



THIEVES OF MERCY

JAMES NELSON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Having survived the bloody Battle of New Orleans and the loss of his ship, Captain Sam Bowater is given new orders – to take command of an ironclad warship being built in Memphis, Tennessee. Bowater and his men are taken up river by ‘Mississippi’ Mike Sullivan, one of the wild, undisciplined captains of the River Defence Squadron, only to find, on their arrival, that their ship is not even half-built and the enemy is closing in fast.

Against his better judgment, Bowater joins forces with the Sullivan on board his river gunship. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Confederates once again fling themselves bravely at the overwhelming power of the Yankee invaders. The deadly fight along the Mississippi ends at last in the massive naval battle of Memphis, as the Confederates attempt to hold back the Northern advance.

This heart-pounding novel continues the story of the Civil War at sea begun in *Glory in the Name*.

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THIEVES OF MERCY

A Novel of the Civil War at Sea

James Nelson

*To Jonathan Bonaventure Nelson,
my beautiful boy*

*Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very warlike
appointment gave us chase.*

*Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled
valor, and in the grapple I boarded them. On the instant
they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner.*

They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy ...

SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*,
ACT IV, SCENE 6

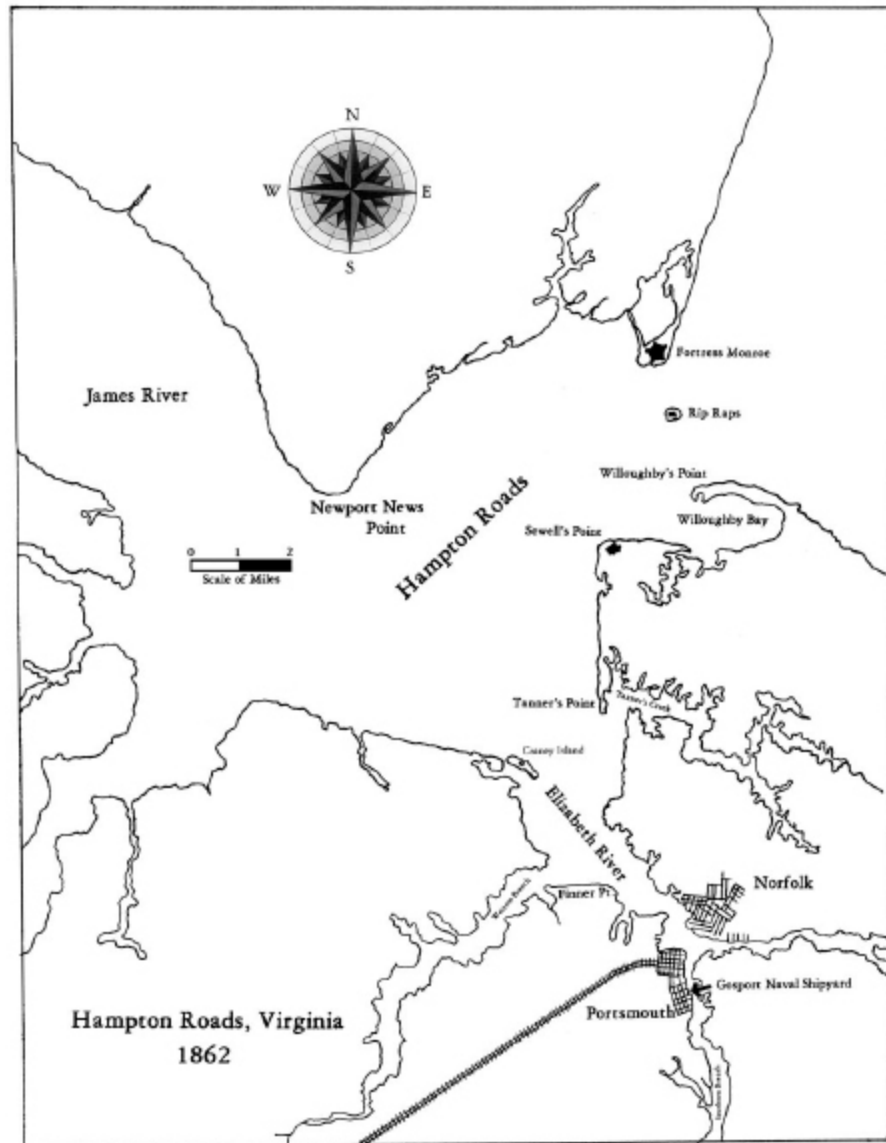
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And last, I would like to thank Lisa Nelson for ... well ... you know ...



PROLOGUE

The completion of the iron-clad gunboat at Memphis, by Mr Shirley, is regarded as highly important to the defenses of the Mississippi. One of them at Columbus would have enabled you to complete the annihilation of the enemy.

Stephen R. Mallory,
Secretary of the Confederate Navy,
to General Leonidas Polk

It was nighttime in the shipyard, the working day long over. But there were men there still, nearly fifty men, standing around in the dirt and sawdust. The air was damp and warm, alive with summer bugs and the sounds of frogs and the lap of water. Just to the north, the lights that climbed up the steep banks and low hills along the Mississippi showed where the city of Memphis was still awake, like the soldiers at Agincourt, too restless to sleep on the eve of battle. To the men in the shipyard, the city might as well have been Agincourt, it felt so far removed.

The men were shipwrights and house carpenters. They were blue-water sailors and river men and black gang. They were from Charleston and New Orleans, Yazoo City and Memphis and Richmond and Mobile, all the states that now formed the Confederate States of America, and a few transplant Yankees thrown in.

There was John Shirley, dancing from one foot to another. There was Ruffin Tanner, his wounded arm still bound with a white bandage. There was Hieronymus Taylor, chief engineer, leaning on a crutch, his splinted leg thrust out in front of him. The glow of his cigar looked like a signal lantern. Red at the masthead.

At the head of them stood Lt. Samuel Bowater, Confederate States Navy. Thirty-five years old, a fifteen-year veteran of the United States Navy, where, after some brief action as an ensign during the Mexican War, he had spent his time visiting foreign ports and seeing that the various ships aboard which he served as lieutenant were clean to navy standards. There had not been much more to do in the old navy.

Bowater smoothed his moustache and goatee, stepped off to the right to get a better look at the ship. The half-dozen men behind him carried torches that spilled their light over the shipyard, the sawmill, the piles of unused timber, the hastily built shacks to house the blacksmith's and carpenter's shops, the looming hull of the vessel.

Good. She looks good, Bowater thought. But she was not finished. She had been slated for completion in December of '61, and now it was June of '62 and she was far from done.

It was not for want of trying. It was for want of everything else: iron plate, bolts, machinery, wood, manpower. Timber came from five different sawmills, iron from all over the Confederacy. The first load of bolt and spike iron was taken before it even arrived, not by Yankees, but by officers of the Confederate States Navy who reckoned they had a better use for it.

Despite the pleas of contractor John Shirley to Stephen Mallory, and Stephen Mallory's pleas to the army to detail a minimum of one hundred men with shipbuilding experience to the project, the shipwrights arrived in Memphis in twos and threes. Shirley made use of house carpenters, day laborers, anyone who knew which end of the hammer to hold.

Given all that, it was something of a miracle what Shirley had accomplished. Two ironclads, nearly complete, built in Memphis on the low banks of the Mississippi. The *Arkansas* and the *Tennessee*.

Of the two, the *Arkansas* was much further along, her woodwork all but done, her iron plating bolted on as far as the main deck, her engines on board, if not in place. Bowater looked at the empty ways on which she had been built. The grease from her launch still shone in the light of the torches. They had slid *Arkansas* into the river and towed her south to Yazoo City. Away from the onrushing Yankees, General Halleck and Commodore Davis and his fleet of ironclad river gunboats coming down from the north, Farragut coming up from the south. Towed her to the heart of the Confederacy, away from the anaconda, squeezing tighter.

But the *Arkansas* was not Bowater's concern. His was the *Tennessee*. His third command.

It was just over a year before that he had joined the Confederate Navy, right after witnessing the bombardment of Fort Sumter in his native Charleston. Bowater was a Southern man, a Southern gentleman, but at the time he was also an officer of the United States Navy. He had sworn an oath to that service, and gentlemen of the South did not break oaths easily.

He went with his state, in the end, and with his new country, and had been given command of the CSS *Cape Fear*, an armed tug, which had been shot out from under him in the naval skirmish in Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. He and his men had been transferred *en masse* to Yazoo City to form the crew of the ironclad *Yazoo River*, which had met her death at New Orleans, fighting to stop Farragut's fleet from pushing up from the delta to take the Crescent City.

Now Farragut was at New Orleans, that city in Yankee hands, and once again Bowater's men had been moved as a unit to their next ship. The *Tennessee*.

The white pine planking of her hull looked orange in the light of the torches, her topsides all but lost in the dark. She was framed in oak and planked with pine but there was

no iron plate on her yet. The iron was not even there – it was still on the Arkansas side of the river, still waiting for payment. *Tennessee* was a turtle without a shell.

She was not huge, by ironclad standards. One hundred and sixty-five feet long, more than one hundred feet shorter than the CSS *Virginia*, the former *Merrimack*. Thirty-five feet wide. Her waterline, scribed in the planking, was visible six feet above Bowater's head. She was not huge, but she would have been powerful. She might have changed the entire strategic situation on that part of the river.

Son of a bitch, Bowater muttered. He was dragging his feet now, and there was no call for it.

He was not the only Confederate officer there. The provost marshal for the city of Memphis stood nearby, watching, his gray frock coat unbuttoned in the warm night, arms folded with mounting impatience. It was by his order that they were there, doing the job they were doing. But it was not the provost's ship. He did not share Bowater's feelings. He coughed impatiently.

'All right, you men.' Bowater turned to his crew behind him. 'Go ahead.'

The men with the torches stepped forward, solemn, as if they were part of some religious service. They spread out along the length of the hull and thrust the flames into the bales of cotton stacked under the wooden hull, cotton soaked in turpentine.

All along the length of the *Tennessee* the flames of the torches swelled into flames like campfires and then like bonfires as the cotton was engulfed. The flames rose up and threw their light all over the shipyard, lighting up the watching men so they were all bright light and dark shadow, flickering over the far ends of the shipyard.

Bowater stepped back. The heat was already too much to bear. He could see the planking on what would have been the ship's wetted surface turn black. The caulking

between the planks began to burn and then the planks themselves flared as the heavy timbers began to catch fire.

Bowater heard the limping gait of Hieronymus Taylor as the chief engineer stepped up beside him. 'Well, goddamn me, Cap'n,' Taylor said around his cigar, his accent thick New Orleans. 'There goes your third ship.' He pulled out a flask of whiskey, took a drink, handed it to Bowater. Bowater took it, put it to his lips, and took a big mouthful, a thing he would have considered unthinkable a year before. Captains did not drink with the crew. Samuel Bowater did not drink whiskey from a flask. He did not drink with the likes of Hieronymus Taylor.

It had been a long year.

'Seems the life span of your ships just gets shorter and shorter all the damn time,' Taylor observed, taking the flask back.

'Don't see how it could get much shorter than this, Chief.' They had been there for less than a month, working like madmen to get the ship in the water. Finishing her was not even a consideration, they hoped only to get her floating, so that like her sister ship *Arkansas* she might be towed away.

It was June fifth, and the *Tennessee* was still on the stocks and the Yankees were just up the river. The following day there would be a battle, a river battle that would determine whether Memphis would be in Union or Confederate hands.

If the Confederates won, and if they could hold the Yankees at bay, then there was still a chance that they could get the *Tennessee* in the water and downriver to safety.

But if the Union won, then Yankee shipwrights would complete the *Tennessee* with an efficiency that the South could not match, and the trim little ironclad would be used against her own people.

It was a gamble over who would win the river fight, and everyone knew which side was the odds-on favorite, so before the battle even started they burned the ship on the ways.

CHAPTER 1

Latitude, elevation and rainfall all combine to render the Mississippi Valley capable of supporting a dense population. As a dwelling-place for civilized man it is by far the first upon our globe.

Harper's Magazine, February 1863

IT WAS A month before the burning of the *Tennessee*, and ten hours after he met the man, that Samuel Bowater first saw someone smash a chair over Mississippi Mike Sullivan's head.

The one doing the smashing was Ruffin Tanner, a blue-water sailor of nearly twenty years' experience, who had been with Bowater since Bowater had commanded the *Cape Fear* in Norfolk.

Tanner was a powerful man, certainly as strong as Sullivan, though not nearly as big. The chair, however, was a meager affair, with thin turned legs and a cane seat, and it shattered over Mike's thick head and wide shoulders like a china figurine and did little more than slew his slouch hat around, leaving Tanner red-faced and gripping the two smashed back rails.

It was two days before that chair-smashing, all-hands-in-brawl that Bowater finally heard from the Navy Department in Richmond.

After the Battle of New Orleans, after the *Yazoo River* had been battered to death by Farragut's big ships, Bowater and his remaining men had returned to Yazoo City. They had no other place to go, and the Yankees were still far from that Yazoo, so it seemed like a good choice. Bowater began to send telegraphs off to Richmond, looking for instructions.

On the third of May, word arrived.

Lt. Samuel Bowater, CSN
Yazoo City, Mississippi

Sir:

You and those men still under your command will proceed with all possible dispatch to Memphis, Tennessee, where you will assume command of the ironclad *Tennessee* currently building there. You will exert all possible effort in the completion and fitting out of that vessel. Recent events along the Mississippi have made it imperative that this ironclad sloop of war be readied to meet the enemy.

Respectfully,
Stephen Mallory
Secretary of the Navy

Bowater read the words with some skepticism. Sometimes it seemed as if Mallory believed that calling a ship an ironclad would make it so. The last time Mallory had ordered him to command an 'ironclad' it had turned out to be a broken-down side-wheeler with pine board and cotton bale bulwarks, a 'cottonclad.' It was a near miracle that they had managed to turn her battered topsides into an iron casement, and Bowater reckoned that his supply of miracles was pretty well played out.

And so he stood in the telegraph office and looked for a long time at the words, until he heard the telegraph operator start to clear his throat in a nervous sort of way.

Ironclad ... recent events ...

Bowater could not fault Mallory for his understanding of the tactical situation, even if the Secretary had been mistaken in thinking the chief threat to New Orleans was from the north, and not the Gulf. It was true that Farragut's big men-of-war, built for fighting the British on the high

seas, were utterly unsuited for river work. But the Union admiral had managed to drag his heavy squadron bodily over the shallow bar at the mouth of the river and blast his way past the forts and the smattering of Confederate ships defending the river below the city.

Now Farragut was probing upriver, but the farther north he came, and the more the water level continued to fall, the more unwieldy his fleet became.

Flat-bottomed, paddle-wheel-driven, ironclad gunboats. Those were the ships for this river fight. A new vessel for an unprecedented type of warfare.

Mallory knew it, was trying his level best to make it a reality. The Yankees knew it as well, and behind their effort was an almost unlimited industrial capacity. So, for the first year of the war, while the Confederacy struggled to get even one operational ironclad on the Father of Waters, the Union built seven. Those ships, the 'City Class' gunboats, were fighting their way south, accompanying the Union Army sweeping along the shore.

Bowater left the telegraph office, wandered along the streets of Yazoo City, still considering the 'ironclad *Tennessee*.' What, he wondered, would greet him on his arrival in Memphis. How would he get there?

'Reckon we best get to Vicksburg.' That was Hieronymus Taylor's pronouncement, upon learning about the orders. Taylor was a riverboat man, an engineer out of New Orleans who had joined the navy to avoid a possible draft, and for the possibility of killing Yankees, which he found very appealing. He was a part of the world of the Mississippi River, as alien to Bowater as the moon.

'Vicksburg,' Bowater repeated.

'Best place to find a boat goin north. Ain't a damn thing movin on this here backwater. We best get to Vicksburg before goddamn Farragut does.'

The next day they found a tug that would take them to Vicksburg, and Bowater herded aboard it the thirty-six men

still under his command.

He felt like a schoolteacher at times, or the head of an orphanage, with his charges to care for. He had men but no ship to house them, no galley to feed them. It was like having a company of infantry, but infantry were prepared for such living, they had tents and knew how to cook rations. Sailors without a ship were lost men. They looked to Bowater for guidance, but Bowater did not know much more about such things than they did. He had never been in that situation before.

They steamed down the Yazoo River, crowded on the deck of the tug, turned south where the Yazoo met with the Mississippi River. Just above the city, the river took a sharp turn so that for a time they were actually steaming northeast before turning one hundred and eighty degrees. Around the low, marshy point was the city of Vicksburg.

The hills of the town rose up from the water's edge, steep and terraced, a formidable defensive position. The 'Gibraltar of the West,' as it was popularly called, a name that carried no small amount of hope for the city's ability to withstand invasion.

From the deck of the tug, as the pilot jockeyed her into the dock, Bowater could see brown patches of turned earth scattered over the high bluffs. Artillery positions set up to command the river below. Confederate gunners could set up a plunging fire that even ironclads would have a hard time surviving. If there was any city that could hold out against the Union's two-pronged attack, it would be Vicksburg.

And that was good, because soon Vicksburg and Port Hudson would be the only points on the Mississippi that were not in Union hands. They would be the citadels that would deny the Yankees control of the entire river, from the headwaters to the delta.

'Goddamned Yankees can't have control of the Mississippi. They can't,' the pilot said to Bowater, speaking

around a large wad of tobacco and ringing *all stop* down to the engine room.

‘No,’ Bowater replied, though he did not know if the man meant that the Confederate Army would prevent it or that a just God would not allow it to happen.

Bowater led his men onto the dock. He did not know what to do next, so he sent them to find some dinner and forbade them to drink, while he went to see about their transportation. He gave the orders in a tone that implied he had the whole thing figured.

‘Chief Taylor, come with me, please. Tanner, you’re in charge until my return.’

Bowater led Taylor down along the waterfront, and when he had put some distance between them and the men, he stopped and Taylor stopped as well. Bowater had been saddled with Taylor as engineer since his first command in the Confederate Navy. Taylor had a genius for irritating him, but he also had a genius for engineering, could keep machinery running with a near magical efficiency; the two nearly canceled one another out.

‘I’m not certain how we should go about securing passage to Memphis,’ Bowater said. ‘I know you are quite familiar with the shipping around here. I would appreciate your thoughts on the matter.’

Taylor nodded. ‘Beats me,’ he said. Insubordination, infinitely subtle. That was Hieronymus Taylor’s forte.

Bowater pressed his lips together, preventing himself from speaking. Taylor was going to play this one for all it was worth. The river and its people were a community, a waterborne society, about which Bowater knew nothing. He was as lost here as Taylor would have been at the grand Charleston balls or theater performances that were part of Samuel’s former life.

And so Bowater resisted saying the first thing that came to mind, which was a rebuke involving several animal

similes, because, infuriating as it was, he needed Taylor's help.

'You are more familiar with Vicksburg than I am. How do you think we should proceed?'

'Well ...' Taylor rocked back on his heels, looked up at the high bluffs. 'Normally there'd be a power of traffic runnin up and down the river. But hell, this don't hardly look like the Vicksburg I know. People rushin all over, ain't but half the number of boats you normally see dockside.'

Bowater had been to Vicksburg only a few times, but he too recognized the difference. The city was preparing for an attack, aware as the Union was of the strategic importance it held. There was a different feel to the place, a desperate and determined feel.

'I guess we had best just walk on down along the docks, ask around,' Taylor said.

'Very well,' Bowater said. He had been hoping Taylor would have a line on a ship, perhaps know someone who could help, but in the end he had suggested the one thing that Bowater had already considered.

Well, that was a damned lot of crow I ate for nothing.

They continued on along the waterfront, considering the various side-wheelers and stern-wheelers and screw tugs, searching for a vessel that looked to be getting under way soon. Bowater walked with purpose. Taylor ambled along with hands in his pockets and a cigar between his teeth.

The voice, when it called out, was so loud it seemed to boom at them from several directions. 'Hieronymus Taylor! You damned, dirty dog!'

Bowater looked around. It was like trying to determine what direction a bullet came from. Taylor's face lost its amused expression and he said, 'Ah, hell ...' as Mike Sullivan appeared on the hurricane deck of a side-wheeler, wearing dark braces and a checked shirt stretched over his big chest, a battered sack coat. He was waving a sweat-

stained slouch hat, grinning through a massive and untamed beard.

'Taylor, you wait right there, you dog!' he called and hurried down the ladder to the main deck, stepping easily onto the wharf, moving with a grace Bowater found surprising.

Sullivan hurried up, grinning wide. He was even bigger than Bowater had thought at first, over six feet and approaching three hundred pounds, but there was nothing flabby about him. He reached out his hand, took Taylor's, which Taylor offered with a halfhearted gesture, shook it hard.

'Hieronymus Taylor, you son of a bitch! Ain't seen you in ... hell, must be a year at least. Not since we whipped your ass in that run to Natchez.'

'We beat you by thirty-four minutes,' Taylor said through clenched teeth as his arm was worked like a pump handle.

'Like hell ... well, maybe.'

Taylor turned to Bowater. 'Captain, this here's—'

The big man turned to Bowater, held out his hand. 'Mike Sullivan. They call me Mississippi Mike Sullivan.'

'No one calls you Mississippi Mike Sullivan but you,' Taylor said.

'Pleased to meet you,' Bowater said, shaking hands. Mississippi Mike had about him the faint odor of whiskey and cigars and coal dust and turpentine.

'Course you're pleased to meet me! Heard tell of me, no doubt. Hardest drivin, hardest drinkin, most dangerous son of a whore riverboat man on the Western Waters.'

'Impressive *curriculum vitae*, skipper, but no, I'm afraid I have not heard of you.'

'He ain't from around here, Sullivan,' Taylor said.

'Oh, that's it. Should have guessed from that fancy-lady way you talk. Must be from the goddamn moon, ain't heard of Mississippi Mike Sullivan.'

Sullivan let go of Bowater's hand, turned back to Taylor, squinted at the shoulder straps on his uniform frock coat. 'Taylor, what the hell is this? What are you, on the Sanitary Commission or some damned thing?'

Taylor stiffened and said, in as matter-of-fact a tone as he could manage, 'As it happens, Sullivan, I am a first assistant engineer in the Confederate States Navy.'

Sullivan paused as if he was too stunned to speak and then he burst out laughing. He laughed from his ample gut, the way a grizzly bear would laugh if it could. He laughed for a long time, until he was red in the face, gasping for breath, as Bowater and Taylor stood silent and annoyed.

'First assistant engineer?' Sullivan said, trying to breathe. 'What the hell is that? They let you run the ash hoist, or you gotta be promoted to full junior engineer to do that?'

Taylor nodded, worked the cigar around in his mouth.

'Chief Taylor is lead engineer on board my command,' Bowater explained. 'First assistant is just a navy designation.'

'That a fact?' Sullivan wiped a tear from his eye. 'What command is that, Captain?'

'The ironclad *Tennessee*, building in Memphis.'

Sullivan's eyes went wide. 'The ironclad *Tenn*—' At that he howled again, bent over double, laughing so hard he looked like he would pass out.

'You don't need to help my case no more, Captain, thanks anyway,' Taylor said.

Sullivan straightened. 'How long you been the captain of the *Tennessee*?'

'I have just received orders now.'

'You're a long damned way from Memphis, Captain, if you don't mind my makin that observation.'

'We are attempting to secure passage, Sullivan, and we have no more time to waste conversing. Good day.'

Bowater stepped away, but Sullivan said, 'Now wait, Captain,' and his tone was more conciliatory. 'This here's your lucky day, because the fact is I'm takin my steamer up to Memphis. Leavin tonight.'

'Well, ain't that a coincidence,' Taylor said. 'Don't reckon we need any part of what you're up to.'

'Now hold on, Chief,' Bowater said. He did not want Taylor to toss away an easy solution to their dilemma just because he didn't care for this 'Mississippi Mike.' Bowater didn't care for him either, but he could tolerate him for the length of time it would take to steam to Memphis.

There was also some satisfaction in overriding Taylor.

'You're heading up to Memphis tonight?' Bowater asked. 'Are you hauling freight?'

'Deserting to the Yankees, most like,' Taylor offered.

'Now lookee here, Mr First Assistant Engineer Hieronymus Taylor, Confederate States Navy, you ain't the only one fightin this here war,' Sullivan said. 'Fact is, I am captain of the side-wheel ram *General Page*, the pride of the River Defense Fleet, true Sons of the South and the foremost defenders of this here river.'

'That a fact?' Taylor said, and now it was he who was smiling, grinning around his cigar, but Sullivan did not seem to notice.

'That's right, boy,' Sullivan said, tapping Taylor on the chest with a finger like a sausage. 'We are an independent branch, we answer to the general of the army in the Mississippi Department, and we don't take orders from no navy peckerwoods.'

Indeed, Bowater thought. The River Defense Fleet certainly did not take orders from naval officers, peckerwood or otherwise. Or from anyone else, for that matter.

Part of the fleet had been at the Battle of New Orleans. They had refused to cooperate in the organized action against the Yankees and had contributed absolutely nothing

to the defense of the forts. The only thing they did that Bowater was aware of was to accidentally set their fire rafts alongside Fort Jackson's wharf, blinding the Confederate gunners but neatly illuminating the fort for the Yankees. That was what the War Department got for the one million five hundred thousand dollars they spent establishing the River Defense Fleet.

'River Defense Fleet, huh? Oh, brother, now I *am* impressed, "Mississippi Mike,"' Taylor said. 'Captain Bowater, I think we best look for more suitable transport upriver.'

'Hmmm,' Bowater said, stalling. It was only a ride upriver, for God's sake, a little over two hundred miles, two days' steaming at the worst. They could endure Sullivan and the River Defense Fleet for that long. What harm could come of it? 'Actually, Chief, I believe we'll accept Captain Sullivan's offer.'

'Whatever you say, Captain,' Taylor said. He looked amused.

'Sure you will,' Sullivan said, giving Bowater a good-natured slap on the back, just the kind of *bonhomie* that Bowater despised. 'The *Page*'s the fastest damn boat on the river, and I'm the best damn pilot. We'll be pickin up a barge tonight, and then it's off to Memphis.'

'Very good, Captain,' Bowater said. 'If my men can be of any assistance in your navigation, let me know.'

'Oh, I reckon y'all can be of assistance, suh, absolutely.' The jolly tone had left Sullivan's voice, as if he was forcing himself to be sincere. 'I imagine you are some eager to get to Memphis and take command of your ... *ironclad*.'

Then like steam through a cracked pipe, the laughter burst out of Sullivan's mouth and he doubled over again.

CHAPTER 2

I will here state that the river defense fleet proved a failure. ... Unable to govern themselves, and unwilling to be governed by others, their total want of system, vigilance, and discipline rendered them useless and helpless when the enemy finally dashed upon them suddenly in a dark night.

Major General M. Lovell to
General S. Cooper, Adjutant and
Inspector General, Richmond, Virginia

EVEN BEFORE THE shooting started, Bowater guessed that his blue-water sailors and the riverboat men would be an uneasy mix.

Taylor put that concern in his head. It was just after Bowater ushered his men into what had been the *General Page*'s first-class passengers' salon back when the River Defense boat *General Page* had been the civilian riverboat *Lisa Marie*.

The navy men took seats at the tables along the port side. Taylor sat down beside Bowater, his frock coat unbuttoned, his cap tilted back, three days' growth of beard on his face. Taylor seemed more relaxed in some ways, being back on his native Mississippi. And in some ways he seemed less. There seemed to be some turmoil of the spirit raging in the engineer's soul, which, like most things about Hieronymus Taylor, was of no interest to Bowater.

'Captain,' Taylor drawled, 'I reckon a warnin is in order. I know there are certain ... aspects of my personality that you find objectionable. Fair enough. I'm a river rat, and

you're ... well ... not. But the boys they got working this bucket, they're somethin else.'

'In what way?'

'Well ... they ain't real refined. Not like me. And they don't like the navy, and they don't like deepwater sailors, and they don't like much of anything else. We just got to see our boys don't get baited into doin somethin stupid.'

Bowater was digesting this when the door burst open and the crew of the *General Page* spilled into the salon. They were big men, with wool pants and checked shirts or patched dungarees held up with braces, bearded or with thick moustaches, sweat-stained caps and hats pushed down on their heads. They were a loud and aromatic bunch, cheeks bulging with tobacco. They were a well-armed bunch too, with pistols and bowie knives hanging from belts.

Bowater felt his men tense as the riverboat men, twenty-five or so in number, took over the salon. They carried pails full of food and they sat at the once fine tables on the starboard side and laid into their meal. They ate without talking, the only sound the loud chewing and smacking of lips. They took no notice of the navy men.

Suddenly one of the riverboat men leaped to his feet. 'Son of a bitch, look at that one!' he shouted, jerking his pistol from his belt. Bowater stood quickly, unsure what was happening. His hand reached for his own gun, a .36-caliber Navy Colt, finely engraved, a gift from his father.

Before he could even pull the gun the river man started firing, blasting away at the salon's forward bulkhead as half a dozen of his compatriots leaped to their feet, guns clearing holsters. Up against the bulkhead, the largest rat that Bowater had ever seen raced side to side, panicked by the bullets shattering the wood around him.

'Hold still, you little puke!' another of the riverboat men shouted, fanning the hammer of his gun. Bowater's eyes moved from the rat to the firing squad and back. The

animal froze, stood on hind legs, and then seemed to explode as a bullet hit him square, but that did not slow the gunfire. In seconds the place where the rat had been was reduced to a ragged, stained hole in the bulkhead, and it was only when hammers fell on empty chambers that the guns were holstered and the men returned to their meal.

In the quiet that followed the fusillade, Bowater waited for someone to comment, but no one did. He turned to his own men, who were all on their feet, eyes wide, pistols held limp in the hands of those who had them. All looked stunned, save for Hieronymus Taylor, who did not appear to have moved.

‘They ain’t real refined, like I said, Captain,’ Taylor explained.

Then the door burst open again, and Mississippi Mike Sullivan stood framed against the blue evening light outside. ‘What the hell is all this shootin?’ he yelled into the salon, then charged in, very like a bull. The men at the tables did not even look up.

‘Rat,’ said the one who had fired the first shot. His mouth was full of beefsteak and the words were muffled. He swallowed. ‘Son of a bitch rat.’

‘Rat!?’ Sullivan shouted. ‘You’re shootin at a goddamn rat?’ He crossed the room in five steps, planted a brogan on the shooter’s chair, and sent him flying. The man landed in a heap, scrambled to his feet, pulling a bowie knife as he did, a foot-long blade with a hand guard that made it look more like a short sword than a long knife.

The rest of the river men leaped to their feet, tumbling chairs to the deck, forming a rough semicircle.

Sullivan charged across the room. ‘We got guests aboard here, you dumb bastard!’ he bellowed. His right foot came up and kicked the man’s hand hard and the knife flew away and Bayard Quayle of Bowater’s crew had to flinch to avoid being hit. Sullivan hit the shooter hard in the stomach,

doubling him over, shoved him to the floor, pulled his own pistol, aimed it at the man.

'Get up, Tarbox,' Sullivan growled and the man on the deck stood up slowly. He stepped over and retrieved his knife and sheathed it and Sullivan put his pistol back in his holster because somehow they both knew the fight was over. The river men picked up their chairs, and resumed their meal.

'Did you git the sum bitch?' Sullivan asked.

'Yeah, I got him.'

'Come here,' Sullivan said and he led Tarbox over to Samuel Bowater. 'Captain Bowater,' Sullivan said in a formal tone, 'I'd like you to meet my first officer. This here's Buford Tarbox, and he's a hell of a river man when he ain't bein a dumb-ass, shootin up rats in front of guests.'

'Honored to meet ya,' Tarbox said, sticking out his hand, and Bowater shook, too stunned by it all to do anything else. 'Pleased to meet you,' he replied.

'Captain Bowater and his men is takin passage up to Memphis with us. They are the crew of the *ironclad Tennessee*,' Sullivan explained.

'The *ironclad Tennessee*, is that a fact?' Tarbox said with something like a half grin appearing through his thatch of beard.

'That is a fact,' Sullivan said. 'Now show these boys some goddamn courtesy and get em somthin to eat, you hear? And don't shoot nothin else.' Sullivan touched his hat to Bowater and disappeared. When he was gone, Tarbox shouted, 'Hey, Doc, get these here fancy navy gen'lmen some grub!'

Tarbox picked up his chair and resumed his place at the table, while the one called Doc, wearing a stained apron, rose from his seat, conveying with every move, every nuance of expression, how much he resented the task.

Ten minutes later, pails of food were set on the tables occupied by Bowater's men, and Doc went back to eating,

without ever saying a word to any of the navy men, or even making eye contact. Bowater's men were too hungry to care. They tore into the food in a manner that made the riverboat men look civilized.

The sky was coal-tar black when they finally got under way, approaching midnight, and the frenetic energy of soon-to-be-embattled Vicksburg had slowed considerably. One by one the lamps that had lit the waterfront were extinguished, dark and quiet settled over the docks, the hiss of steam engines and the squeal of hoisting gear died away, the rumble of carts on cobblestone, and the shouting of motivated men tapered off and disappeared.

By 11 P.M. the loudest place on the waterfront was the big saloon on the main deck level of the *General Page*, where the crew of the riverboat had finished supper and moved on to whiskey, which made the otherwise taciturn men quite vocal, shouting, bragging, lying. The General Pages drank, smoked, chewed, and played cards. They ignored the blue-water men, who resented it, especially as it meant that none of the copious amount of whiskey flowing to starboard was finding its way to port.

The *Page* was a side-wheel steamer, one hundred and eighty feet on deck, around six hundred and fifty tons, not much different from hundreds of other riverboats that ran on the western rivers, hauling passengers, cotton, and mixed freight. Her twin paddle wheels were driven by a massive walking beam engine, a single cylinder driving a diamond-shaped rocking arm, the 'walking beam,' that in turn rotated the paddle-wheel shaft. The engine was a huge affair, the walking beam mounted on top of a thirty-foot-high A-frame that went right through the hurricane deck, the uppermost deck, on which the wheelhouse sat.

Her conversion to a man-of-war had not been extensive. A heavy iron ram was bolted to her stem, just under the water. A metal shield that looked more like a cowcatcher than anything else was mounted on her bow and backed up