken by Tripoli, even as she lay anchored below the ape's hooked nose."

Reis's face went white. His crystal blue eyes glared at the American and he silently damned Barrington's impudence.

"What is it the slave says?!" demanded the bashaw in Arabic. "I don't like his look!"

Reis glanced at Sidi Mohammed Dghies, Tripoli's foreign minister and the only other member of the royal courtiers who spoke English. The man was old and feared Murad Reis so he averted his eyes.

“This Christian dog insults the bashaw and his family!” Reis roared in Arabic as he pointed at Barrington.

Yusuf’s oily eyes darkened. He had been sitting placidly, hands over his enormous belly, fingers like hairy brown sausages locked together, but now he bolted up with startling quickness and grabbed Barrington by the hair. He dragged the prisoner to the edge of the rampart where two Turks seized the seaman by his arms.

At the foot of the city wall, a throng of Arabs was looking up at him. Excited chatter rippled through the mob as men below pointed and smiled evilly. The American now understood he was about to die. Barrington felt a sudden bolt of terror, but not just at being thrown from the parapet. There, halfway down, a row of iron hooks protruded from the wall, their points aimed at him, waiting.

The bashaw stood beside him wearing a sadistic grin while Barrington tried vainly to break free of his captors. If he was to die he would try to leap clear of the vicious hooks. But the janissaries held him fast and even began to laugh as he struggled.

“Dam’a C’ris’an,” Yusuf growled as he pointed at the hooks.

With that Barrington felt himself thrown from the wall, falling toward the upturned faces. But before he hit the ground among the spectators the iron hooks snagged his body, impaling him through his shoulder, his side and through the calf of his right leg. He screamed in anguish as the mob roared its approval. Nathaniel Barrington hung from the vicious hooks, his blood splashed across the whitewashed fortress wall, excited Tripolitans throwing stones at his tortured body.

At first the American struggled but he slowly realized that to fight would make the excruciating pain worse. So Barrington hung from the hooks - for five days and nights...alive. On the sixth day, the pain disappearing, a peaceful vision came to Barrington. It was of Martha and his children. They were all smiling at him and he smiled back at them for one last time.

A full week after he’d been thrown from the parapet, vultures were

picking the American's body clean. The townspeople of Tripoli had returned to their business no longer interested in the rotting corpse of the American sailor dangling from the city's wall.



LOGAN COUNTY, KENTUCKY

July 19, 1850

The day is intolerably hot and, vexed, I once again wonder why it is father has sent me on this burdensome errand. I would much prefer to be back home in my native Virginia engaged in leisurely pursuits with my friends than here, traveling to this loathsome backwater in search of some forgotten military officer. Cockfights, balls, riding, horse racing, hunting, these are what I am missing as I ride along this damnable rutted road, bouncing inside a stagecoach with two greasy drummers both of whom stink to high heaven.

“You *shall* go and you *shall* record for posterity what he has to tell you!” father had commanded me. “The man was a hero yet no one remembers his name!”

I could ask why this duty should fall to me but father’s response would be because the hero in question was the uncle of my late mother. He would explain once again it had been mother’s dying wish that “Uncle Presley’s story” find its way to some publisher for the edification of the reading public. My elder brother, Thomas, is in charge of running father’s plantation and my three sisters are all engaged in genteel womanly pastimes, so father approached me one warm June afternoon as I sat idly in a rocking chair overlooking our estate.

“What were you doing at university but preparing yourself to become a writer of books and such?” father asked. “At least that is what you claimed you were doing. Surely you would find Presley’s exploits

wonderful fodder! If you choose not to do this, then you may work as an overseer in the fields at your brother's direction. I shan't watch you while away your time on endless games and debauchery!"

Working under Thomas, ten years my elder and a stringent taskmaster, was an appalling notion. So here I am.

The stagecoach rolled to a stop and I found myself standing in a dusty crossroads called Russellville in the rolling hills of central Kentucky. There were a few ramshackle houses, a store and a tavern but little else to recommend the place. I was parched with thirst so I entered the tavern, an ancient log structure that might once have catered to Daniel Boone himself.

In the dark, stuffy interior I saw the landlord drawing ale for a customer so I called the same for myself.

"Where you hail from, sonny?" the landlord asked genially as he drew my pint. He was a short man with a mop of black hair clad in a stained leather apron.

I took a long draught of the lukewarm brew. "Fauquier County, Virginia," I replied as I set the mug on the bar.

"Oh, the cap'n's home county!" he replied a broad smile revealing very few teeth.

"The captain?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Captain O'Bannon. Everyone in Logan County knowed the cap'n!"

"Indeed!" I replied excitedly. "He is the fellow I seek! Is he hereabout? I was told he was but no one in my family has had any intercourse with him in some years. My father told me this was his last known domicile?"

"Domicile? Sure 'nough 'tis..." The tavern keeper replied. His tone now turned suspicious. "Why is it you want 'im, anyhow?"

"I am a relative of his. A great nephew to be precise. I wish an interview with him."

"What fer?" the man asked with a scowl. "He's old and he ain't none too well."

I decided it would be best to enlist the man's assistance even though my mission was none of his business, so I continued.

"You see, sir, my mother was his niece. She died two years ago but she was adamant that Captain O'Bannon's history be recorded, perhaps in a book about his life. I am an author...or, I hope to be one someday, so I wish to hear first hand of the captain's deeds and perhaps write a book about them."

"Y' know what he done, don't ya?"

"Not exactly, no," I replied with a look of embarrassment. "I...I believe he served in the war with the Barbary pirates years and years ago...I know that much."

"Oh, he done more than that...much more," the innkeeper remarked cryptically. "But I fig'er he should tell you that if'n he's able. Like I say, cap'n's health ain't good."

"Where might I find Uncle Presley, er, I mean the captain?"

"His plantation is about two mile or so up the north road there," he replied as he pointed through the dirty window. "It's called *Derne*."

"Indeed," I replied as I picked up my valise and portfolio containing my writing implements and paper. "Strange name."

"Not really all that strange 't al'," the tavern keeper said as I took my leave.

From a livery stable I rented a small gray gelding that had enormous difficulty understanding basic commands. I finally got the nag under control and half an hour later, I passed by a wide field of tobacco. It was approaching three o'clock in the afternoon but I saw no field hands and wondered why. I soon spied a dozen Negroes sitting in the shade of an oak tree alongside the road singing one of their spirituals and clapping their hands in time to its rhythm. This was an odd sight, but even more unusual, there seemed to be no white overseer to direct their work.

This was perplexing because, in the fields of Fauquier County, Negro slaves toiled dawn to dusk with only short breaks for feeding and watering.

As I came near, the Negroes saw me. Several of them smiled broadly and waved cheerfully as though they hadn't a care in the world. Frowning, I half raised my hand to acknowledge their greeting.

After another mile, a lovely white clapboard frame house came into view. It sat well off the road, pleasantly shaded by stands of hickory and elm. A well-tended lawn and gardens fronted the house, which I now saw was expansive. It appeared as though its owner had added rooms over the years.

I dismounted and unlashed my belongings as a Negro boy appeared from a red barn nearby. He smiled and waved. "I'll take 'im, sir," the boy said as he trotted up to me and reached for the reins. A soft breeze blew through the thick leaves of the shade trees as I mounted the porch stairs and crossed to the wide front door. Before I could knock, a light skinned Negress opened the door and stood before me. She looked to be in her middle years and wore a calico dress of excellent quality. Her hair was swept back and she moved with casual grace.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said with a bow of her head and a smile. "Welcome to *Derna*. Whom may I say is calling?"

I was taken aback. Our house Negroes wore hand-me-downs and they were not very well spoken, nor did they carry themselves particularly well. By comparison, this black woman seemed almost gentle.

"Um, my name is Mr. Harrison Oswald," I replied. "I am Captain O'Bannon's great nephew."

She didn't reply, so I continued.

"His niece, that is, Margaret O'Bannon, was my mother."

"Was?" she asked. This truly startled me for I was completely unaccustomed to a Negro questioning me.

"Well, my mother died. Two years ago..."

"And the captain is unaware of her death?"

"No. Yes, I mean, no, he likely does not know my mother passed away," I replied as I felt myself becoming impatient. Who did this servant think she was? "See here, woman, I would really like you to announce..."

She slowly closed her eyes and held up her hand for silence. “The captain is resting at present, Mr. Oswald. I won’t disturb him just now. Kindly seat yourself on the porch and I shall serve refreshment there.”

With that, the Negress turned and walked into the house leaving me standing before the front door, mouth agape.

In all my life, a slave had never addressed me so.

❖ 2 ❖

A short time later the Negress reappeared with a tray. On it was a tall glass filled with tea over shaved ice. There were also sugar biscuits. As she bent next to me I noticed she smelled of lavender soap, another startling discovery, since our slaves seldom bathed. She placed the tray on the small table next to my wicker chair and returned silently to the house.

I sipped my tea and marveled at the ice, a luxury seldom seen at my home in the middle of July. Tired from my journey, I must have dozed off because I was startled awake by singing. The Negroes I had seen in the field earlier came trooping up the drive, their tools casually resting on their shoulders, chanting a gospel melody. I consulted my pocket watch and saw that it was just a little past five o'clock. There were at least three hours of daylight left so I wondered why they were quitting their work so early.

A tall buck saw me on the porch as he and the others passed by. He touched the brim of his wide hat. "Afternoon, sir!" he called out. I nodded at him.

"Supper time," a voice declared from the door. I turned and saw the Negress. I began to rise, but she held up her hand. "I mean it is their supper time."

"It is early, is it not?" I replied, confused.

"No. Captain O'Bannon's hands begin work at eight o'clock and retire

for the day at five o'clock. They don't work on Sunday, and only half of a day on Saturday."

"But slaves usually..." I started to reply.

"They are not slaves," the Negress interrupted. "Nor am I a slave, Mr. Oswald. The captain freed us years ago when he arrived here. We are all paid a weekly wage for our labor as well as room and board. We may leave or we may stay."

I was truly astounded. Kentucky law permitted slaves so why on earth would a man pay good money for what he could have at no cost? It certainly must have hurt my uncle's income considerably. Reading my thoughts, the Negress said, "The captain will explain."

Shadows had by now crept across the lawn and the breeze had become noticeably cooler. The Negress walked to the side table and picked up the serving tray. "Won't you come in now and meet Captain O'Bannon?" she invited. "He wishes to make your acquaintance, Mr. Oswald." As she turned she looked over her shoulder. "You may call me Miss Lily. I am the captain's housekeeper."

Following Miss Lily, I entered a long hallway. Dappled sunlight spilled in through the wide Palladian windows and there was the pleasant aroma of pine oil in the still air. I could see the house was immaculate. As I passed through the main hall I noticed fine furnishings were arranged in the parlor and dining room. A stairway to my right led to the second floor.

Paintings were hung throughout the hallway. I paused before one of the pictures because it was different than the portraits and landscapes featured in the other works. It was an image of a hatless young man with flowing black hair standing atop a rampart clutching a standard at the end of which flew an American flag. In his other hand, the figure held a bloody sword. There appeared to be a battle underway, with turbaned figures and soldiers fighting to either side of the young man, white smoke hanging in the air.

"That's the captain," Miss Lily explained as she stepped up beside me and pointed at the gallant figure with the flag and sword. "In 1805."

I frowned. "Where..."

I turned to see her gentle smile. "The captain will explain."

She moved on and I followed. At the end of the hall she stopped, turned toward me and held her hand out toward a room to her left. "Captain Presley Neville O'Bannon will receive you now, Mr. Oswald."

I followed her gesture and entered a paneled study lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves stuffed with hundreds of leather-bound volumes. It was dark within as the shades were drawn, so I let my eyes adjust.

"Welcome, Harrison!" a baritone voice declared. "Miss Lily told me of Margaret's death. I am so sorry. She was my favorite niece, a kind and lovely young girl."

I turned and saw Uncle Presley seated in a leather chair, a shawl drawn around his shoulders. He appeared to be a man of perhaps seventy-five years, his thick head of hair gone to gray, his lean, clean-shaven face framed by long side-whiskers reaching his jaw line. He was still handsome, and although his face appeared pale and waxy, his green eyes were clear beneath bushy black eyebrows shot with silver. I could immediately see the vigorous young man Captain Presley O'Bannon had once been.

I bowed. "Captain O'Bannon, sir, I have heard so much about you."

He slowly pushed himself up from his chair and, despite the shoulders stooped by age and illness, he stood at least six inches taller than me, well over six feet. He held out his hand and I took it. His fingers were long and his grip cool and firm. His eyes met mine as he kindly placed his hand on my shoulder. "I trust your mother did not suffer in her passing."

"No, sir, not very much. She became ill with a fever," I replied sadly, remembering mother's sunken eyes. "The physicians were able to make her comfortable with medicines and she died rather quickly."

He nodded his head knowingly and patted my shoulder. "I am afraid my days are numbered as well, Harrison – may I address you informally, sir?"

"Of course, Uncle," I quickly replied.

"You may call me Presley, or Pres as my shipmates did," he replied taking his seat and drawing the shawl up over his shoulders. "In any event,

the doctor tells me there is little he can do. I have perhaps six months to live.”

“Uncle Presley...Pres...surely there is something...”

He was shaking his head. A smile slowly creased his face, his eyes wandering to the cold fireplace. “No,” he replied, and closed his eyes. “I am ready. It is time. I learned years ago not to fear death. Nor to fight it. It comes to all of us. Some see it earlier than others as with your dear mother. But I am an old man. I have lived my life and I am fortunate that it was full. I am a terrible host, sir,” he said suddenly with an apologetic smile that revealed a few missing teeth. “May I offer you a dram of sour mash whiskey? It is one of the singular pleasures of Kentucky.”

Without waiting for an answer he rang a little silver bell and Miss Lily shortly appeared with a tray on which sat a crystal decanter, glasses and a carafe of water.

I sat in the chair across from Presley as he poured and handed me a glass. I sipped the liquor, which was indeed refreshing. Presley eyed me over the rim of his glass. “You look very much like Margaret,” he said. “You have her eyes and her mouth. I last saw her when she and your father visited us here,” he cast his eyes to the ceiling. “That would have been along about 1835, shortly before my own wife passed.”

“I am sorry about your loss, Uncle,” I quietly replied. At the words, his green eyes briefly misted over and the hand holding his glass trembled for a moment before he cleared his throat.

“Yes. Well, sir, what brings you to *Derne*?” he asked.

“I am embarrassed to say, Presley,” I replied as I shifted in my seat. “You see, I have aspirations to be an author but I have never had much of anything to write about. My mother always thought yours was a fascinating story and wished it told, perhaps in a book. My father had me educated at Charlottesville, so he insisted I come visit you and record the events of your life.”

The captain’s shoulders began to shake. He covered his mouth with his handkerchief and he closed his eyes. I was at first alarmed, because he

appeared to be in the throes of some kind of a seizure. Then I realized he was laughing. "Oh, dear God, that's a fine joke!" he managed to say through his handkerchief. "Events of my life! Very good! Very good!"

My embarrassment was giving way to annoyance, but Presley held up his hand. He dabbed his eyes and continued. "I am sorry, Nephew," he chuckled. "It is not you...it is me. You see, my life's events may be summarized in one word, and that word is Derne. I am very sorry to say your journey was for naught because my life was otherwise extraordinarily ordinary."

My expression must have turned to one of puzzlement because Presley stood again and ambled slowly to the fireplace. He reached up and took down a sword that hung above the mantle. He drew the curved blade from its scabbard and held it out to me. I took it and saw that it was made of fine steel, its hilt bejeweled and filigreed with gold and silver.

"A Mameluke sword," Presley explained proudly. "Presented to me by Hamet Karamanli."

I held out the handle to him and he took it. Presley gazed lovingly at the sword for a moment longer then slid the blade into the scabbard. I sipped my whiskey and looked earnestly over at my uncle, embarrassed.

"Captain O'Bannon," I began in a soft voice, "I am afraid I don't know anything about Derne. My mother often mentioned a battle, but she never told me much of anything about it and," I looked down at the floor, "I am ashamed to admit I was never much interested in learning."

The ticking clock on the wall filled the brief silence.

"You must be hungry, Harrison," Presley finally declared. "Supper is served in a few minutes. Why don't you find Miss Lily. She will show you to your room and provide water and towels. We can talk some more after we dine."

We sat on the porch watching the sunset splash vivid crimson and orange light across the dark blue evening sky while birds chirped and fussed in the nearby trees preparing themselves for the night. The breeze had died, but it was cool so before she permitted Presley to sit on the porch, Miss Lily insisted a thick woolen blanket be draped over his long legs. She had served us hot tea and then retired to the kitchen, where we could hear the clatter of china and silver and above that, Miss Lily's voice singing a sweet tune as she worked.

My uncle was staring out across the lawn and gardens while he rocked meditatively in his chair. I stayed silent and sipped my tea, not wishing to disturb his thoughts. After many minutes, we heard a screech in the nearby woods.

"A barn owl," my uncle explained. "He visits me most every evening about this time."

As though in answer, the owl screeched again and then was silent. "The Indians say that the presence of an owl foreshadows death," Presley observed. "I have read much about the Indians. That is my passion. Reading, I mean."

"Mine as well, Uncle Pres," I replied brightly before adding, "when I am not otherwise, um, engaged."

"Ah, I understand," he smiled. "When you are behaving like a young

man! Sport, gambling and, dare I say,” he raised his bushy eyebrows, “the gentle attentions of the ladies?”

I shot him a sheepish smile.

“We can speak freely, my boy,” he continued. “I was a young man once, a marine officer aboard the ships sent by President Jefferson to the Mediterranean to deal peace or death to the bloody Mohammedans. During my service I spent many a pleasant evening with my fellow lieutenants in the company of lovely Spanish and Italian ladies in the ports of Cadiz and Naples.”

“But, Pres, I thought you were a captain.”

He chuckled again. “No, no, I was never a captain of the Marines, I’m afraid. I resigned because the commandant would not promote me after Derne. I think he was jealous of my fame. Anyway, the folk hereabouts took to calling me Captain O’Bannon when I arrived in Kentucky and I, well, I never corrected them. A silly vanity, but no harm I suppose.”

I nodded and he continued.

“So, Harrison, you wish to know about Derne, eh?” he asked. “I was just thinking when we sat down that no one has asked me to recount my story for many, many years...I mean, the tale of the *entire* enterprise.” His eyes now shifted and he was once again looking thoughtfully out over the lawn that had all but disappeared in the falling darkness.

“Mother sometimes mentioned a fellow named Eaton,” I prompted him.

At the sound of the name, Presley pinned me with his green eyes and then slowly broke into a wide grin. “General Eaton!” he exclaimed. “Now there’s a fellow whose story has been heard by everyone!” He paused and gave me an apologetic glance. “Well, almost everyone. General William Eaton! If you didn’t ask him about the enterprise, he was sure to tell you anyway! I understand he made a nuisance of himself in Washington what with all his talk about Tobias Lear’s treachery. And then there was the business with Aaron Burr later on.” He shook

his head sadly. “But I was a soldier, trained to follow the orders I was given and to carry them out to the best of my abilities. People never really seemed interested in that. I suppose I am not the raconteur the general was...or perhaps I was more humble about what I did...what we all did.”

“What *did* you do, Uncle?” I asked earnestly.

A long moment passed. His face was hidden in shadows as we spoke, but he presently leaned forward in his chair and light from a nearby window revealed his clenched eyes and mouth. He began gasping, so I bolted from my chair. “Miss Lily!” I cried out. “Come quickly! It’s Uncle Presley!”

I heard quick steps in the hall and then she was there, kneeling by his side tenderly stroking his head. “Shhhh,” he whispered, “it will pass. It will pass.”

He was clutching her hand, which must have been painful, but her face remained placid as she now moved her other hand to the side of his face. I could see whatever seizure he had experienced was slowly releasing its grip. His face began to relax and he seemed able to breathe again. Miss Lily looked up at me. “This happens once or twice a day,” she explained. “It’s the disease.”

“Can...can you make him comfortable?” I asked, my voice strained with worry.

“I have laudanum...please, help me take him up to his bedroom.”

An hour later, Uncle Presley lay asleep. I thought his breathing sounded shallow, but his face was peaceful so Miss Lily turned down the lamp and we left the bedroom together.

“Would you like more tea?”

I said I did so she led me to the kitchen where she brewed a small pot. I watched her delicate hands and movements and was once again amazed that any Negress could seem so completely refined. She poured the tea in small porcelain cups, one for me and one for herself. As we sat at the kitchen table in companionable silence, it occurred to me that I had

never shared a moment like this with a Negro. It was almost as though we were equals.

“The doctor tells me he has a wasting disease in his organs,” she remarked sadly. “The best they can do is help him with the pain.”

I said nothing for a long moment. “How long have you been at *Derne*, Miss Lily?” I finally asked her.

“Since Presley arrived here in 1810 with his bride, Miss Matilda,” she said. “I was born here. My parents were slaves that came with the plantation when Presley’s wife inherited it from the estate of General Daniel Morgan. You know of him?”

Dan Morgan was legendary in Virginia, the Revolutionary War hero whose many exploits included dealing the British a crushing defeat at Cowpens in South Carolina.

“Every schoolboy in the Old Dominion knows of General Morgan!” I declared, “Even dense fellows like me.”

Lily nodded, returning my smile and continued” “I was a young girl then and,” she looked about, “this house was much smaller. The captain added many of the rooms; the study you saw today, for example, and he bought more adjoining acreage over the years.”

“What does he produce here?”

“Principally tobacco. But also corn, cotton, wheat and some barley,” she smiled proudly. “It’s a very, very productive plantation. And it is all run without slave labor.”

I was stung by this observation and felt myself getting angry with her. She saw my dark look and reached over to pat my arm.

“Young man, Harrison, please take no offense,” she said in a kindly voice. “But you should know it is your uncle’s opinion that, in the near future, slavery will be abolished forever. He believes it is a wicked and reprehensible practice that beggars any nation permitting it.”

Now I was truly angry. My father owned several thousand acres in Fauquier County and our slaves were crucial to its success. How dare this nigger woman lecture me on a necessary institution peculiar to the

Southern states? And what the hell was Presley O'Bannon thinking? He was a son of Virginia and surely understood what slaves meant to us!

Her liquid brown eyes met mine, and she continued to pat my arm for a long, silent moment. "Do you know how and where your uncle formed his opinion about slavery?" she asked.

I shook my head curtly in response, my lips pursed.

"In the war with the Barbary pirates," she replied quietly.

"But...but what does that have to do with..."

"When he is feeling up to it," she interrupted me as she rose from her chair, "the captain will explain."

❖ 4 ❖

I awoke early and after I had breakfasted I looked in on Uncle Presley. He was asleep. I was pleased that his breathing was now deeper and rhythmic. It was a fine morning, so I decided to take a ride. I found the Negro groom at the stable behind the house and he happily tacked up a big white mare for me instead of the gelding I'd rented.

"Y' enjoy ridin' her, Missa Harr'son," the boy explained as he cinched off the girth. "Dolly here know'd the plantation and she very obedient."

Indeed the mare proved to be a wonderful mount as we toured the grounds in the coolness of the morning. Uncle Presley's farm was set among low hills and broad fields. I found a trail that led through a dense hardwood forest. After a half mile, I came upon a vast field of corn that promised a bumper crop come autumn. I turned Dolly back onto the trail that led up a hill. At its crest was a clearing that offered a pleasant view of Uncle Presley's sprawling white house, barn and its outbuildings, and, in the distance, his verdant fields where the hands were at work. The vista was altogether pleasing. Then I thought again of the sick old man in the house below, and the moment passed. I remounted and rode back to the stable.

"Good morning, lad!" Pres welcomed me as I entered his study. He placed the book he had been reading on a side table. "I understand you were out for a ride. I trust it was enjoyable."

“Indeed, Uncle, very,” I replied. “*Derne* is most impressive. I rode to the top of the hill to the north.”

“A wonderful place for a man to sit and contemplate life,” he smiled. “I often go up there...well, I used too. I can’t ride anymore, but in years past, I sat on the top of that hill and thought about how fortunate I have been.”

I made no reply to this, so he continued, his eyes wandering to the nearby window where he could look out over a garden of flowers. “My days as a boy in the Virginia woods, as a Marine officer, my beautiful late wife, Miss Lily and, of course, the enterprise. I have been blessed.”

“Are you feeling well this morning, Pres?” I asked.

He glanced over at me with a thin smile, said, “Never well, these days, I am sorry to report, sir. As you saw last evening, this disease has its evil talons in my guts. I am told I can expect the seizures to become more frequent and more painful, if that’s possible. Thank God in heaven for Miss Lily and laudanum.”

His eyes met mine. “As you may have ascertained, Harrison, Lily is more than a mere servant to me.”

I frowned in my confusion.

“A year after my dear wife died, Miss Lily and I became, well, more than friends. We became companions, if you take my meaning.”

I must now have looked completely shocked, but he smiled indulgently and continued.

“I was lonely and in a deep sadness over my loss. I had stopped working, riding, reading...I had stopped living, Harrison; I stopped caring about everything. I spent my days in the house grieving and drinking too much,” he cleared his throat. “Miss Lily saved me. Brought me back to life, you might say.”

There was nothing new about a white man communing with a Negress. Indeed, my own first carnal experience had come with a slave girl named Pixie in the woods behind our home in Fauquier County. But Uncle Presley was in love with Miss Lily and it now dawned on me that

she was, for all intents and purposes, his wife. That was an altogether different circumstance and, in Virginia at least, altogether forbidden.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat at this bit of news. Presley watched this and smiled.

“Yes, I know,” he said quietly. “But, you aren’t here to discuss social mores with me. You wish to know about the enterprise.”

I nodded absently, still reeling from uncle’s revelation about Miss Lily. He seemed not to notice.

“Fauquier County, Virginia,” he stated. “Like you, that’s where I grew up. Wonderful place for a boy. I hunted and fished and explored. My father was very indulgent with me. He allowed me to go to school when I wished, but he also instilled in me my love of reading.”

I pointed at a violin displayed on a book shelf and said, “Did he teach you to play?”

“He did, though my fingers won’t let me fiddle anymore,” he replied, flexing his hands. He nodded at the violin and said, “That particular instrument has had quite a history. Anyway, I wish I could have remained a boy, but one day father told me I must find some gainful employment,” he chuckled at this recollection. “He knew the county tax collector was looking for an assistant, so he offered him my services. You see I was taller and stronger than most and you needed those attributes as a tax collector far more than you needed a head for numbers.”

I pictured young Presley riding from farm to farm, shop to shop, tavern to tavern with a ledger book, meeting with unfriendly receptions.

“I didn’t like the work,” he continued. “It was boring and I was a bit of a firebrand so I often exchanged fists with reluctant taxpayers. That didn’t help county revenues.”

I laughed out loud at this and he joined me. “One day I encountered a military officer at a tavern seeking recruits for a new service called the Marine Corps. He was dressed in a dashing uniform that I knew the ladies would find attractive. I was not familiar with what Marines did,

so the officer explained that they were assigned to navy ships to prevent mutinies.”

“Like constables?” I interrupted.

“Yes and no,” he replied. “You see, the Navy was a new force. American ships mounted as many as forty-four guns and were crewed by three hundred or more sailors, many of them from England, France, Portugal and other such maritime nations. When the American frigates were at sea, mutiny was always a possibility. Marines were aboard each ship to keep order. During battle, we would stand guard against gun crews abandoning their posts. In close combat, we fired from the decks and rigging on the enemy.”

“So you joined?”

“Naturally!” he barked out with a laugh. “The recruiting officer made the service sound a great deal more exciting than collecting taxes from angry landowners! He was also impressed with my size and the fact that I was well read and spoken, so he recommended to the commandant of Marines that I be given a commission.”

His eyes roamed to the window and over the sunlit garden, his face relaxed, and I saw the fleeting shadow of a young Marine lieutenant. He paused for several moments, and then he abruptly looked back at me, the old man reappearing.

“I dreamed about it last night,” Presley began. “About the enterprise, I mean. I saw General Eaton in his white Arab robes and headdress riding his horse through the endless desert once again, waving his scimitar, leading our bizarre little army toward the Tripolitan stronghold at Derne. But I get ahead of myself. You see, the bashaw...”

“Bashaw?” I interrupted him.

“The regent....um, the prince of Tripoli,” he explained with a flutter of his hand.

“So the ruler of Tripoli, then?”

“Yes, the ruler, but answerable to Selim, the Sultan in Constantinople, as were all the tyrants of the Barbary,” Presley continued. “The bey, dey

and bashaw of Algeria, Tunis and Tripoli; they were all beholden to the Ottomans and required to pay this Selim fellow annual tribute.” Presley glanced again out the window, and I could see his mood darken.

“And America was required to pay these regents tribute,” he continued, his voice tight. “We sent our diplomats and emissaries to try to reason with them but it was no use. Theft and murder were their stock in trade. They only respected the flags of the nations that paid them their blood money. Any other shipping was fair game, sir. *We* were fair game”

“We?” I asked, incredulous.

“Oh yes, Harrison! We! The United States of America!” Presley replied. “It is difficult to believe, I know, but after our own merchantmen were plundered and our own innocent seamen thrown in Tripoli’s dungeons and then tortured, we were left with little choice.”

This was history I had never before heard. How was it possible that America could be so ruthlessly coerced? Presley continued.

“We had no Navy to fight the sons of bit....,” he looked over his shoulder. “Those people! America was shamefully forced to pay tribute until Congress finally understood that the only way to deal with the dogs was to bring them to heel.”

“So the Navy was founded?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. Keels for six frigates were laid,” Presley proudly replied. “The first real American war ships. And it was to the Barbary Coast I sailed aboard *Adams* in 1802.”

“And it was there that you encountered this Eaton?”

Again, Uncle Presley seemed to become distracted. A minute passed and then another.

“William Eaton was America’s consul in Tunis,” Pres replied. “He was a kind of diplomat who looked after our interests, always negotiating with the tyrant there and doing whatever he could to protect American and European merchantmen.”

Presley sat back in his chair and said, “A remarkable man, really, as I came to learn. He graduated Dartmouth College, fought in the

Revolution and then on the Georgia and Ohio frontiers. He was an expert swordsman and he could shoot and ride better than any man I ever knew.”

I was impressed for certainly my uncle had seen some of the best rifle and horsemen in his time.

“He also had a gift for languages,” Pres continued. “Along with French, General Eaton could speak the Arabic and several derivations of it. Maybe his most important trait, though, was his ability to organize and lead. I never really had those skills.”

“So Eaton was a military man then?” I asked.

Pres suddenly broke into a grin. “He should’ve been! It was he who devised the enterprise and convinced President Jefferson to approve it! But no,” he shook his head, “William Eaton was not a general....at least not officially, shall we say?”

Miss Lily appeared at the study door. She was smiling as she crossed her arms over her bosom. “Oh my word!” she declared, “You have him talking about the enterprise.” She looked mischievously my way. “I hope you have plenty of time, Mr. Harrison Oswald!”

“Quiet woman!” Presley replied in mock anger, “I was just getting to the part about meeting General Eaton!”

Before he had finished speaking, she had her fists on her hips and was scowling at him playfully. “That will be quite enough Lieutenant O’ Bannon!” she scolded him as she hid a smile. “Oh, I *am* sorry...I meant *Captain* O’ Bannon! It is time for your nap, sir!”

Presley looked my way, bemused. “After a broadside like that one, Harrison, I am compelled to strike my colors and surrender to the tender mercies of my foe.” His eyes met Miss Lily’s and the two gazed tenderly at one another.

To my complete surprise, I found myself smiling at the scene before me.

As he reached the door, Uncle Presley turned back to me pointing at the bookshelves. “I have several volumes about the struggle our naval forces waged with the bast...I mean Barbary pirates. You may wish

to peruse them, Harrison. We learned much about the nature of the Mohammedan in those days that I hope is not soon forgotten.”