

## *Habeas Corpus*

by Owen Barfield

(In the year 1722 a slave named James Sommersett, confined in irons on board a ship lying in the Thames and bound for Jamaica, was brought before the Courts by Habeas Corpus and released.)

“Nine chests of tea!”

“Nine tea!”

“One slave . . .”

“Nay, Captain, by your leave! Not yet!  
See! It is written: *Thou mayst have  
The body of James Sommersett!*”

They drop the rope, they man the gig,  
They march him before men of weight  
In silken gown and curly wig,  
Choleric, gouty, obstinate;

Who, with budge Latin of the Schools,  
Doze on a chair that’s called a Bench,  
Discovering fictitious rules  
In English judgments writ in French

“Please ye, my Lords, the chattel’s mine!”  
“*Chattel?* Hath precedent been found?”  
His Lordship leaves the court to dine.  
The chain lies broken on the ground.

*Nullus liber homo* . . . Who spoke?  
What voice of what enchanted Land?  
Ere yet the fairy garlands broke,  
And gun and gospel hand in hand

Went creeping in the wake of pelf  
And mortgage out of mortgage grew  
And lie from lie . . . To thy sweet self,  
O Bottom, hadst thou stay’d but true!

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