

**Excerpt from "American Wake"
Written by Bruce J. Robinson**

Scene Four

(A special remains on Sherman. Further lights up on a grassy rise overlooking where we imagine Grant's body is laying - the future site of Grant's Tomb, on W. 122ND St. The only things on the hill are a stump and a large log.)

CLEMENS

Christ!

(Sherman jerks himself from his fantasy. Nearby is Clemens. It's 3 A.M. - August 7, 1885.)

It's black as hell. No moon.

SHERMAN

Scared of the dark?

CLEMENS

No. `course not. I am, however, scared of everything in the dark.

SHERMAN

Damn!

CLEMENS

What?

SHERMAN

My hat!

CLEMENS

What?

SHERMAN

I lost it.

CLEMENS

You didn't lose it.

SHERMAN

I don't have it.

It's back at the carriage. CLEMENS

It's not there. SHERMAN

It's there. CLEMENS
(calling out upstage)
Arthur! You see the General's hat back there?

It's not there. SHERMAN

It's not there! DUBOIS (far OS)

It's at the Lotos. SHERMAN

I'm sure. CLEMENS

We must go back there now. SHERMAN

Cump. CLEMENS

Now. SHERMAN

It's 4 in the morning, fuhgodsake! The club's closed. The hat'll be safe. I promise.
(looking down - trying to distract Sherman)
Who stands guard? CLEMENS

The Ol' Tennessee. SHERMAN

His monument 'll be amazing. In days to come, everyone'll flock to his grave and
remember what he did. CLEMENS

I suppose. SHERMAN

Suppose? CLEMENS

Everything fades. Everything. SHERMAN

CLEMENS

I believe this monument and the legend of his quiet bravery will be eternal.

SHERMAN

Even marble turns to dust. Who knows what man-beasts will be dragging their hairy knuckles into the future? Who knows who'll care? Even giants fade as history glances over its shoulder. Things change. Everything changes. Change is rarely good.

(A boat horn draws their attention.)

Down by the mouth.

CLEMENS

A mouth!? That's not a mouth. Now, the Mississippi... that's a mouth.

SHERMAN

A maw. The Hudson just has pursed, little, Neurasthenic, Eastern lips. Gasping for air like a guppy. Unhealthy. Barely a breeze.

CLEMENS

(quoting Shakespeare's RICHARD II)

"For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad tales of the death of kings.."

SHERMAN

"How some have been depos'd, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have depos'd,
Some poinson'd by their wives, some sleeping kill'd;
All murder'd; for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temple of a king
Keeps death his court..." I... I must..

CLEMENS

What?

SHERMAN

I must drain the lizard. Then, we leave.

CLEMENS

We just got here.

SHERMAN

And we'll just leave here. This is a seduction of all that's weak.

CLEMENS

What?

SHERMAN

This is not what I should be doing. No. I'm done. How in bloody hell did you talk me into comin' here?

CLEMENS

No one talks you into anything, so you wanted to come here.

SHERMAN

No.

CLEMENS

You needed to come here.

SHERMAN

No, you! You need this. I read you, sir.

(Again, Sherman starts out.)

CLEMENS

(to Sherman)

Wait.

(calling out)

Arthur!

SHERMAN

I hope you ain't calling that boy to help me.

CLEMENS

It's dark, and the terrain...

SHERMAN

I made Georgia howl; I can pee myself.

(He exits – Clemens looks after but dare not follow.)

(Arthur dashes on.)

DUBOIS

Should I go after him?

CLEMENS

Not without a muzzle-loading howitzer. Arthur-Arthur-Arthur.

DUBOIS

Not going well?

CLEMENS

The General's a complicated man.

(Beat. You can hear the country sounds of this part of the city.)

A night without a moon. You know what they say about moonless nights?

No. DUBOIS

(Beat)

Well?

CLEMENS
I have no idea. I was hoping you knew. But they must say something about moonless nights. They say something about nearly everything, don't they?

I think they do. DUBOIS

(Long beat – in which each man is in his own thoughts.
Finally...)

CLEMENS
You want something to drink, Arthur?

DUBOIS
You brought something?

CLEMENS
I wouldn't come up here unarmed.

DUBOIS
'spect not.

CLEMENS
nor would I tease you with the hypothetical.

(He pulls out a flask.)

No-no, this offer is concrete - which, if you drink enough of this, it will turn many of your inner organs into.

(He pitches the flask to Arthur.)

(Arthur removes the top. He wonders if his putting his lips to the bottle would be okay with Clemens.)

DUBOIS
What should I use to drink from this?

CLEMENS
I'd try the mouth; any other orifice is unsanitary.

(Arthur takes a healthy swig.)

DUBOIS
Wooo. Thanks.

CLEMENS
(as Arthur wipes bottle on sleeve)

Pleasure.

(He closes flask and pitches it back to Sam.)

(opening the flask)

Letting go doesn't come easy for me.

(He takes a pull. He closes his eyes. He feels a breeze.)

Ahh! The Hudson. Hard to let go. Keep going. Sorry 'bout your nephew, Arthur.

DUBOIS

I know you are, Sam.

CLEMENS

The Mississippi. I found my spirit but lost my soul on that river. My brother Henry was younger by 3 years; and as much a hellion as I was (and I was), Henry was angelic. Not angelic in one of those goody two-wings ways. Angelic as in "a joyful, untouched, burning purity." I loved Henry. I still do. I managed to wangle him a low-level job on the Pennsylvania – a first-class steamboat on which I was standing by for William Brown, the pilot. A sonofabitch's sonofabitch. Well, his abusive personality gave me no choice but to kick his ass; which made our further co-existence on the bridge a tenuous proposition at best. The owner – who knew what bad medicine Brown was – arranged for me to go home on another ship. On June 8th, my beloved Henry and I had dinner. The Pennsylvania left on the 9th to cruise its route; my ship, two days later. On June 13th, the headlines: "The Pennsylvania Blows Up! 150 Lives Lost!" That edition listed the dead. Henry was under "hurt beyond help." Hurt beyond help? Hurt beyond help!? How could that be? How could my beautiful young brother be beyond my help? And on the remote chance that he were somehow beyond my power and indomitable drive, surely he isn't beyond God's help. You know, I was still considering the ministry, you see? Still willing to dedicate my life to the glorification of the Almighty. All mighty. See?

DUBOIS

I do.

CLEMENS

Henry was sleeping somewhere above the boilers. The peace of the river at dawn was cracked by the sound of a million lions roaring – by a fire that seared the sky. A steam blast drives him through the roof, and Henry drops back into the hot boilers, where he's showered by rubble. He drags himself into the water and finds himself pulled into a jammed rescue boat. The death, destruction – human beings boiled alive, decapitated, scalded to the bone. 150 lives. The pain... Well... The disaster was early Sunday: the injured arrived at Memphis at 3 the next morning. They rigged up some hospital. There; I found my brother, my glory, my all. When I saw him, I smiled and mumbled some stupid words of hope and reassurance. When I left, I fell to the ground and prayed as never before. I begged the Lord to bring down His wrath on me – an expert sinner – and spare this holy child. And at the same time, I cursed myself. You see, it was I...

DUBOIS

Sam!

CLEMENS

No, I got him that job. Got him to sign-up for a disaster – where, but for that fight, I might have lost my life, which I'd've traded for his in a heart-beat and still would. I promised the Lord anything. Everything. I offered to hop on the cross and drive the damn nails in myself. And as I prayed, I knew – see – that there would be no answer: that I was just a lone, wailing beast among many; each weighed down with unique, horrific details – baying to a hollow universe. That's when I lost my faith. Henry hung on for three days. Miraculously; his beautiful, 20 year-old face was untouched by the disaster – and, I expect, his generous heart as well. On that river, I found the seed of "Mark Twain." I discovered that posture that stands apart unimpressed – a contorted carriage that grows old. Well; for listening to that bathetic bullshit, you deserve another.

(He pulls back to pitch flask, but Arthur's outstretched palm stops him.)

DUBOIS

Better not. I'm driving.