

Extract from *Dangerous Freedom*

Lawrence Scott

IT WAS PART of a story Master told Lady Betty and the company in the drawing room that evening, the story of the escape of an American gentleman's slave who had come with him from Norfolk in Virginia.

The gentleman had bought the man in that town at an auction. Stewart Esquire was the man's owner. He was also associated with that town they heard a lot of at that time, Boston, in Massachusetts. Dido could not hold all the information, which her Master gave to the company. She heard the words *cashier* and *paymaster of customs* at the port of that same town.

This gentleman's man was now a runaway in London and Dido was imagining him at large, along the lanes, in hovels, in alleyways and under hedgerows. She imagined him by the river, hunkered down in a boat moored on the mud flats, waiting for the tide. How would she have survived?

It was like an adventure as she retold it to herself later in bed or sitting on

the windowsill, listening to the wind in the trees. Could this happen to her? She had noted his name in her diary, *Sommersett*. Little did she know then that his name would come to inhabit the house at Bloomsbury Square and dominate their lives for a whole year and change their lives beyond anything, echoing through the King's realm in all the newspapers and as far his colonies in America and the West Indies and accompanying her to the dairy and to the poultry, or just while she was stood at the window and watched Master and Beth go out for their afternoon ride as far as Lord Southampton's park. It affected the mood of Christmas that year. Little did she know that she would become so familiar with the life of this man, James Sommersett.

And all the while Beth paid attention to her sewing during her Master's first telling of that story. It was how they, Beth and Dido, were different. On the stairs Beth said to Dido as they went up to bed, 'Aren't you really a slave, Dido? Might it not happen to you, be captured and sent back to wherever, a plantation in Jamaica? Sent back in irons? Do you not fear that?'

So she had been listening, Dido thought, and she had not even pricked her finger with her sewing needle. Dido did not answer her question. Beth had not even dropped her pattern on the floor, she thought, all seeming seamless, not shocking, with her own life and the music she played.

Mr James Sommersett's search had been a yearning for liberty. He was

running away from his master, running into the fields of England, through every hedgerow, down every alley and lane for his freedom. His plight was always on her mind.

The legalities were beyond Dido then. *Habeas corpus*? That man Sommersett had good friends who had brought a charge of *habeas corpus* against Mr John Knowles who held Sommersett in the ship *Ann & Mary* on the Thames on the instruction of Mr Stewart with the intention of taking him to Jamaica. He was ordered to bring Sommersett before her Master on the King's bench. In Dido's mind it was the story that traversed such a large number of places: the Guinea coast to Virginia, crossing oceans and continents and coming to rest here in her Master's house.

Servants whispered it along the corridors, stopping conversation when doors were opened or passing Lady Betty on the stairs. The story surprised Dido in the creak of the floorboards, the rattle of the window at night, and in particular when she peeped at the newspapers. Visitors in carriages arrived at the house with questions for her Master about the story. They told it in the bustle of Bloomsbury Square. She overheard Lady Betty's sister Mary saying, 'This reading of newspapers is quite precocious in someone of her kind.' And so it was, Dido supposed, getting her story from the columns of print.

She heard the same story again when Mr French was providing her Master with his nosegay from the very finest flowers as he was leaving the house after his cup of coffee. Then she remembered her Master saying, 'You, young girl, must remember that you must not venture beyond the Square. There'll be much more space for you to play at Caen Wood with your cousin.'

Dido hazarded a question: 'Will I be captured and put in irons and sent back, like James Sommersett?'

'What are you talking about, young lady? Your imagination, Dido, is growing faster than your sentences, or the questions that you frame for me. In fact, your imagination is growing as fast as your body, child.' The blood rose in her cheeks at the mention of her body.

Then Dido thought what next she might ask which was the point of her first question. It was about James. That was his name, Sommersett's name. He had been baptised in the hope of freedom. Her mother had taught her that. 'They say baptism bring freedom, but is a lie.' She had smiled at her blunt assertions.

So then, before her Master entered his carriage, she asked again, 'What about James?' She made bold to call him by his first name, so familiar had she become with his story. She almost knew him and wondered if his plight might be her own.

'And what James is it that you mean, Dido, my dear?' Her Master asked. Sometimes she was a *young girl* and at other times a *young lady* to her Master and *Dido, my dear*, at other times. She thought she was a young lady when she was getting above herself, sounding like she knew more than she did. But then she did know, quite a lot, about this horrifying story. But at this moment she did not venture any further and her Master was already into his carriage which took him to the Great Hall at Westminster or to the King's Bench in the Middle Temple where he became like one of his portraits dressed in scarlet with hood and sleeves of snowy ermine.

'You do not know what you speak of,' her Master answered from the window of his carriage.

She stood and stared. Then she turned and went back into the house determined to know everything.

If she had been James Sommersett standing in the dock she would have been terrified of her Master on his bench.

He had sauntered off with his nosegay to sit on the King's bench and pronounce judgment. It got postponed and postponed again. The world hung in the balance on that judgment. The newspapers waited, ready to imagine an outcome if not given a verdict and the facts concerning the horrifying story of a man in irons.

This story took the place of all the stories Dido was reading at the time, even Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and his man, Friday.

'You see what happen to that one that get capture?'

Her mother had been warning her. She followed all in *The Advertiser*. Her ability to read had started with her English mistress in Pensacola, the mistress who had told her the story of snow. Her words frightened Dido. 'Will I get captured and put in irons?' Dido asked her mother.

The shiver she felt might have been the damp of the season as the evening declined. She had a cough then that persisted.

'Them can't give you no medicine for that?' Her mother knew that they could and that they did. But she wanted to find fault. Dido told her that it would not make her love her less that they were kind to her. Her eyes were distrustful of her words. Her mother could be jealous of Lady Betty. 'Is steal she steal you? She can't bear children of she own?'

She was left to answer and had no other words but 'I love you', kissing her on the cheek.

'Come child, now, none of that when we have things to do.' Her mother could be brusque. Dido knew she loved her affection.

'He come from Africa, taken. Captured is the word I want,' her mother continued. 'They bought and sold him.'

As she listened to her mother's words it felt as if the cotton fields had come right up to the windows. There was field upon field as Dido looked out over London from Mary Hill in Greenwich, swaying cane fields and the knocking thud of the mills moved by the tread of men and women in irons. Then she saw the harbour of Pensacola. She saw James Sommersett on a ship in the port. Her mother had told her not to look. And *come inside, child, don't look at them kind of thing*. She saw him standing in her Master's court before the King's Bench in the Great Hall at Westminster.

She became him. She was a slave, a slave like James Sommersett.

Lawrence Scott

Lawrence Scott is a prize-winning novelist from Trinidad & Tobago. His most recent novel is *Dangerous Freedom* (2021). He was awarded a Lifetime Literary award in 2012 by the National Library of Trinidad & Tobago for his significant contribution to the literature of Trinidad and Tobago. He was elected as a Fellow of The Royal Society of Literature in 2019.

His second novel *Aelred's Sin* (1998) was awarded a Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Best Book in Canada and the Caribbean (1999). His first novel *Witchbroom* (1992) was a BBC 'Book At Bedtime' and was translated into French as *Balai de Sorcière* (2020). His other novels are *Light Falling on Bamboo* (2012) and *Night Calypso* (2004). His collections of short stories are *Leaving by Plane Swimming Back Underwater* (2015) and *Ballad for the New World* (1994). In 1986, his short story *The House of Funerals* was awarded the Tom-Gallon Trust Award by The Society of Authors.

He is the editor of *Golconda Our Voices Our Lives* (2009), a collection of stories, poems and archival photographs collected through a Public History project on the Golconda sugarcane estate in Trinidad (UTT Press, 2009). His poems are published in a number of journals and anthologies.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

© Lawrence Scott