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A FOAM-BELL MORE OR LESS

I fell asleep while reading Mark Twain's book about life on the Mississippi, and when I came to I was on a riverboat. It was a sternwheeler and I was at the back rail on the upper deck. The hurricane deck. The paddles below me churned the water.

I knew I was dreaming and wanted to draw the experience out for as long as I could. The only other time I'd dreamed what I was reading was with a Henry Miller novel, and I was a eunuch in that one. The memory made me reach down to check my equipment. It was all there. Not that I expected to use it on the boat, where women might ward off impropriety by opening fire with a derringer. In Miller's books they open their legs.

But I didn't see any women, or any men. The deck was empty. The pilothouse was at the other end, and the back door was open, so I set off walking in that direction.

The deck was dark wood, shellacked and shiny. Brass fittings sparkled in the sun, and thick white steam poured from a smokestack that was painted red, white and blue. I assumed the boat was making its way along the Mississippi. The river was wide and smooth and the banks were a luxuriant green. Some fleecy clouds to the starboard side seemed to be grazing on the green like sheep. The air was warm, so I judged it to be late spring or early summer.

I stepped through the back door of the pilot-house and saw a man standing at the other end, at the wheel of the boat. His back was to me but I suspected who he was because of his white linen suit and shock of white hair. A stream of what

smelled like cigar smoke flowed over his shoulder in the light breeze passing through the cabin.

I approached him and cleared my throat to make my presence known just before I reached his side. He turned his face to me and sure enough, it was Mark Twain.

“Uh, duh, hello,” I stammered. “This is an honor, Mr. Twain. I’m a big fan. Or should I call you Mr. Clemens? I know your real name is Sam Clemens but you wrote as Mark Twain and . . .”

A blast of cigar smoke hit me in the face and interrupted my gibbering.

“Just call me Sam,” he said while I coughed.

He turned back to the river and I studied his profile. The hair, the bushy mustache, the observant squint—I’d call him Sam, like he asked, but to me he was the immortal Mark Twain.

He noticed me staring and said, “Did I lose a crawfish in my mustache at lunch?”

“What? Oh, uh, no. It’s just a great honor to meet you. And unexpected. You died over a hundred years ago.”

“The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

“I’d forgotten you said that,” I laughed. “You know, most witticisms that people use in my time are attributed to you, Dorothy Parker or Oscar Wilde.”

“Wilde? The Irish fairy?”

“We . . . we don’t say ‘fairy’ anymore.”

“You don’t? Where are you from?”

“Well, America, like you, but from the twenty-first century.”

“And you don’t say ‘fairy’?”

“Not to mean ‘homosexual.’ It could be considered offensive.”

“Hmpf. So what brings you here?”

I told him I’d been reading nineteenth-century writers lately, mainly American, and especially

him. "You were the best, Mr. Twain . . . Sam. You were the absolute greatest."

I saw a glint of pride in his eye before he shrugged dismissively and said, "Good breeding consists in concealing how much we think of ourselves and how little we think of others."

We talked about other writers for a while, his contemporaries, and he said he ran into them from time to time on the river. "As a matter of fact, there's Mr. Thoreau now." He pointed ahead, to the portside bank, where a man in a wrinkled suit and straw hat sat watching us from a stand of cattails.

I said Henry David Thoreau was remembered for advocating a quiet life in the face of industrialization. "He's been a model of poise and self-contemplation to several generations."

I thought I saw a smile below Twain's mustache. He turned the wheel and guided us toward the cattails. When the boat was close to shore he blew its whistle loud and long. Thoreau shook a fist at us, made an obscene gesture, then stood up and dropped his pants to moon us. Twain laughed and muttered "model of poise" as he swung us back to the middle of the river.

There was an unhurried feeling in the air, and I looked forward to spending time with Twain. I had lots of questions for him. Before I could ask one though he said, "There's something up ahead," and produced a spyglass. He extended its long brass tube, put his eye to it, then after a moment he snorted smoke and said, "Now that's an unusual sight."

"What?"

"A giant mulatto. Or the top of his head at least. It seems to be spanning the river from bank to bank."

"That's another word we don't use anymore, Sam."

“What word?” He was still peering through the glass.

“Mulatto. They’re mixed-race people and we call them, well, mixed-race.”

He looked at me, probably to see if I was joking, then he went back to the glass. “Well, whatever you call him, he’s an ugly cuss. He has beady eyes and ears like barn doors.”

“May I look?”

He handed me the glass and I saw the top of Barack Obama’s head. It spanned the river, like Twain had described, and the river ran into his mouth.

“His name’s Obama,” I said. “He was president. Or he will be, someday.”

“Indeed? America elects a mulla . . . a mixed-race president?”

“Yes, to two terms. And some say he’s still in control through his former vice president. I was just reading . . .”

“Take the wheel,” he interrupted. I did, and he ran out of the pilothouse. I watched him grab a long pole and go to the starboard side of the boat. He used the pole to reach for a woman who was floating in the water. Her petticoats and green skirt billowed around her, making it look like she was riding a lily pad. She wore a bonnet that obscured her face, but when the tip of the pole hit her she looked up and I recognized her. It was Jane Austen. Twain stretched the pole out as if to aid in her rescue, but then he pushed her under the water. She bobbed up and swam away. Twain ran along the side of the boat so he could continue to poke and stab as we moved past her.

When she was receding in our wake he stowed the pole and returned to the pilothouse. “Sorry,” he said as he took the wheel. “Just doing my civic duty.”

He relit his cigar and stood studying the river

ahead. Obama's head was looming larger, and even without the spyglass I could see nose hairs the size of tree roots. While I watched, some huge white crystals fell from the hairs and then his mouth began to move. His teeth gnashed the water.

"We'll be in for some rough going in a bit," Twain said, but he didn't seem overly concerned. He puffed his cigar and adjusted our course slightly. "So tell me about this Obama," he said. "Was his father or his mother the Negro?"

"His father. But we don't say 'Negro' anymore either. If you do, people think you're racist."

"Well, I suppose I'm as racist as the next man, preferring my own race to others, but I think I gave . . . what do you call Negroes in the future?"

"African-Americans."

"I think I gave African-Americans a fair deal in my writing."

"Not by modern standards. According to those you shouldn't even be writing about people of color. Whites can only write about whites."

"And African-Americans can only write about African-Americans?"

"No, they can write about whites, but with contempt if possible. Mixed-race people can write about both their parent groups, but they're expected to condemn the white side if they have one."

"What happens if you don't abide by those rules?"

"Then you're cancelled. Shunned."

"It seems that would cripple free expression."

"It does. It's killed modern writing, and now the academics are reevaluating older writing, like yours. They want to cancel you."

Twain smoked and contemplated, then he said, "Too many academics want to be agents of change rather than guardians of knowledge. I wish they were smart enough to figure out why

they're so stupid."

Obama's mouth had continued to chomp at the water, but as we drew closer I learned that he wasn't just chomping, he was speaking. The words came to us across the roughening chop. "Welcome to my presidency! Hope and Change! Welcome to my presidency! The Audacity of Hope!"

The riverboat gained speed. Twain held the wheel firmly, and he said something, but his words were drowned out by what sounded like a roaring cataract just inside the mouth. The boat narrowly missed being crushed when we passed between the gnashing teeth, then the deck tipped and we shot downward.

Obama's voice died away as we slid into darkness. We picked up speed and encountered hot headwinds rushing up to meet us. The tip of Twain's cigar provided the only light. His face glowed orange as he called for lanterns. Several flared to life around the boat.

He jerked the wheel left and right, guiding us around what looked like tombstones sticking out of the pink meat of the throat. I saw "Integrity" carved on one as it zipped past, and "Decency" on another. They were words that Obama had choked on while he was president.

Farther along we passed a large stone skull with "Fast and Furious" carved on its forehead. I told Twain about Obama's gunrunning operation by that name. He and his Attorney General gave thousands of guns to Mexican drug cartels, guns that were later used to kill American police. Twain asked a couple of questions, and then some stone pillars raked our starboard side. One was engraved with the words "Disparate Impact."

"That was a phrase from a typical Obama program," I said. "He claimed that the disciplinary policies in America's public schools were unfair, and he ordered that whites be disciplined in the

same numbers as blacks. It was mathematically impossible for schools to comply with the order, unless they eliminated punishment for blacks, so that's what a lot of them did. The result was an explosion of classroom violence. Blacks attacked whites because suddenly there were no consequences. Obama talked about bringing us together, but he did everything he could to divide us."

"Politicians were just as deceptive in my day," Twain said. "All they cared about was getting fools to vote for them. If they could do that they always won with a majority."

We passed through another patch of choked words—Morality, Honor, Truth—then Twain asked whether Obama was from the North or the South.

"From Hawaii," I said. "Or that's what the media tells us. No one knows the truth about his origins. He used to work for the CIA, a spy agency, and at times he went by the name of Barry Soetoro. People in Chicago nicknamed him Bathhouse Barry because he liked gay bathhouses. I remember one of them was called Man's Country."

Twain's face took on a puzzled look, and I said, "Gay means homosexual in my time."

Before Twain could respond, our angle of descent increased and we rushed toward the sound of another cataract. There was a moment of freefall, and then we splashed down in what proved to be acid. Roiling waves of it broke over the deck outside the pilothouse and ate into the planking. The tossing boat smoked like it was on fire.

"We must be in the stomach!" I shouted, but Twain didn't answer. He was busy fighting the wheel. He kept us afloat, though we bounced and listed so badly I figured we were sure to capsize.

I saw monstrous shapes in the swirling haze, then faces. Victoria Nuland's twisted visage rose out of the gloom, as did Rahm Emmanuel's and Susan Rice's. Obama's lieutenants. There were

other faces, but I couldn't put names to them. Several appeared as a group, like a school of fish, but it was a school of giant spermatozoa. They had heads like basketballs. I pointed them out to Twain and said, "Obama's boy toys. College basketball players who visited the White House through the back door." One of the sperm creatures leapt and landed on the deck in front of the pilothouse. It flopped around, and as it did I recognized its face as that of a man named Reggie something-or-other, one of Obama's favorites. Before I could recall his full name he slid back into the acid. A man in a coonskin cap gave chase and both were swallowed up by the darkness.

Other faces came and went, and then a leviathan rose up on our port side. Above its acid-dripping jowls I made out the face of George Soros, the billionaire and former Nazi collaborator who was Obama's biggest backer. He rose until he towered above our boat, then he extended a half-dozen tentacles. John Brennan's head was on the end of one. His face bobbed in front of the pilot-house and scowled in at us.

"That man was chief of Obama's intelligence apparatus," I said. "He converted to Islam. Obama's a Muslim too. He was born and educated as one, but when he entered politics he began posing as a Christian."

Twain was focused on piloting the boat but said, "That doesn't surprise me. Mohammedans are crafty buggers."

Some movement just ahead caught my attention, and I saw a little boy in water wings paddling frantically. Joe Biden was chasing him. "Speaking of buggers," I said, and I pointed to Biden. I told Twain that he'd been Obama's vice president, then he was cheated into the presidency even though he had a history of being inappropriate with children.

Biden swam near the boat, and when he did I

noticed that something trailed behind him. It was attached to him nose-to-ass, but as I watched, it broke free and partially rose from the waves. It was a seahorse with a British redcoat sitting astride its back. The horse whinnied and I saw that it bore the face of Kamala Harris. I told Twain that Harris was Biden's vice president. He said something about Caligula appointing horses to high places too, and then an Indian in war paint rose out of the waves and pulled the redcoat from Harris' back. The man in the coonskin cap reappeared and he, the soldier and the Indian fought while they sank beneath the waves. Harris sank with them. Her final acid-gargling whinny made me think of the time she laughed about murderers flooding into the U.S. across the Mexican border.

Twain looked spooked. He said, "We're in hell. I never really believed in it before, but now I have proof that it exists."

"Because of Kamala Harris?"

"No." He pointed to where the coonskin cap bobbed on the waves. "Because the place is infested with Fenimore Cooper characters."

I remembered his essay on Cooper and was about to comment on it, when the boat swung wildly to the port side. We got caught in a vortex and circled once, twice, and then we plunged.

We fell for several seconds before our bow hit a thick sludge. We skidded to port, smacked a wall, then ricocheted to the starboard side and smacked a wall there. The impacts knocked me around, but Twain stood fast and wrestled the wheel until he got the boat under control.

We advanced on a viscous current as the rumbling of the maelstrom we'd fallen through faded behind us. The lanterns on the boat's deck lit our way. We were moving along a cavernous channel with a dark ceiling just barely visible overhead. Recesses in the walls to our sides held big-screen

TVs. Some came to life briefly as we passed in front of them. I saw CNN on one, MSNBC on another. One program was about Obama's Strong Cities Network. "It's truly a blessing," the host said. "American cities are partnering with sister cities from around the world to provide police protection for our young people." The screen showed the face of a smiling child.

I said, "The media put a positive spin on Obama's efforts to chip away at our sovereignty. His Strong Cities initiative placed foreign police on the streets of America."

The next TV to light up showed a hooded Ku Klux Klansman before switching to Obama. He said we needed a "civilian security force" at least the size of the military.

"He got it," I said, "or a proto-version of it. A leftist group called Antifa is the head of the force, and the bulk of its members come from Black Lives Matter, Incorporated. They may not know they're part of a paramilitary group, but they are."

"And is the Klan still a strong force in American society?" Twain asked.

"No. Half of its membership is FBI. Federal police. They keep the Klan alive in order to justify their funding."

An animated cartoon flickered on the next screen. Uncle Remus was telling a story about Brer Fox and Brer Buzzard.

"That's Joel Harris's work," Twain said. "I'm surprised it lives on in your time."

"Wait for the other shoe to drop."

A cartoon woman in a stiff Victorian dress entered the picture and began lecturing Uncle Remus. She said his speech and demeanor promoted a negative stereotype of African-Americans.

"Unless I'm mistaken," Twain said, "that's Harriet Beecher Stowe."

We both watched as she told Uncle Remus

that he was permitted to say this, but not that, and to do this but not that.

Twain shook his head after we left the screen behind. “President Lincoln said Harriet started the Civil War with her book about Uncle Tom, and now it seems she’s being used to help start another. But there’s no cause for war in the future. Not for racial reasons at least. The country freed the slaves and elected a mixed-race president.” He puffed his cigar, thinking, then he looked at me and said, “Sinister forces are at work in your time. Your leaders say they’re charting a new course but. . .” He waved a hand at our surroundings. “We’ve passed this way before.”

We entered a narrower passage. The boat’s smokestack barely cleared the low ceiling, and dark walls pushed in on either side. We moved more slowly, on a thicker sludge.

I said, “If we were in the large intestine before, we’re in the small one now.”

Twain had to keep his gaze fixed ahead to pilot the boat, but I was free to study the walls. And I came to see that they were covered with what looked like living carvings. People moved just beneath a layer of glistening muck. Most were in Muslim garb—turbans, burkas, hijabs and so on. I watched them argue and fight, kneel and pray, and then a helicopter passed through them. Somebody dangled from one of its skids.

“This is Joe Biden’s first term as president,” I said. “Or as some people call it, Obama’s third term. Biden continued Obama’s policies, and one of those was to appease radical Islam. This here, with the helicopter, this is where Biden pulled us out of Afghanistan. He handed it over to Islamic fundamentalists and abandoned tens of thousands of people who’d helped us provide stability for twenty years. The headchoppers got them, and another country was added to the expanding international

Caliphate.”

I'd barely finished speaking when the walls seemed to tighten around the boat. A great wind rushed past us from back to front, blowing out all the lanterns, and aside from the glow of Twain's cigar we were left in darkness. The boat slowed and then lurched forward once, twice, three times. A dot of light appeared in the distance after the first lurch, and by the third it had grown quite large. It was like we were approaching the shutter of an enormous camera, a shutter that opened and closed, opened and closed.

When the boat lurched a fourth time we shot through the opening and into bright daylight. We fell some distance, hit water, nearly submerged, then bobbed up and leveled. The roar of a cataract behind us drowned out most of Twain's curses as he struggled with the wheel. He spun it back and forth until I felt the boat's paddlewheel catch water. We began to move forward and Twain pointed us downstream.

I looked back and saw Joe Biden's face up high. It was Rushmore-sized and his mouth was moving. A brown discharge poured out over his lower lip and fell from his chin. Boats and people tumbled from the mouth and dropped to a foul-smelling, foamy pool below. I saw Hawthorne's Hester Prynne just barely staying afloat by holding onto a lowercase a. Melville's whale was dead on its side. Twain directed my attention ahead and said he thought he saw Walter Scott in the water, but it was hard to tell with so many other turds floating around.

The current slowed and the stream widened. Twain lit a fresh cigar and I thought I saw a look of sadness on his face. I told him that, for what it was worth, he'd been shat out of other monsters besides Obama. I told him about the Nazis burning his books. "All dictatorial regimes try to silence

you.”

“All dictatorial regimes try to silence everybody but themselves,” he said. “Look at Miss Dickinson over there.” I looked where he pointed and saw Emily Dickinson on her hands and knees on a sand bar. She was sodden, disheveled, and vomiting. “Poor woman,” Twain said as we passed. “How could her work possibly warrant gastric censure?”

Before we could discuss the matter we saw a man swimming past, headed upstream. He had a manic gleam in his eyes.

“Walt Whitman,” Twain chuckled. “He was a wild one. It looks like he’s going back for more.”

Twain waved to Whitman. He didn’t see, but a gaunt man on the bank beyond did. He was seated at a writing desk, and when he returned Twain’s salute I noticed he held a black quill pen. “There’s Mr. Poe,” Twain said. “He seems to have made the passage just fine. The stories you’ve been telling me, about Obama and the others, would fit quite well into his line of nightmarish fiction. Shall I drop you on the bank so you can exchange thoughts with him?”

“No, thank you. I think I’ve had enough thinking for one day.”

We drifted along until the river resumed much of its former appearance. It was smooth and wide, but the vegetation on the banks was struggling. Half-dead trees leaned out over the water, and the fields leading away from it were streaked with brown.

Twain smoked for a while, then he asked if things were really as bad in my time as our trip through Obama had shown. I told him they were worse. “What we saw was just the tip of the iceberg.”

“The nose of the bear,” he said softly. He smoked some more, then he said, “I’ve often

wondered why people are so willing to tolerate the lies of politicians. It must make the honest ones want to give up the fight. As Arnold said, 'On the breast of that huge Mississippi of falsehood called history, a foam-bell more or less is of no consequence.'

"Who's Arnold?"

"Matthew Arnold. I didn't see him in the flotsam back there, so perhaps he hasn't been subjected to your modern 'reevaluation.' He was an Englishman and a harsh critic of America, but he touched my heart with that line about the Mississippi. It's quite lyrical."

"But you don't believe it, do you? That truth is of no consequence?"

"No, I don't believe it." He made a slight course adjustment and said, "I used to be a newspaperman, you know. I wrote about the same scoundrels that you have in your day, though mine had different faces and different names. But as a reporter I learned to stick to the truth. That's a rule you should apply to all writing, even fiction; whatever yarn you spin, stick to the truth of the thing." He puffed his cigar a couple of times, then added, "And don't worry that somebody in your wake may criticize you. If you think life's a popularity contest, then you've already lost."