

# LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

A Musical Play by  
PHILIP W. HALL

Based on Mark Twain's book *Life on the Mississippi*

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### **CAST OF CHARACTERS:**

**SAM**

An energetic and ambitious teenager. A boy at the play's beginning. A man at the end.

**HENRY**

Sam's younger brother. May double as Chorus.

**BIXBY**

Distinguished and wise man. Not necessarily old.

**BROWN**

Older, grumpy. Doubling possible.

**MATE (Malloy)**

Irascible, yet kindly. A man about BIXBY'S age.

**CHORUS (Approx 5): LEADSMEN, CREWMEMBERS**

Healthy, sturdy men and ladies.

*A slash (/) in the dialogue indicates the start of the next spoken line.*

## MUSIC

(Bold titles appear on Demo Recording)

1.	<b>Underscore: "When I was a boy ..."</b>	<b>Sam</b>	<b>p. 1</b>
2.	<b>Great Big Boat (On the Great Big Water)</b>	<b>Sam, Company</b>	<b>p. 1</b>
3.	Cue: "Boat's lookin' for a new Cabin Boy."	Sam	p. 4
4.	Cue: "Leave me alone."	Sam	p. 6
5.	Cue: "But, sir."	Sam	p. 7
<b>6</b>	<b>The Alligator Boat</b>	<b>Sam, Bixby</b>	<b>p. 10</b>
7.	Snatch It!	Company	p. 16
8.	Snatch It! (Reprise)	Company	p. 18
9.	Underscore: "Ever spent any time ..."	Bixby, Sam	p. 24
<b>10.</b>	<b>Flights of Angels</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>p. 26</b>
11.	Underscore: "The boat backed out ..."	Sam	p. 27
<b>12.</b>	<b>The Leadsmen's Song</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>p. 29</b>
13.	Underscore: "But, little brother."	Sam	p. 34
<b>14.</b>	<b>Mississippi Sunset</b>	<b>Sam, Henry, All</b>	<b>p. 34</b>
15.	Snatch It! (Reprise)	Company	p. 36
<b>16.</b>	<b>God Made This River</b>	<b>Brown, Sam</b>	<b>p. 41</b>
17.	Chord	Orchestra	p. 47
<b>18.</b>	<b>The Book Song</b>	<b>Sam, Bixby</b>	<b>p. 48</b>
19.	Underscore: "How you doin' ..."	Sam	p. 53
20.	Mississippi Sunset(R)	Sam, Henry, All	p. 54
21.	Underscore: "Next day ..."	Sam	p. 57
<b>22.</b>	<b>Killing Brown</b>	<b>Sam, All</b>	<b>p. 59</b>
23.	Chord	Orchestra	p. 61
<b>24.</b>	<b>The Book Song (R)</b>	<b>Sam, Bixby</b>	<b>p. 63</b>
<b>25.</b>	<b>I Remember</b>	<b>Bixby</b>	<b>p. 69</b>
26.	Chord	Orchestra	p. 72
27.	Underscore: "Yes, ma'am ..."	Sam	p. 73
28.	Underscore: "As far as my brother ..."	Sam	p. 77
<b>29.</b>	<b>Flights of Angels (R)</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>p. 77</b>
30.	Snatch It (Reprise)	Company	p. 85
31.	Underscore: "... signed in your presence."	Bixby, Sam	p. 88
32.	Underscore: "I imagine right here ..."	Sam, Mate	p. 90
33.	Underscore: "So, that's how I achieved ..."	Sam	p. 93
34.	Underscore: "People who come to ..."	Sam, Bixby	p. 95
35.	Chord	Orchestra	p. 97
<b>36.</b>	<b>Great Big Boat (R)</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>p. 97</b>

**TRACK LIST**  
Demo Recording

1.	<b>Underscore: "When I was a boy ..."</b>	<b>Sam</b>	<b>p. 1</b>
2.	<b>Great Big Boat (On the Great Big Water)</b>	<b>Sam, Company</b>	<b>p. 1</b>
3.	<b>The Alligator Boat</b>	<b>Sam, Bixby</b>	<b>p. 10</b>
4.	<b>Flights of Angels</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>p. 26</b>
5.	<b>The Leadsman's Song</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>p. 29</b>
6.	<b>Mississippi Sunset</b>	<b>Sam, Henry, All</b>	<b>p. 34</b>
7.	<b>God Made This River</b>	<b>Brown, Sam</b>	<b>p. 41</b>
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11.	<b>I Remember</b>	<b>Bixby</b>	<b>p. 69</b>
12.	<b>Flights of Angels (R)</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>p. 77</b>
13.	<b>Great Big Boat (R)</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>p. 97</b>

*The stage is bare. When house lights go out, a lone flute is heard in the distance - No. 1 Underscore <<Track 1>>. Then SAM walks onto the stage alone and addresses the audience.*

SAM

When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was to be a steamboatman. We had transient ambitions of other sorts, but they were only transient. When a circus came and went, it left us all burning to become clowns, and now and then we had a hope that if we lived and were good, God would permit us to be pirates. These ambitions faded out; but the ambition to be a steamboatman always remained.

*Music and lights begin to change.*

SAM (CONT'D)

I'll tell you why we felt that way: Once a day a steamboat arrived upward from St. Louis, and before it came, the day was glorious with expectancy. After it left, the day was a dead and empty thing. Not only the boys but the whole village felt this.

*(beat)*

I can see it now. The streets empty, or pretty nearly so. One or two folks sitting in front of the stores, hats slouched over their faces, asleep. A few pigs loafing along the sidewalk doing a good business in watermelon rinds and seeds. And the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi - mile wide - shining in the sun. Presently, a film of dark smoke would appear above the water, and instantly a young man famous for his quick eye would lift up the cry ...

*Panting, HENRY runs up to him.*

HENRY

Steamboat Comin'!

**SOUND:** *A far-off steam whistle.*

*The MUSIC of No. 2 "Great Big Boat" <<Track 2>> begins.*

SAM

That's my brother, Henry!

COMES A QUIET TO A DAY.  
COMES A SIMPLE SWEET-AND-SILENT WAY  
TO SIT WITHOUT A THING TO SAY -  
I MEAN, WITHOUT A SINGLE WORD.

THEN YOU HEAR A CLANG!

HENRY

FIRST YOU HEAR A SWOOSH, THEN HISS, THEN  
BANG -  
LIKE NO SONG YOU EVER SANG,  
LIKE NO SOUND YOU EVER HEARD.

SAM & HENRY

THEN A GREAT BIG JOY  
COMES CUTTIN' THROUGH THE MIDDLE OF THE  
TOWN,

SAM

MAKIN' EVER' CREATURE LYIN' DOWN AWAKE  
AND START A BRAND NEW DAY.  
LIKE A GREAT BIG TOY,  
LIVIN' IN A MEM'RY FROM THE PAST -  
SLIDIN' DOWN THE RIVER CLOSIN' FAST -  
AND THEN YOU HEAR SOMEBODY SAY:

HENRY

“GREAT BIG BOAT ON THE GREAT BIG WATER.”

*The CREWMEMBERS begin to assemble the steamboat “PAUL  
JONES.”*

SAM

Everyone's here. Every house and store pours out a human contribution. And all in a twinkling, the dead town is alive and moving. Men, women, boys, all hurrying to the wharf. And people fasten their eyes on the coming boat as if it's a wonder they're seeing for the first time.

SAM (CONT'D)

SMOKESTACKS SHOOTIN' SOOT.  
EACH ONE 'BOUT FIFTY, SIXTY FOOT.  
AIN'T A SINGLE SOUL IS STAYIN' PUT -  
ALL FLYIN' ON THE RUN.  
STEAM WHISTLE GIVES A BLOW.  
(WHOOO, WHOOO!)  
OL' BOAT BE HERE BEFORE YOU KNOW.  
PADDLEWHEEL JUST PUNCHIN' 'GAINST THE  
FLOW,  
BEST TIME OF DAY FOR EV'RYONE.

ALL  
 THEN A GREAT BIG SMILE  
 GOES SLIDIN' 'CROSS THE MIDDLE OF MY FACE,  
 GIVIN' ME A REASON TO EMBRACE THE DAY  
 AND EV'RYONE AROUND.  
 LAUGHIN' ALL THE WHILE,  
 I HURRY FROM THE LEVEE TO THE SHORE -  
 GETTIN' THERE A DECENT WHILE BEFORE THE  
 REST,  
 AND THEN I HEAR THAT SOUND:  
 "GREAT BIG BOAT ON THE GREAT BIG WATER."

*SAM pulls out his ticket - passage to get on the boat - and waves it proudly.*

SAM

See, I wanted to be a pilot.

*A member of the CREW places the "Paul Jones" sign - the name of the boat.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Pilot was the grandest position of all. That's why I ran away. I decided that I would never come home again 'til I was a pilot and could come home in glory.

*(he finds a spot on deck and poses gallantly)*

I was gonna be a steamboatman! I tell you, a word has never tasted so good in my mouth before.

SAM (CONT'D)

PILOT IS IN CHARGE:  
 EV'RY SINGLE ASPECT, SMALL OR LARGE,  
 EV'RY SINGLE PASSAGE, DOCK, OR BARGE,  
 EV'RY SINGLE THING.  
 PILOTHOUSE UP HIGH.  
 PILOT'S LIKE AN ANGEL IN THE SKY,  
 EVER TIME HE SMILES OR WINKS AN EYE, I  
 SWEAR,  
 THE LADIES START TO SING.

ALL

IT'S A GREAT BIG JOY  
 RIDIN' ON A CUSHION MADE OF STEAM,  
 RIDIN' DOWN THE MIDDLE OF A DREAM  
 THAT CHANGED MY LIFE FROM NIGHT TO DAY.

SAM  
I'M A GREAT BIG BOY!

ALL  
LEAVIN' FROM A MISSISSIPPI TOWN,  
TRAVELIN' THE RIVER UP AND DOWN  
WHERE I HEAR EV'RYBODY SAY:

SAM & HENRY  
"GREAT BIG BOAT ON THE GREAT BIG WATER."

ALL  
"GREAT BIG BOAT ON THE GREAT BIG WATER."

*The song ends in a flourish. The CREW have assembled the PAUL JONES, which features the pilothouse and various decks, all viewed from the bow.*

*The boat is configured as if it is headed straight toward the audience. **MUSIC No. 3 Underscore** plays.*

HENRY  
Sam! Boat's lookin' for a new cabin boy. I'm goin' to sign up.

*He starts off.*

SAM  
*("this is happening awfully fast")*  
Good, Henry. You chase those dreams!

HENRY  
*(stopping, on his way out)*  
You're the one with dreams, Sam. I'm just along for the exhilaration. I don't even know what a cabin boy is!

*He's gone.*

SAM  
*(to audience)*  
Now, for me: I had only one thing in mind, and I intended to get it done, even though I had no idea whatsoever how to do it.

*(beat)*  
The man I was lookin' for was the pilot. Fellow named Horace Bixby.

*SAM begins to move toward the pilothouse - where there are several calling bells, a speaking tube for communication with the engine room, and a large pilot's wheel. BIXBY, a serious and sturdy man, stands facing out, studying his pocket watch and scanning the horizon.*

*When the MUSIC ends, LIGHTS change. SAM knocks on the post of the pilothouse and addresses BIXBY from behind.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Mister Horace Bixby?

*(beat)*

Name's Sam Clemens, sir. And I'm hear to serve.

BIXBY

What are you servin'?

SAM

No. I'm interested in learnin' the river, sir. Like to be a cub pilot, if it's all right with you.

*(beat)*

I guess what I'm askin' is, would you teach me the river?

BIXBY

No, I would not.

SAM

No?

BIXBY

NO.

SAM

No?

BIXBY

NO!

SAM

I wouldn't be no trouble, sir. Don't eat much. Don't take up much space.

BIXBY

NO, again.

*BIXBY straps down the wheel.*

SAM

I'd jump right into it, sir. I'm a hungry learner.

BIXBY

*(leaving)*

Never found yourself hungry enough to learn the meanin' of the word "NO!"

*(beat)*

Leave me alone.

*BIXBY exits to another spot on the boat. MUSIC No. 4.*

*Underscore plays.*

SAM

*(to audience)*

Talkin' Mr. Bixby into learnin' me the river was walkin' a more treacherous path than I expected. But I stayed with it.

*He follows BIXBY to the new location. LIGHTS change to LATER IN THE DAY.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Mister Bixby, I'll be / nothing but ...

BIXBY

No.

SAM

I'm determined / to turn myself ...

BIXBY

No.

SAM

I want to become a pilot.

*BIXBY stops to face him down.*

BIXBY

How'd you come aboard?

SAM

*(showing his ticket)*

I booked passage, sir. Me 'n my brother.

*BIXBY looks at the ticket.*

BIXBY

Huh. You're supposed to be in the back, bunkin' with the livestock.

SAM

Yessir.

BIXBY

A pilot position's quite a promotion for you.

SAM

Sir. A pilot's what I want to be. A steamboatman.

BIXBY

*(sternly, no)*

Pilotin' a steamboat is dangerous business, son. Ain't a county fair!

*(beat)*

There are about three hundred and sixty-five ways to obliterate a steamboat and a pilot's gotta look out for each and every one of them. You can blow it sky high from too much steam and you can smash it to pieces on a sharp chunk of rock.

*(beat)*

The banks of this river are wet with the tears of those who've lost someone.

*(serious - driving this home)*

Pilotin' a steamboat's no game, son. It's dangerous business. Ain't fer boys. Ain't fer children.

*BIXBY'S gone again, headed back to the pilothouse.*

SAM

But, sir!

*MUSIC No. 5 Underscore plays. SAM turns back to the audience as HENRY runs in, perhaps carrying a chamber pot.*

HENRY

SAM! I got the job. I'm a cabin boy!

SAM

*(bewildered by this)*

Great news, Henry. I knew you'd take like a snap-turtle to water.

HENRY

You workin' the pilot?

SAM

I'm workin' 'im.

HENRY

Later.

*He's gone.*

SAM

*(to audience)*

I am nothin' if not persistent. So, I stuck with it.

*SAM scurries after BIXBY and arrives back at the pilothouse.*

*LIGHTS change again to LATER IN THE DAY.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Mister Bixby, sir. Have I got a deal for you!

*BIXBY begins to leave.*

SAM (CONT'D)

*(desperate pleading)*

PLEASE, SIR.

*BIXBY stops. MUSIC stops.*

SAM (CONT'D)

If you'll teach me the Mississippi river from St. Louis to New Orleans, I'm willin' to offer five hundred dollars -

*Surprise on BIXBY'S face.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Payable out of the first wages I receive as a pilot.

BIXBY

*(amused at the offer)*

Five hundred dollars, eh. Boy, when you get ahold of somethin', you don't let up, do you?

SAM

Told you, sir. I'm a hungry learner.

*(beat)*

I will NOT be a disappointment.

SAM (CONTD)

*(beat)*

Sir.

*Long pause. BIXBY looks him over.*

BIXBY

Got any particular talent, keep us awake on a long drive?

SAM

Only singin' I ever done was in church. Can't make nothin' but noise on a banjo.

*(beat)*

I can spin a yarn, though.

BIXBY

*(show me)*

Oh. Ya can, can ya?

*(beat)*

Boy, I've heard the finest tall tales from two generations of River Pilots. What makes you think you can spin a yarn that good?

SAM

*(pouring it on - striking a pose)*

Oh. Well. Because.

*(beat)*

I learned about spinnin' yarns when I worked as an alligator pilot.

BIXBY

A what?

SAM

*(laying it on thick)*

Alligator pilot. On an Alligator boat.

BIXBY

I'm almost afraid to ask: what's an alligator boat?

SAM

To pull the alligators out of the river. Ever'one knows that.

BIXBY

Alligators have become a problem?

SAM

Well, not now, because we took care of 'em. But they used to be so bad we'd run aground on gators every trip.

*(beat - a sigh, a pose)*

SAM (CONT'D)

Yessir, I spent five years on the finest alligator boat ever - the Spanish Galleon *El Crock-a-DEE-lee-oh*.

BIXBY

Spanish Galleon on a river?

SAM

Dire measures for dire situations.

*(beat - smugly)*

Only thing fast enough to catch a gator.

*MUSIC No. 6 "Alligator Boat" <<Track 3>> begins.*

SAM (CONT'D)

*(theatrically)*

The Captain was a man with one leg, an eyepatch, and a hook for a hand.

*(beat)*

His nickname was "Lucky."

SAM (CONT'D)

ONCE A GATOR'S SPOTTED  
ROPE IS TIGHTLY KNOTTED.  
A BAT MADE OF TIMBER  
IS READIED FOR USE.  
NOW THE NIGHT GROWS CLEARER.  
NOW THE SHIP IS NEARER.  
NOW THE WATCHMAN LOWERS,  
SO CAREF'LY, THE NOOSE.

*Some CREWMEMBERS join in the "Whoomps."*

SAM (CONT'D)

AND WHOOMP! THE LOOP AROUND THE NECK.  
WHOOMP! THE GATOR'S ON THE DECK.

*He mimes beating the gator.*

SAM (CONT'D)

WHOOMP, WHOOMP, WHOOMP! HECK!  
NOW THE FUN BEGINS.

CREW

HEY!

*The MUSIC continues.*

BIXBY

You do that to ev'ry gator?

SAM

*(no)*

Just the one.

BIXBY

Ah. You get the other gators to chase you and you lead them away?

SAM

*(yes)*

Like lemmings over the cliff.

LO, THE MIGHTY GALLEON  
SPEEDY AS A STALLION  
DOWN THE MISSISSIPPI  
NOW SAILING FULL SPEED.  
EV'RY GATOR TRACKING,  
GATOR LIPS A'SMACKING.  
EV'RY GATOR HUNGRY AND  
WANTING TO FEED.

*Some CREWMEMBERS join the "Floops."*

SAM (CONT'D)

THEN, FLOOP! THE SAILS GO UP THE MAST.  
FLOOP! THE SHIP NOW SCREAMING PAST.  
FLOOP! THE GATORS CHASING FAST.  
NOW THE FUN BEGINS.

*Some CREWMEMBERS offer an "Ooooo" background.*

SAM (CONT'D)

SPLASHING AND KICKING  
AS WE'RE PICKING UP SPEED.  
THUS, THEN A MILLION  
REPTILIANS ARE FREED.

*Crew "Swooshing."*

SAM (CONT'D)

THEN, SWOOSH! THE GATORS OUT TO SEA  
SWOOSH! THE RIVER'S GATOR-FREE.  
WON'T COME BACK, I GUARANTEE.  
NOW THE FUN BEGINS.

CREWMEMBERS

HA!

BIXBY

What about the one onboard?

SAM

Sometimes let 'im go, sometimes cook 'im over a grill.

BIXBY

Don't tell me.

SAM

Tastes just like chicken.

BIXBY (CONT'D)

Tastes just like chicken.

*BIXBY joins in, too.*

SAM & BIXBY

YES, SWOOSH! THE GATORS OUT TO SEA.

SWOOSH! THE RIVER GATOR-FREE.

WON'T COME BACK, I GUARANTEE.

NOW THE FUN BEGINS.

NOW THE FUN BEGINS.

ALL

NOW THE FUN BEGINS.

SAM

OLAY!

ALL

WHOOOMP!

*The MUSIC ends. A pause. Smiles and laughs of recognition.*

BIXBY

Well, you got me - you can spin a yarn.

*(beat)*

You remind me of myself a while back. I used to enjoy tellin' a tale.

SAM

Let's hear one!

BIXBY

*(no - with some regret)*

That was ... long time ago.

SAM

We could swap stories. While we work. Keep us awake on a long drive.

BIXBY

*(back to business)*

You do seem to be a decent sort.

SAM

Oh, I'm nothin' if not decent.

BIXBY

*(half serious)*

Don't cuss, do you?

SAM

On remarkable occasions.

*(pause)*

I've left home, sir. M' young brother Henry's workin' as a cabin boy. Doin' a fine job of it, too.

BIXBY

Henry's your brother?

SAM

Yes, sir.

BIXBY

The Captain's already singin' his praises.

*(beat)*

Maybe cabin boy's a more suitable position for you.

SAM

Sir. I'm pilot material.

BIXBY

Are you?

SAM

Yessir.

*Another long pause. BIXBY looks him over.*

BIXBY

Well. Here's the thing. If you promise not to give up - stick with it all the way - I'll take you on.

SAM

*(pure elation)*

You won't regret this, Mr. Bixby. I promise.

BIXBY

Hold on to your wages, though. 'Magine you'll need 'em.

SAM

Mighty kind of you, Sir.

BIXBY

No sense "Mighty Kindin'" me. Two pilots on every steamboat. They both gotta sign your license.

SAM

Yes, sir.

BIXBY

You gotta work under Mister Brown, too. You can start tomorrow.

SAM

*(not really hearing)*

Oh. Yes. Thank you, sir.

*BIXBY looks immediately regretful. SAM moves to another place on the boat, where he meets HENRY.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Look at us, Henry! Me a Cub Pilot, an' you a cabin boy!

HENRY

Means I'll be up before dawn, scrubbin' pots and brewin' coffee - makin' beds, sweepin' floors. It'll be a lot like the farm.

SAM

You'll be the best cabin boy in five states.

HENRY

Might be the weariest. But you! Sam, you're half-way to bein' the most famous Steamboat Pilot on the river. And that's why we're here!

*(beat)*

You're pure gold, Sam! 'Magine what Granma'd say!

SAM

‘Magine she’d say, “What’re you thinkin’, takin’ your little brother on that boat?”

*Back in the pilot house, BIXBY checks his pocket watch and shouts to the MATE - beginning a recitation - a ritualistic game they play.*

BIXBY

Mr. Malloy!

*The MATE is discovered on another deck.*

MATE

Yessir, Mr. Bixby.

BIXBY

I got a hankerin’ to pilot the Mississippi River, Mr. Malloy!

MATE

Then ain’t it fortunate that you find yourself aboard a steamboat, sir?

BIXBY

Loadin’ up the boat as we speak. Charge of a no-good scoundrel named Malloy!

MATE

Malloy! I know that ragamuffin. Ugly as a horse’s hind end, but he’ll sure get yer boat loaded.

BIXBY

Good.

*(the final move of the game - a pronouncement)*

THEN, GET ‘ER LOADED, MR. MALLOY!

MATE

*(to the CREW)*

SNATCH IT!

*The CREW jumps to life, moving bags, packages, boxes. As members of the company perform loading chores on board the Paul Jones, they burst into a rhythm using their hands (a la STOMP!). **MUSIC No. 7 “Snatch It.”***

MATE (CONT’D)

SNATCH IT!

COMPANY  
SNATCH IT!

ALL  
'VAST HEAVING!

MATE  
SNATCH IT!

COMPANY  
SNATCH IT!

ALL  
'VAST HEAVING!

MATE  
SNATCH IT UP, SNATCH IT UP,  
HEFT 'ER OVER LARBOARD.  
ROLL 'ER 'CROSS THE BOILER DECK  
AND STOW 'ER UP STARBOARD.

CAREFUL NOW, WATCH IT THERE,  
YOU LILY-LIVERED GOAT.  
I MEAN TO GET HER LOADED,  
BUT I MEAN TO STAY AFLOAT!

CAREFUL OF THE PADDLEBOX,  
YOU'RE SCRAPIN' ON THE PAINT.  
GIT IT ON THE DECK. YOU'RE  
EITHER LOADIN' OR YOU AIN'T.

SNATCH IT UP, SNATCH IT.  
USE YER MUSCLE, USE YER BODY.  
GET 'ER STOWED AND GET 'ER TIGHT  
SO WE CAN QUIT AN' HAVE A TODDY.

NOW. SOMEBODY FETCH ME A CAPST'N BAR!

CREWMEMBER  
SOMEBODY FETCH 'IM A CAPST'N BAR.

MATE  
JUST SNATCH IT UP AND FETCH ME A CAPST'N  
BAR.

SAM

*(over-anxiously jumping in, he runs up to MATE.)*

I'M GONNA FETCH YOU A CAPST'N BAR!

*The MUSIC, the song, everything stops, and several CREW, including the MATE, gather on the deck above SAM. They stare down at the boy.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Tell me where it is - I'll fetch it!

*(beat)*

The capst'n bar.

MATE

*(as if talking to a dog)*

So you gonna fetch me a capst'n bar, are ye?

SAM

Why yessir, I reckon I will.

MATE

Don't suppose you'd like to tell me exactly what a capst'n bar is an' where it's hidin'.

SAM

Well, I'm sure you could describe it to me, and gimme some kinda clue as to its whereabouts.

MATE

I'm sure I could describe the sun to you and give you a clue that it's in the sky and you couldn't locate it on a clear day! Truth of the matter is you wouldn't know a capst'n bar if it flew outta the North and bit you on the southside while you wasn't lookin'.

SAM

Well, I aim to learn, sir.

MATE

What you aim to do is try my patience, you interferin', corn-spittin', sow-faced, waste of human components. GID ON WICHA!

*All CREW burst into laughter.*

SAM

*(embarrassed - to audience)*

It seems not everyone was as excited about my being aboard as I was.

*Quickly, the MATE turns on the gathered CREW - they've stopped working to watch.*

MATE

Whoa. Did bedtime come and someone forget to tell me, you soft-hided, squash-footed, fat-bellied good-for-nothings? Or maybe we just havin' a moment of prayer? Sunday rolled around and I missed it, eh?

*The crewmembers supply the rhythm again. No. 8 "Snatch It (R)."*

MATE (CONT'D)

SNATCH IT!

COMPANY

SNATCH IT!

ALL

'VAST HEAVING!

MATE

SNATCH IT!

COMPANY

SNATCH IT!

ALL

'VAST HEAVING!

MATE

SNATCH IT UP, SNATCH IT UP.

AFT AGAIN! FORE!

LIFT IT WITH YOUR STOMACH, MAN.

GET YER MUSCLES SORE.

SNATCH IT UP, TOSS A LINE.

NEVER LET 'ER PINCH.

GATHER UP THE SLACK AND WRAP 'ER

TWICE AROUND THE WINCH.

SNATCH IT!

COMPANY

SNATCH IT!

ALL  
‘VAST HEAVING!

MATE  
SNATCH IT!

COMPANY  
SNATCH IT!

ALL  
‘VAST HEAVING!

*The MATE goes on with his shouting, moving off all the while. The CREW disburse, though they keep the rhythm of the song going quietly. SAM starts to make his way to the pilothouse. As he does, he pulls out his diary and makes an entry.*

SAM  
*(to the audience)*

So, that’s how I entered upon the small enterprise of learning thirteen hundred miles of the great Mississippi River. Seemed easy to me: all a pilot had to do was to keep the boat in the river, and I did not consider that to be much of a trick, since it was so wide.

*Still writing in his diary, SAM is feeling very satisfied with himself as he makes his way across the deck. BROWN enters, wrapping a length of rope Navy-style on his arm, causing SAM to mistake him for a crewman. The MUSIC - the rhythm of the song - stops when BROWN speaks.*

BROWN  
Hey, boy!

*(no answer)*

Boy, I’m talkin’ to you!

*(beat)*

What’re you doin’ on this boat?

SAM  
*(his ticket again)*

Got passage.

BROWN  
*(deaf)*

WHAT?

SAM

Got *passage*.

*BROWN* grabs the ticket and reads it. He grumbles to himself.

BROWN

Looks to me like you're supposed to be hobnobbin' with goats and chickens and such.

*(beat - shoves the ticket back at SAM)*

Didn't ask where you're sleepin', asked what you're *DOIN'* on this *BOAT*.

SAM

*(nothing at first - then, arrogantly - he's decided how to play it)*

What am *I* doin'? Well, I might just as well ask you what *you're* doin' on this boat.

BROWN

Oh, ye might?

SAM

Yes, sir, I might. I myself have recently achieved the rank of cub under Mister Horace Bixby, the finest pilot ever to steam the Mississippi River. That's what *I'm* doin' on this boat - not that it's any of your business!

BROWN

Cub, huh? You gonna become a river pilot, you sam-blasted swamp snail?

SAM

"Sam-Blasted?"

BROWN

SAM-BLASTED! You never heard a curse before?

SAM

*(under his breath)*

Never one that stupid.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

WHAT?

SAM

I say, yes I have.

BROWN  
You have *what*?

SAM  
I have heard the occasional curse.

BROWN  
Well, now, correct me if I'm wrong, Cub - but I thought you need *two* signatures on a Pilot's license.

SAM  
*(pouring it on)*  
Strictly a formality, of course.

BROWN  
*(deaf)*  
A WHAT?

SAM  
*A formality.* All I'll be needin' is Mr. Bixby's signature. The alternate pilot, whoever he may be -

*(in confidence)*  
he'll more'n likely do whatever Mr. Bixby says.

BROWN  
He will?

SAM  
I'm certain of it.

BROWN  
*(deaf)*  
WHAT?

SAM  
*(riled)*  
YES!  
*(recovered)*

Why, Horace Bixby's famous. Well-known. This other fellow - man by the name of Brown.

BROWN  
*(still deaf)*  
WHAT?

SAM

Name's BROWN! The other pilot.

BROWN

Really?

SAM

Imagine he's scroungin' around in a dark corner somewhere. Lookin' fer scraps.

BROWN

Oh?

SAM

Reckon so.

BROWN

Well. Let's hope he gets flushed out in time to steer the boat.

*(beat)*

HUH?

SAM

*(off guard)*

Yes. Yes.

BROWN

*(he turns to go)*

Well, I'll be seeing you around, boy.

SAM

You won't be callin' me "boy" for long, sir. Soon it'll be "Mister."

BROWN

*(deaf)*

WHAT?

SAM

I say, soon you'll be callin' me "Mister."

BROWN

*(stopping, turning back)*

Oh.

*(beat)*

Well, I'm not so high-fallutin'. You can just call me by my name.

SAM

And what might that be?

BROWN

Name's BROWN!

*BROWN goes. A crestfallen SAM is left to address the audience.*

SAM

Brown bein' a pretty common name, I had hopes that this was not the *pilot* Brown.

*(beat)*

But it was. And that was how I met him. Mr. Brown. A middle-aged, horse-faced, ignorant, stingy, malicious, snarling, fault-hunting, mote-magnifying tyrant. Who couldn't hear any better'n a Georgia brick.

*Joyful again, he begins his ascent to the pilothouse.*

SAM (CONT'D)

*(still to the audience)*

But right now, I was too busy bein' proud of myself.

*He has arrived at the pilothouse. LIGHTS. It is MORNING. Something has hold of BIXBY's attention.*

BIXBY

Smell that?

SAM

Sir?

BIXBY

*Magnolia Grandiflora.* Beautiful tree. All along the river.

*(beat)*

All through my life. Brings back memories.

*SAM tries to take in the aroma the same way BIXBY does.*

SAM

Yes, sir.

BIXBY

*(looking SAM over)*

I see you writin' in a book of some kind?

SAM

I keep a diary.

*He shows it to BIXBY.*

BIXBY

Do you.

*(beat)*

Fella your age - whatcha got: two, three pages?

SAM

I write down some of my yarns, too.

*Pause.*

BIXBY

You ever spent any time on the river?

*MUSIC Underscore No. 9 begins.*

SAM

I have a little pram - used to go fishin'.

BIXBY

Steamboat's not a pram, son.

SAM

I know.

BIXBY

*(contemplative)*

How do you ... *see* the river?

SAM

Beg pardon?

BIXBY

The Mississippi. This muddy ditch down the middle of the country that you wanna navigate. How do you see it?

*(beat)*

What does she *mean* to you?

SAM

Why, she means everything. The whole world. My whole life.

*(beat)*

I wrote a whole passage about a sunset I saw over the water one evenin'. It was a bewitching thing. Told me I was made for this river. If I can't become a steamboatman and navigate the Mississippi for the rest of my days, I might as well climb on into a wooden box right away 'cause I won't do anybody a bit of good otherwise.

BIXBY

What're you gonna do on the day she doesn't mean everything to you anymore? The day she becomes a big muddy ditch full of traps and snares.

SAM

That ain't gonna happen, Mr. Bixby.

*BIXBY takes a beat.*

BIXBY

It always happens.

*The **MUSIC** is interrupted and halted by a **SOUND**: A terrible explosion is heard to the port side, ahead of them. Perhaps even a flash of light. Both BIXBY and SAM turn.*

*There is a flurry among the crew. We hear, "Buckets!" "Rope!" "Nah." "Too far," "Too far away," "Can't do nothin'," "You sure?" "Go on 'bout your business."*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

*(finally adding an end to the commotion)*

Too far! Stand down!

*Both SAM and BIXBY stare out toward the place where the noise originated.*

SAM

Sweet heaven! What's that?

BIXBY

Heaven's got nothin' to do with it. That's the worst sound a riverman can hear.

SAM

What is it?

BIXBY

That's the *Aleck Scott*. Class A Paddlewheel. Just two miles up. By the sound of it, her main boiler just exploded from too much pressure.

*(beat)*

If you ever see someone scalded to death from a steam explosion ...

*(beat - a rare moment of weakness)*

Well. It's not somethin' you ever forget.

*There is a pause as they both consider this.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

Too far away to help. Best thing we can do is go on 'bout our business.

*The CREW, including BIXBY, assemble and join arms - SAM and HENRY, curious, stand to one side and watch.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

*(to SAM)*

We do this for the dead, son.

*The CREW and BIXBY sing an anthem for the dead. **MUSIC No. 10 "Flights of Angels" <<Track 4>> is sung a cappella.***

COMPANY

CAST THE RIVER CALM, THE WATER STILL.  
SOOTHE THE STORMING SEAS UNTIL  
FLIGHTS OF ANGELS SING THEE TO  
THY REST.

STAY THE MIGHTY WAVES AND STOP THE RAIN.  
FREE YOUR SOUL FROM HOPELESS PAIN.  
FLIGHTS OF ANGELS SING THEE TO  
THY REST.

BIXBY

Back to it, Gentlemen.

*The CREW disperses. Then BIXBY reaches for a bell, and turns to the sound tube.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

*(into the tube)*

Quarter for'ard'll do nicely, Ben.

***SOUND** of a whistle and paddlewheels. BIXBY is steering.  
SAM takes his place behind BIXBY.*

SAM

*(to audience)*

The boat backed out at four in the afternoon and it was our watch until eight.

***MUSIC No. 11 Underscore** begins. BIXBY pulls out his diary  
and makes an entry about the explosion.*

BIXBY

Understand you met Mr. Brown.

SAM

Yessir.

*(beat - about BROWN)*

Man composes some of the strangest curses I ever heard.

BIXBY

You'll be doin' shifts under him too, you know.

SAM

Mister Bixby, if it's all the same, I just as soon do my shifts under you.

*(beat)*

Sir.

BIXBY

'Fraid it doesn't work that way.

*(walking away from the wheel)*

Here, take her. Stay close to the side, close to those tied up boats. Right up next to 'em.

***MUSIC** stops.*

SAM

*(to audience)*

I took the wheel, but we were awfully close to the bank. So, I held my breath and began to ease the boat away from the danger.

*(he turns the wheel)*

On out.

*(again)*

On out toward the middle.

*(beat)*

In half a minute I had a nice wide margin of safety.

*BIXBY grabs the wheel, pushing SAM aside.*

BIXBY

What're you doin'? Gimme that here, you scumbucket. You got the whole boat dancin' around like a butterfly!

SAM

We were so *close* - I thought we were in danger, Sir.

BIXBY

*(patiently but firmly)*

Consider this your first lesson: The easy water is close to shore. The current is out in the middle. You hug the bank going upstream to stay out of the current, and you ride the middle comin' downstream to take advantage of the current!

SAM

*(to audience)*

There and then I resolved to be a downstream pilot and leave the upstreaming to others.

*Pause as BIXBY re-settles the boat to his own satisfaction.  
Then he gestures toward the bank, pointing out his lesson.*

BIXBY

Now, pay attention. This here is nine-mile point.

SAM

Um hm.

BIXBY

Got to take a bearing on that White Oak, same with the dead Cypress back at six-mile point.

*(still pointing all of this out from the pilothouse)*

The slack water ends here, with this bunch of China-trees; now we cross over.

*As he speaks, SAM slips away from the pilothouse and comes down to lower deck. **LIGHTS** darken. He removes his jacket, pulls his shirttails out. It is now nighttime.*

SAM

*(to audience)*

Lucky for me, the watch was ended at last and I headed toward bed. My very first watch was done. And my first day of pilotin' was not what I'd expected.

BROWN (O.S.)

What're you boys doin'? You specialize in dawdlin'?

CREWMEMBERS (O.S.)

*(glumly)*

No sir, Mister Brown.

BROWN (O.S.)

Sam-blasted lolly-gaggers!

***MUSIC No. 12 "The Leadsman's Song" <<Track 5>>  
begins.***

SAM

Thing about bein' aboard a big boat - especially at night - there seems to be music everywhere. In the splash of the wheel. In the chug of the steam. In the slide of the water.

*The LEADSMEN are at the bow with their lines. They throw the lines and sing the readings as SAM explains.*

***SOUND: The Leadsman's Bell in the pilothouse rings.***

SAM (CONT'D)

The leadsman are the fellows on either side of the boat who drop the line into the river bottom to check depth. They sing their readings like a song, and no sooner have they pulled up the line than they drop it again.

LEADSMEN

HALF. HALF TWAIN.

SAM

That means two and a half fathoms.

LEADSMEN

QUARTER. QUARTER TWAIN.

SAM

Two and a quarter fathoms.

LEADSMEN

MARK. MARK TWAIN.

SAM

Means two fathoms.

LEADSMEN

NO. NO BOTTOM.

SAM

Which means the river is so deep that the lead doesn't touch the bottom.

LEADSMEN

HALF. HALF TWAIN.

QUARTER. QUARTER TWAIN.

MARK. MARK TWAIN.

NO. NO BOTTOM.

SAM

I coulda stayed there forever - just listenin' to the music of the river.

*BROWN, JIM, and PAPPY (Crewmembers) are left onstage after the song. SAM watches from the side. The two Crewmen have a specific task to perform - sweeping or a similar job. BROWN is continuing a previous conversation with them, jotting in his notebook as he does.*

BROWN

There is such a thing as regulation, ain't that right?

JIM

Yessir.

BROWN

A loaf o' bread's a loaf o' bread, ain't it? HUH?

PAPPY & JIM

Yessir.

BROWN

If regulations said "two loaves," or "ten loaves," that'd be a different situation, now wouldn't it?

PAPPY

*(glumly)*

Yes sir, Mister Brown.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

What?

PAPPY & JIM

Yes, sir.

BROWN

Blad-snab right, "yes, sir."

JIM

Cookie was throwin' out the three loaves, Mr. Brown. Three full loaves o' bread, straight in the river. Didn't see no harm in takin' one of 'em.

BROWN

Don't talk to me about harm. Your kind's done plenty o' harm on this boat, and you better believe it. We got regulations!

JIM

Just tryin' to feed ourselves, sir.

*HENRY enters, not noticing the situation.*

HENRY

*(exciting upon seeing his brother)*

Sam.

SAM

Huh.

HENRY

*(running up to him)*

Sam, I'm glad to see ya.

SAM

What, little brother?

BROWN

*(focusing on HENRY)*

I'm *talkin'*, son! You interrupt me?

HENRY

*(seeing BROWN for the first time)*

Oh, no sir. I didn't mean ...

BROWN

*(deaf)*

WHAT?

*BROWN marches down to HENRY.*

HENRY

I didn't mean / to ...

BROWN

You don't interrupt a pilot, boy!

*BROWN backhands HENRY smart on the face. All three witnesses react with a lurch toward BROWN - perhaps even a "Hey!" But they catch themselves. BROWN turns to the CREWMEN.*

BROWN (CONT'D)

*(to CREWMEN)*

You got somethin' to say?

*(no)*

Get to quarters, you sandbags!

*The men leave. BROWN surveys the situation, then follows. SAM and HENRY are left alone.*

SAM

*(the slap)*

You okay?

HENRY

*(feelin' his face)*

Oh, yeah. Cousin Dolly hits harder'n that ol' fool. An' she's barely six years old.

SAM

Somethin' troublin' you, little brother?

HENRY

The Cap'n's turned in.

*(beat)*

I got his cabin all laid out for tomorrow. I've swept 'n cleaned. All tip top.

SAM

The Cap'n?

HENRY

They made me the Captain's cabin boy.

SAM

*(jealousy creeps in)*

That's awful fast.

*(beat)*

You ... *ready* for that?

HENRY

I s'pose. They say I'm good at it. Like you're good at bein' a pilot.

*SAM is silent.*

HENRY (CONT'D)

That's goin' fine, ain't it? The pilotin'?

SAM

Oh, yeah.

HENRY

I heard some talk. Wanted to be sure.

*HENRY takes a pause before his sorrow leaks through.*

SAM

Henry, you okay?

HENRY

I ... I sure could use one of Granma's biscuits right about now.

SAM

Cookie's got biscuits in the larder. Sneak in and grab one.

HENRY

Ain't the same.

SAM

'S a biscuit, ain't it?

HENRY

Ain't Granma's biscuit.

SAM

What's troublin' you, Henry?

HENRY

Missin' home, Sam. This's a nice boat, but it ain't home.

SAM

Henry. Blast! You should be walkin' on air. Whole crew's talkin' 'bout what a good cabin boy you are.

*(beat)*

Brother, this's what we wanted. We both got a good two-fisted grip on our dreams. Need to hold on.

HENRY

Sam, I'd sure like to put my dreams off a few years.

*(beat)*

I could use the biscuits.

*SAM sits up and puts his arm around HENRY. MUSIC No. 13 Underscore begins.*

SAM

Tell you what. You still feel this way next stop, we'll putcha on a wagon headed home.

*This seems to cheer HENRY somewhat.*

SAM (CONT'D)

But, little brother. Look out toward the river. Look at that sunset - that bright red sunset steamin' out over the Mississippi river. You'll never get away from a sight like that. That's what Granma would say. "You'll never get away from that, son." Means it stays with you. It's in yer blood.

*(beat)*

That sunset, that's where we're headed, Henry. We're gonna be steamboatmen, you an' me. We're gonna ride this country North to South.

*MUSIC No. 14 "Mississippi Sunset" <<Track 6>> begins.*

SAM (CONT'D)

And little brother, there'll be biscuits at every port. With butter'n honey.

FEEL THE WEARY GLOW OF A MIDNIGHT MOON  
GRINNING LIKE A FOOL IN THE NIGHT,  
OR THE CRAZY HEAT OF A NATCHEZ NOON -  
SWEATY, LOUSY, ANGRY, DROWSY.

SMELL THE KANSAS SKY WHEN THE STEAKS ARE  
GRILLED.  
SMELL THE WHISKEY AGE IN TENNESSEE.

SMELL THE CREWMEN LINED UP, GLASSES  
 FILLED -  
 LONELY, WANTIN', DREARY, HAUNTIN'.

BUT YOU'LL NEVER GET AWAY  
 FROM A SIGHT LIKE A MISSISSIPPI SUNSET.  
 NO, YOU'LL NEVER GET AWAY  
 FROM A SIGHT LIKE A MISSISSIPPI SUNSET.  
 MISSISSIPPI, MISSISSIPPI.

HENRY

*(trying to take part in the reverie)*

SAW A CATFISH CRAWL UP FROM BASTIAN BAY,  
 FATTER THAN AN OLD TEXAS SOW.  
 I JUST PICKED HIM UP AND HAULED HIM AWAY.  
 SLIMY, GOOEY. GAMEY, CHEWY.

AND THE TOAD FROGS JUMP LIKE THEY'RE  
 CATCHIN' BIRDS -  
 FLYIN' UP FAR INTO THE BLUE.  
 AND THE CRAWFISH SOUP, WELL I AIN'T GOT THE  
 WORDS:  
 PEPPER, SPICY, RED BEAN, RICEY

BOTH

BUT YOU'LL NEVER GET AWAY  
 FROM A SIGHT LIKE A MISSISSIPPI SUNSET.  
 NO, YOU'LL NEVER GET AWAY  
 FROM A SIGHT LIKE A MISSISSIPPI SUNSET.  
 MISSISSIPPI, MISSISSIPPI.

SAM

SHOULD I EVER KNOW A GREAT ADVENTURE,  
 SHOULD I EVER LIVE A THOUSAND YEARS,  
 I WILL NEVER KNOW SUCH DAZZLING COLORS:  
 THE RED OF BLOOD,

HENRY

*(homesick still)*

THE BLUE OF TEARS.

SAM

OH, THE FIREFLIES SWIM LIKE A MILLION STARS  
 SENT DOWN HERE TO EARTH JUST TO PLAY,

AND THE MEN ON DECK SMOKIN' RED CIGARS.  
SMOKESTACKS SPARKIN', DAYLIGHT'S DARKIN'.

*The CREW begins to gather around HENRY in a show of unity.  
They join in the last chorus.*

ALL  
BUT YOU'LL NEVER GET AWAY  
FROM A SIGHT LIKE A MISSISSIPPI SUNSET.  
NO, YOU'LL NEVER GET AWAY  
FROM A SIGHT LIKE A MISSISSIPPI SUNSET.

SAM & HENRY  
MISSISSIPPI, MISSISSIPPI.

*The MUSIC ends.*

*SAM kisses HENRY on the forehead.*

SAM  
(to HENRY)  
I gotta get some shuteye.  
(beat)  
You wanna sleep here?

HENRY  
Nah. I'm alright.

SAM  
(sleepily pointing a him)  
Best cabin boy on *both* sides o' this river. That's a fact.

*HENRY leaves. SAM collapses and hits the floor, head down,  
butt up in the air - asleep.*

SAM (CONT'D)  
(to audience)  
My bed, which was not terribly comfortable, was most welcome.

*LIGHTS dim. No sooner is he still than we hear the percussive  
beat that the crewmembers performed earlier. No. 15 "Snatch  
It! (Reprise)." When the beat is established, a WATCHMAN  
enters with a bright lantern, goes to SAM, and wakes him.*

WATCHMAN

COME! TURN OUT!

CREWMEMBERS

COME! TURN OUT!

*SAM'S head rises, then drops again.*

WATCHMAN

MOVE, CUBBY! TURN OUT!

CREWMEMBERS

MOVE, CUBBY! TURN OUT!

WATCHMAN

UP AND OUT, CUBBY.  
WHAT'S THE TROUBLE WITH YOU?  
GOT A BOAT, GOT A RIVER,  
GOT PILOTIN' TO DO.

CREWMEMBERS

GOT PILOTIN' TO DO.

WATCHMAN

YOU BETTER GET YER BRITCHES ON  
AND START TO MOVIN' SWIFT.  
HAD YER SLEEP, HAD YER DREAMS,  
NOW IT'S TIME TO DO YER SHIFT.

CREWMEMBERS

TIME TO DO YER SHIFT!

*The WATCHMAN and CREWMEMBERS continue the percussive beat during the following.*

SAM

*(testy)*

Hey! What do you want to come bothering me in the middle of the night for? Glory to Louisville, I'll never get back to sleep!

WATCHMAN

Well, if you ain't just the sweetest thing in the universe! It's midnight, you sloppy thumb-suck. You're on watch. Four hours on, four hours off! How you think this boat gets itself up the river at night? *Elves?*

## WATCHMAN (CONT'D)

Or maybe we oughta stop the whole blasted thing so's you can catch a nap, huh?

*(beat)*

You're LATE! Bixby's waitin'.

*SAM straightens his jacket, slicks his hair:*

## WATCHMAN (CONT'D)

MOVE, CUBBY! TURN OUT!

## CREWMEMBERS

MOVE, CUBBY! TURN OUT!

*The WATCHMAN and CREWMEMBERS continue the beat, laughing as they leave the stage, the sound quietly continuing as underscore. SAM, stumbling and in a mess, begins the trek back to the pilothouse. As he moves, he tries to dress himself.*

## SAM

*(to the audience as he makes a note in his diary)*

Here was something fresh. This thing of getting up in the middle of the night to go to work. It was another detail that had never occurred to me. Of course, the boats run all night, but I never thought that somebody actually had to get up out of a warm bed to run 'em.

*SAM is tucking in his shirt and trying to finish off the entry in his diary. He doesn't see the approaching BROWN, and runs right into him, not realizing who it is.*

## SAM (CONT'D)

Ooof. 'Scuse me.

*Rhythm stops.*

## BROWN

HERE! HERE, you sam-floundered scumbucket. Watch where you're goin'!

## SAM

I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I ...

*(seeing who it is)*

Mr. Brown. I didn't realize it was you ...

BROWN

*(taking a pugilist's stance)*

OH? YOU? You tryin' to knock me over, ain'tcha? You're lookin' for a whoopin', huh?

SAM

No, sir.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

WHAT?

SAM

I didn't see you, sir!

BROWN

You STRUCK me, you bass-fishin' dangle! You'll answer to my knuckles!

SAM

Oh, no sir.

BROWN

*(maybe pugilist dance)*

Oh, yes! You struck! You did!

SAM

*(honest - deflated)*

I didn't mean to, sir. I swear.

BROWN

*(calming down a bit)*

You know that's a *serious offense*, don't you boy? Strikin' a pilot on a steamboat!

SAM

Oh, yessir. I know!

BROWN

Statute 53A, Subsection C - Certified Regulation of the Steamboat Pilot's Association of these here United States.

*Beat. SAM writes this in his diary.*

BROWN (CONT'D)

I oughta have you put ashore. Oughta have you put in SHACKLES!

SAM

I'm very sorry, Mister Brown.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

WHAT?

SAM

I'm sorry, Mister Brown, sir.

*BROWN notices the diary.*

BROWN

Whatcha got there?

SAM

Diary, sir.

BROWN

Ooooo. "Dear Diary." Gonna write me a poem?

*SAM starts off.*

BROWN (CONT'D)

*(even more furious, now)*

HO! HERE! Don't walk off when I'm talkin' to you!

*(beat)*

My knuckles ain't been satisfied.

*SAM stops in his tracks.*

SAM

I'm due on watch!

BROWN

*(deaf)*

WHAT?

SAM

I'm DUE on WATCH!

BROWN

*(walking slowly to him)*

I don't care if you're due uptop Mount Hollenbeck in the middle of a thunderstorm.

*(he checks his pocket watch and grins)*

Ha. You were due on watch some time ago.

*(pause)*

But right now, you're speakin' to a PILOT, son. A man who commands respect on a steamboat!

Oh, yessir! SAM

A man who gives orders! BROWN

Yessir! SAM

BROWN  
*(contemplative)*  
 You know, a man who becomes a pilot, he's a special sort o' man.

SAM  
*(Very meekly)*  
 Oh, yessir!

BROWN  
 Now, listen here:

***MUSIC. No. 16 "God Made This River" <<Track 7>>***  
*begins. SAM is reluctant to join in at first, but he is overtaken by the song after a while.*

BROWN (CONT'D)  
 GOD MADE THIS RIVER  
 FER MEN LIKE ME!  
 MEN DON'T COME NO BETTER.  
 WE'RE THE BEST THAT WE CAN BE.  
 YOU'RE A CHICKEN, I'M A ROOSTAH!  
 GOD DON'T MAKE 'EM LIKE HE USED TAH.  
 GOD MADE THIS RIVER HERE FER  
 MEN LIKE ME.

NOW, GOD LOOKED DOWN  
 ON THE RIVER WIDE.

SAM  
 It sure is wide.

BROWN  
 SAID, "PEOPLE DOWN THERE NEED A WAY  
 TO GET FROM SIDE TO SIDE.  
 A PADDLEWHEEL ..."

A steamer, yeah!

SAM

BROWN  
“A WONDROUS BOAT.”

Who said this?

SAM

GOD!

BROWN

SAID: “I’LL MAKE PILOTS - YES, A  
SPECIAL BREED -  
TO KEEP THE THING AFLOAT.”

UNCOMMON MEN.

That’s very true.

SAM

BROWN  
HE MADE US STRONG.

I’m workin’ on it.

SAM

*(his bicep)*

BROWN  
AND ANYONE WHO DISAGREES IS  
SAM-DAD-BLASTED WRONG.  
THIS RIVER’S OURS.

Us pilots, sir.

SAM

BROWN  
WE OWN IT, BOY.

Sure feels that way.

SAM

BROWN  
AN’ TIME FOR YOU TO REALIZE  
A STEAMBOAT’S NOT A TOY.

GOD MADE THIS RIVER.

SAM  
GOD MADE THIS RIVER.

BROWN  
FER MEN LIKE ME!

SAM  
FER MEN LIKE ME!

ME! BROWN

YOU! SAM

BROWN  
'CAUSE A BOY WHO'S STILL IN KNICKERS  
REALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.  
I MIGHT AS WELL BE BLUNT -  
YOU'RE A MANGY LITTLE RUNT -  
AND GOD MADE THIS RIVER HERE  
FER MEN LIKE ME.

A SPECIAL WALK.

I can do that, watch. SAM

BROWN  
A SPECIAL LOOK.

Don't know 'bout that. SAM

BROWN  
DON'T SPEND EACH WAKING HOUR  
WITH OUR NOSES IN A BOOK.  
WE'RE BORN TO LEAD.

To lead us where? SAM

BROWN  
WE KNOW THE WAY.

SAM

Which way is that?

BROWN

DON'T BOTHER DOIN' WHAT I DO,  
JUST LISTEN WHAT I SAY.

I'VE BEEN HERE YEARS.

SAM

Yessir, you're old.

BROWN

YOU'RE JUST A CUB.

SAM

But I learn fast!

BROWN

YOU CROSS ME, BOY, YOU KNOW  
THAT I COULD SQUASH YOU LIKE A GRUB.  
YOU GOT TO WORK.

SAM

I work real hard.

BROWN

YOU GOT TO LEARN.

SAM

I do my best.

BROWN

IF YOU DON'T GET YOUR LICENSE, WELL -  
IT'S NONE OF MY CONCERN.

'CAUSE GOD MADE THIS RIVER.

SAM

GOD MADE THIS RIVER.

BROWN

FER MEN LIKE ME!

SAM

FER MEN LIKE YOU!

BROWN

RIGHT!  
 YOU'RE MORE 'R LESS A FARMER.  
 COULDN'T PILOT A CANOE!  
 THE CREATOR DID CREATE ME.  
 YOU'D DO WELL TO EMULATE ME.  
 GOD MADE THIS RIVER HERE  
 FER MEN LIKE ME.

GOD MADE THIS RIVER.

SAM

GOD MADE THIS RIVER.

BROWN

FER MEN LIKE ME!

SAM

FER MEN LIKE ME!

*(oops)*

You, you, you, you.

BROWN

YOU GOT TO GET IT RIGHT, SON.  
 YOU'RE A MEMBER OF A CREW!  
 WE'VE HAD STERLING REPUTATIONS  
 SINCE WE FIRST READ REVELATIONS!  
 GOD MADE THIS RIVER HERE  
 FER MEN LIKE ME.  
 OH, YEAH!  
 GOD MADE THIS RIVER HERE  
 FER MEN LIKE ME.

BOTH

OH, YEAH.  
 GOD MADE THIS RIVER HERE  
 FER MEN LIKE ME.

SAM

You!

BROWN

Me.

SAM

You.

BROWN

ME!

*MUSIC ends. Brown stomps off. SAM runs. He jumps the final steps to the pilothouse, where BIXBY is waiting. BIXBY pulls out his pocket watch and gives it a scowling glance. Neither speaks for a long moment. Then ...*

BIXBY

Question: what is the name of the first point above New Orleans?

SAM

I ... don't ... know.

BIXBY

Don't know?

SAM

*(confirming)*

No sir.

BIXBY

Well, let's try again. What's the name of the next point?

SAM

*(struggling)*

Well, I don't know that, either.

BIXBY

I believe I see a pattern developing! Will you please tell me the name of any point or place I have told you.

SAM

*(thinking awhile, then ...)*

I don't really know any of them, Sir.

BIXBY

*(agitated now)*

How about this: where do you start out from, above Twelve-Mile Point, to cross over?

SAM

*(realizing something's amiss)*

"White Cypress?"

BIXBY

*(mimicking SAM)*

“White Cypress!” What in blazes does “White Cypress” have to do with it? Do you know *anything*?

SAM

Not for certain, sir.

BIXBY

Damn it, I believe you! You’re the stupidest swamp fish I ever did see, so help me Moses! The very idea of you being a pilot. YOU! You don’t know enough to pilot a cow across a field of grass.

*(he paces awhile, then ...)*

Why do you think I told you the names of those points?

SAM

*(frightened now)*

First I thought you were just pointin’ out scenery! Then the list got too long to remember.

BIXBY

*SCENERY?* You sod-sniffin’ goat-farmin’ cub of a weasel rat! You think I’m up here in this pilothouse to be your *tour guide*? I oughta kick some sense into you with the point of this boot and not stop kickin’ until you can recite the capital cities of the world through your nose! BLAST DAMMIT!

*MUSIC: No. 17 CHORD. With this last shout, BIXBY freezes in a pose of hot and fierce cursing. SAM comes out of the scene to address the audience.*

SAM

*(to audience)*

I interrupt here for the good of all concerned, for Mister Bixby at that moment launched a volley of red-hot profanity into the air. He thrust his head up and such an eruption followed as I had never heard before. The madder he got, the higher he lifted his voice and the weightier his adjectives grew.

*Pause. He observes BIXBY for a moment.*

SAM (CONT’D)

But he used it all up. Every round of ammunition. And when he was done, he was empty. You could’ve sifted through his soul and not caught enough curses to disturb your mother.

*The scene restores - BIXBY unfrozen.*

BIXBY

*(gently, but firmly)*

Look. Boy. You keep a diary, right?

SAM

Yessir.

*BIXBY reveals a diary of his own, a small book stuffed with scraps of paper.*

BIXBY

I do, too. Use it for notes, for the river, for life - everything.

*(beat)*

I have ev'ry word in here committed to memory.

*(beat)*

You gotta do the same.

*(beat)*

When I tell you a thing, write it down. Then learn it!

*(beat)*

There's only one way to be a pilot, and that is to get this entire river by heart. You have to know it just like your ABCs.

*(beat)*

There's an old sayin' among pilots: "If yer brain ain't burnin', might as well be dead. Only way to learnin', get it in yer head."

*SAM pulls his diary from his pocket along with a pencil.*

**MUSIC No. 18 "The Book Song" <<Track 8>> begins.**

SAM

IN A BOOK,

BIXBY

In a book.

SAM

I WILL WRITE THIS RIVER.

BIXBY

Now you're talkin'

SAM

EV'RY NOOK,

BIXBY

Every nook.

SAM  
EV'RY TURN AND BEND.

BIXBY

Much more'n that.

SAM  
I'LL TAKE IT WITH ME WHERE I GO.  
MY BRAIN WILL BURN WITH THE THINGS I KNOW.  
FROM THE PILOT HOUSE TO THE DECKS BELOW -  
OH, THIS BOOK.

BIXBY

IN THAT BOOK,

SAM

This book.

BIXBY

YOU WILL FIND YOUR FUTURE.

SAM

Let me write that down.

BIXBY

LIKE A HOOK,

SAM

Like a hook?

IT'LL PULL YOU IN.

SAM

Like a fish hook, huh?

BOTH

SO, WORK ALL DAY AND READ AT NIGHT -  
AND LEARN IT ONCE AND LEARN IT RIGHT -  
KNOW EV'RY TOWN AND POINT BY SIGHT -  
IN THAT/THIS BOOK.

*His shift over, SAM walks to the railing of a lower deck, leans on it, and looks out over the water. The **MUSIC** continues.*

SAM

*(still to audience)*

By the time we had gone eight hundred miles up the river, my diary was as full as Bixby's.

*(beat)*

But none of it was in my head.

*The MUSIC ends, chugging to a halt.*

*SAM studies his book diligently. From the darkness, MATE comes up behind SAM unnoticed. He carries what appears to be a lead pipe, which he holds over his head - giving us the impression that he is going to hit SAM with it.*

MATE

Snatch it! Snatch it, you little runt.

SAM

*(jumping - surprised)*

AHHHHH! WHAT?

*MATE brings the pipe down to eye level and shows it to SAM.*

MATE

Through the hole. Through the slip-drippin' hole, understand? You put this an' turn!

*SAM has no idea what's going on.*

SAM

What are you ..?

MATE

This, cubby. You put it through the hole!

SAM

*(“play along, this man is dangerous”)*

All right.

MATE

The winch is horizontal.

SAM

Yes. Of course, it is.

MATE

*(demonstrating with the pipe)*

You put this through and turn.

SAM

Okay.

*MATE is frustrated that SAM'S not understanding.*

MATE

The winch, you turnip! The horizontal winch. It's a capst'n. You put the bar through the hole in the winch and turn.

*(beat)*

This here's a capst'n bar.

SAM

*(slowly realizing what this is about)*

Oh. Oh, I see.

*(beat)*

A capst'n bar.

MATE

Now when I ask fer one - when I ask for a capst'n bar, you won't get that look on yer face: like a nun's first night in a brothel.

*(once more for good measure)*

Capst'n Bar! Starboard aft toolbox!

SAM

Yes!

*MATE lingers in a surly manner.*

MATE

“If yer brain ain't burnin', might as well be dead. Only way to learnin', get it in yer head.”

*(beat)*

Man needs t'know.

*(beat)*

That way a man got nothin' to fear.

SAM

Fear? What's to fear?

MATE

The river. The boat.

SAM

*(surprised)*

The boat?

MATE

Man needs to know 'is steamboat. 'Specially if he's gonna be a pilot.

SAM

Well. That's what I'm gonna be.

MATE

*(looking him over)*

You 'bout as close to pilot as that bar.

*(beat)*

Trouble is - this thing's ruined many a man better'n you.

*(beat)*

But. I reckon you might be. Pilot material.

*BROWN crosses by.*

BROWN

Malloy! Caught you consortin' with the urchins.

MATE

Just passin' along information, Mr. Brown.

BROWN

Ha! Pass it on into the river all the good that'll do!

*(beat - to SAM)*

Cub! What's a fathom?

SAM

Why, uh, it's a measurement / of ...

BROWN

Fathom's six foot, Sea Legs. HA!

*BROWN is gone.*

MATE

*(he roughly grabs the bar from SAM)*

Now, gimme that, you rose-sniffin' turnip.

*MATE begins to leave.*

SAM

Mr. Malloy!

MATE

*(surprised to be called by name)*

Yup.

SAM

Thank you. Sir.

MATE

*(after a moment)*

Thank yerself, you cow-lovin' dairy-weed.

*He's gone. SAM walks to another place on the deck and meets up with HENRY, who rests on a piece of cargo. MUSIC No. 19 Underscore begins.*

HENRY

How you doin'?

*SAM'S nose is in the book again. He closes it and puts it away for HENRY.*

SAM

Good. How're you?

HENRY

*(Hard to get it out)*

Weary. Still thinkin' about home.

*The two look to the river - out over the audience - as the sun begins to set.*

SAM

But Henry, we are home. The river's our home now.

HENRY

I miss things, Sam. I miss the cowbells. Horses. That ol' barn cat? Miss her, too.

*(struggling)*

Gran'ma's biscuits. Gran'ma.

SAM

Henry. You are an *extraordinary* cabin boy. Everybody says so. You worked yourself up to waitin' on the Cap'n himself.

HENRY

Just do what I'm told.

*(beat)*

But you - you're gonna be a pilot, Sam. *Pilot.*

SAM

*(covering his doubt)*

'Swhat I always wanted, 'swhat I'm gonna be.

HENRY

*(after a beat)*

Bixby said how long it takes?

SAM

What?

HENRY

Gettin' your license.

SAM

He says ... it'll be a while longer.

HENRY

But it'll be soon, right?

SAM

I 'spose.

HENRY

You're pure gold, Sam.

*(beat - doubt)*

All things equal, I imagine you're gonna be a pilot.

SAM

I guess that's just about right.

HENRY

But I'm not so sure this is for me.

*SAM leads him to the railing to look at the sunset.*

***MUSIC No. 20 "Mississippi Sunset(R)" begins slowly.***

SAM  
 SHOULD I EVER KNOW A GREAT ADVENTURE,  
 SHOULD I EVER LIVE A THOUSAND YEARS,  
 I WILL NEVER KNOW SUCH DAZZLING COLORS:  
 THE RED OF BLOOD,

HENRY  
*(homesick still)*  
 THE BLUE OF TEARS.

*BIXBY approaches.*

BIXBY  
 Mr. Clemens.  
*(he addresses HENRY)*  
 You'd be Henry, wouldn't you?

HENRY  
 Yessir.

BIXBY  
 Horace Bixby.

HENRY  
*(shaking his hand - unsure)*  
 Mr. Bixby.

BIXBY  
 Know what I hear?

HENRY  
 What's that, sir?

BIXBY  
 I hear you're the best cabin boy workin' 'tween Lake Itasca and New Orleans. You seem to know what a Captain wants before he knows himself.

HENRY  
 I try to do right by my job, Mr. Bixby.

BIXBY  
 Well, you got yourself a reputation.

HENRY  
*(looks to SAM)*  
 That a good thing?

BIXBY

That's a blasted good thing, boy. Head of the Pilot's Union, Mr. Garrison, has requested you - to work on the *New Orleans*.

*(beat)*

Beautiful boat. Much nicer'n the *Paul Jones*. Have your own bunk. Your own spittoon.

HENRY

Holy cow!

*(beat)*

A fella needs his own spittoon.

*(beat)*

How're the biscuits on the *New Orleans*?

BIXBY

'S the only steamboat keeps a grandmother on staff for the sole purpose of biscuit manufacture.

*(beat)*

And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that there's a substantial salary increase.

HENRY

I don't make nothin', Mr. Bixby. Work for gratuities. *Any* salary's an increase.

BIXBY

I understand your thinkin', boy.

*(he looks at SAM while he addresses HENRY)*

But your brother here hasn't done near as well in his vocational undertakings. Be a shame if his spotty career as a pilot were to pull you to the bottom like an oversized anchor. He's gonna be more ... purgatorial than you in terms of salary increase.

HENRY

I don't rightly understand what that means, Mr. Bixby. But a salary increase sounds just about right for me.

*BIXBY heads away.*

BIXBY

It's a good decision, boy. Transfer'll take place tomorrow. I'll introduce you to Mr. Garrison.

*(beat)*

Congratulations, Henry. Seems to me you're just about a steamboatman.

*HENRY runs to SAM and hugs him tight.*

SAM

Now, ain't you just somethin', Henry? Ain't you just become the very definition of a great cabin boy?

HENRY

You and me ever see each other, Sam?

SAM

See each other? Spanish baloney, brother. We'll meet apart every pass up and down - some salty pub - have ourselves an ale.

HENRY

'Magine I'll have to develop a taste for ale.

*A quiet moment.*

SAM

I'll miss you, brother. I'll feel mighty empty for a while.

HENRY

Me too, Sam. Me, too.

SAM

But, no more reason to be homesick. The river's our home now.

*The LIGHTS change. HENRY is gone. SAM moves to the railing of the deck, addressing the audience as he goes.*

*MUSIC No. 21 Underscore begins.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Next day, my little brother went aboard the *New Orleans*. He was fightin' back sickly tears of loneliness as he kissed me goodbye. But the sparkle of adventure was in his smile, and, as the boat steamed off, he waved with a wide, loose arc, the way a First Mate waves.

*(he pulls out his diary)*

But I felt a strange pang in my belly. And I wrote it up in my diary. My brother Henry, child that he was, had done better at this steamboat business than I had - and his advancement made me feel like somethin' *less*.

Goodbye, Henry. Godspeed.

*(in the diary)*

I wrote a long, wandering paragraph about my shameful state: Cub Pilot - toilin' in the shadow of his little brother, a cabin boy.

*(beat)*

I wrote it right next to a yarn I'd put down about a fellow who was training his pet frog to jump higher than a woodpecker flies.

*MUSIC ends. SAM, his nose in the book.*

SAM (CONT'D)

*(testing himself)*

'What's the marker at nine-mile point?' Uh. Large White Oak.

*(he checks the book - yes)*

'What's the marker at six-mile point?' Uh. Palmetto clump.

*(he checks the book - no)*

China trees, China trees, China trees. 'What's the order from Walnut bend to twelve-mile point?'

Walnut bend, five mile point, two branch trees ...

*(he turns once again and there is BROWN,  
glowering)*

Mister Brown!

BROWN

So, what's the trouble with you now? You're not gonna go all weepy on me are you, you sam-balsted sob-sniffer? Say G'bye to your baby brother and get on with it!

SAM

I'm on watch, sir.

BROWN

You mean, you're late?

SAM

No sir. I'm on time.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

What?

SAM

I'm on time!

BROWN

You callin' me a *liar*?

SAM

No such thing, sir.

*(beat)*

Just statin' a fact.

BROWN

Ooo, ain't you precious? Ain't you special with your "statin'" and your "facts."

*(beat)*

Some of us got no time fer such fineries as "facts."

SAM

*(under his breath)*

I believe that.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

WHAT?

SAM

I said, "Sir, yessir!"

BROWN

Dad-durned right, "yessir!"

SAM

*(to audience)*

Now, let's get somethin' straight. I often wanted to kill Brown. But I knew a cub had to take everything his boss gave in the way of vigorous comment and criticism.

*(beat)*

*And* - I believed it was a penitentiary offense to strike a pilot. Or even threaten him.

*(beat)*

But I could *imagine* myself killing Brown; there was no law against that; and that was the thing I did the moment my head hit the pillow at night. Instead of going over the river in my mind as was my duty, I threw business aside for pleasure, and killed Brown. I killed Brown every night for months; not in old, stale, commonplace ways, but in new and picturesque ones - ways that were surprising for freshness of design and ghastliness of situation.

*MUSIC begins No. 22 "Killing Brown." <<Track 9>> SAM and THE CREW act out each fantasy.*

A RATTLESNAKE  
DROPPED DOWN THE PANTS.  
THE SNAKE DOES HISS,  
AND DUE TO THIS,  
THE MAN DOES DANCE.  
THE BITES ARE FEW -  
JUST ONCE OR TWICE.  
THE DANCER TIRES.  
THE SNAKE EXPIRES.  
(A SACRIFICE.)  
AND ONCE THE POISON FLOWS INTO  
HIS HEAD - (ACK!)  
HE'S DEAD!

A FISHING HOOK

TO PIERCE EACH EAR.  
 THEN HANG HIM OUT TO  
 DRY - A WEEK,  
 A MONTH, A YEAR.  
 THE SKIN WILL STRETCH.  
 THE EYES WILL BAKE.  
 THE NIPPLES FLOP,  
 THE TOENAILS POP,  
 THE FINGERS FLAKE.  
 THEN ONCE THE HAIR FALLS FLOATING FROM  
 HIS HEAD. (ACK!)  
 HE'S DEAD!

QUITE AN UNDERTAKING FOR A LAD.  
 NOT THAT BAD.  
 SOME RENOWN -  
 FROM TOWN TO TOWN -  
 FOR KILLING BROWN!

HUNG UPSIDE DOWN -  
 A LOADING CRANE.  
 TIED TIGHTLY SO HIS  
 TORSO TWITCHES  
 FROM THE PAIN.  
 THE HANDS SECURED.  
 THE BLINDFOLD SNUG.  
 THE FINGERS TWITCH,  
 TIED DOUBLE-HITCH.  
 (THE GRAVE'S BEEN DUG.)  
 THEN DIP HIM IN THE RIVER 'TIL  
 HE CHOKES. (ACK!)  
 HE CROAKS!

SURELY WORD WILL SPREAD ABOUT MY DEED!  
 I DID SUCCEED.  
 I MADE HIM BLEED.  
 AND I FEEL FREED.  
 I AM RENOWN -  
 FROM TOWN TO TOWN -  
 FOR KILLING BROWN!  
 FOR KILLING BROWN!  
 ACK!

*MUSIC ends. SAM then arrives in the pilothouse, BIXBY steers as SAM assists. There is the usual quiet pause.*

BIXBY

*(quizzing SAM again)*

Question: what is the shape of walnut bend?

SAM

*(to BIXBY)*

I didn't know it had any particular shape.

BIXBY

You didn't?

SAM

No, sir.

*(beat - really trying)*

Is it shaped like a candy cane?

BIXBY

A CANDY CANE! BLAST! You sow-kissing cousin of a lowlife lapdog. BLAST DAMMIT!

*MUSIC No. 23 CHORD. BIXBY freezes mid-curse - like before - as SAM speaks to audience.*

SAM

Well, he was off again. With a bang. Reloadin' and firing until he was out of adjectives.

*(he turns to watch BIXBY awhile)*

Now, I knew that walnut bend was shaped like a flapjack lyin' on its side. But it left my head when that man asked me. And so, that blunderbuss fired.

*(beat)*

But once again, I knew that he carried just so many rounds of ammunition. I waited.

*(beat)*

Still, this time he was different when he came out of it.

*BIXBY unfreezes and turns to SAM.*

BIXBY

Look. You're the one signed up for this. You've got to know the river. You've got to be able to steer this water on a pitch black night.

SAM

How am I ever gonna learn *that*?

BIXBY

How do you follow a hallway at home in the dark? Because you hold that hallway in your head. The *true* hallway.

SAM

Well, right about now I wish I was *deceased*. My head's poppin' open like a rotten pumpkin.

BIXBY

*(serious - after a beat)*

Thought you were pilot material.

SAM

I am.

BIXBY

Then you got to know it.

SAM

*(pulling out his diary and pencil - some anger)*

Well. Load me up! I'll get started on the five hundred thousand things I need to learn about this river.

BIXBY

No. You only learn one thing: the *true* river. That way, you steer by the river that's in your head, and pay no attention to the one you see.

*Beat. Back to testing.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

Now.

*(beat)*

Question: what was our depth in the crossing at Memphis trip before last?

*SAM throws down his cap and begins a rant.*

SAM

TRIP BEFORE LAST? Now, looka here! Every trip, the leadsmen are singin' out numbers at Memphis like it's Mister Giuseppe Verdi's *El Traviatoe*. "Quarter Twain, Mark Three, Mark Twain." How am I supposed to remember a mess like that?

BIXBY

My boy, you've got to remember it. You've got to remember the *exact* spot and the *exact* marks in the shallowest water.

*SAM is shuddering, close to tears.*

SAM

*(blurting - a final confession)*

Well, *I CAN'T DO IT.*

*(long beat)*

I can't do it.

BIXBY

But pilotin's what you want.

SAM

Always been. From long as I remember.

BIXBY

*(sternly - facing him down)*

Then you got to do it.

*(beat)*

I was the same way. I yelled, "I can't do it" at the top of my lungs.

*SAM tries to laugh.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

Now, look. When I say I'll learn a man the river, I mean it. There's a lot to remember. But you can do this.

***MUSIC No. 24 "The Book Song(R)" <<Track 10>> begins.***

BIXBY (CONT'D)

*(beat)*

"If yer brain ain't burnin', might as well be dead."

SAM & BIXBY

"Only way to learnin', get it in your head."

BIXBY

*(the river)*

IN YOUR HEAD,

SAM

In my head.

BIXBY

GOT TO PAINT THIS PICTURE.

SAM

I gotta paint, too?

BIXBY  
RIVER BED,

SAM  
*(writing)*  
River bed.

BIXBY  
RIVER BANK AND SIDE.

SAM  
*(his diary)*  
This book's a mess!

BIXBY  
KNOW WHERE TO AFT AND WHERE TO FORE,  
JUS' STOKE YER BRAIN UNTIL IT'S SORE,  
THEN STOKE IT JUST A LITTLE MORE -  
IN YOUR HEAD.

*Then the **MUSIC** continues. BIXBY and SAM move to another part of the ship. **LIGHTS** change to **LATER**.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)  
What's yer "dip?"

SAM  
That's the depth of the paddlewheel. Today it's a half-fathom.

BIXBY  
*(disappointed)*  
No. That was yesterday. Today ya got a full fathom dip.

*Disgusted with himself, SAM writes this down in his diary*

SAM  
IN MY MIND,

BIXBY  
In your mind.

SAM  
I GOT SHAPES AND FIGURES.

BIXBY  
It'll all make sense someday.

SAM  
I'M RESIGNED

BIXBY  
You're resigned.

SAM  
TO LEARN EACH ONE.

BIXBY  
That's the only way to do it.

SAM  
I GET 'EM ONCE AND THEN FORGET  
THEN I PROCEED TO GET UPSET.  
'CAUSE I AIN'T LEARNED THIS RIVER YET -  
IN MY MIND.

*LIGHTS change to LATER at another place on the boat.  
BIXBY is quizzing SAM.*

BIXBY  
*(beat)*  
What am I talkin' about when I talk about "beam?"

SAM  
That's the width of yer boat. Need to know that for low tide in Saint Paul.

BIXBY  
FROM THAT BOOK,

SAM  
From this book.

BIXBY  
YOU'LL BECOME A PILOT,

SAM  
I guess it's the only way, huh?

BIXBY  
AN OLD SALT,

SAM  
Old Salt!

BIXBY  
A STEAMBOAT MAN.

SAM  
That's been my dream.

BIXBY  
YOU'LL RIDE THE RIVER BY MY SIDE.  
YOUR EXPERTISE WON'T BE DENIED.  
YOUR REPUTATION RIVERWIDE -  
FROM THIS BOOK.

BOTH  
I'D/YOU'D RATHER BE FISHIN' OR SLEEPIN'  
OR SLEEPIN' OR FISHIN',  
OR SOWIN' WHAT I'M/YOU'RE REAPIN'  
AND WISHIN' I/YOU WERE DEAD.

*SAM and BIXBY move back to the pilothouse. LIGHTS change to LATER. MUSIC continues.*

BIXBY  
What's yer first bank *north* of Saint Paul?

SAM  
Uh, *Hastings!*

BIXBY  
*NORTH!*

SAM  
Uh ...

BIXBY  
It's Elk River. Hastings is south. What's significant bout the Hastings bend?

SAM  
Uh, it's a loadin' dock.

BIXBY  
What else?

SAM  
Uh ...

BIXBY

Somethin' happens to the river there.

SAM

Shallow?

BIXBY

At the bend ..?

SAM

Deep?

BIXBY

NO! The river flows south to north there. Just for a little while.

SAM

*(serious disappointment)*

Oh. Oh, yeah.

*Pause. MUSIC has stopped by now. BIXBY, approaching the end of his rope, has an idea.*

BIXBY

*(he holds out his diary to SAM)*

Here. Gimme your diary.

SAM

What?

BIXBY

Gimme your diary. You take mine.

*(beat)*

It's time to see if that head of yours'll hold anything.

*(beat)*

An' I 'magine we make it a contest, you'll try harder.

SAM

*(reluctant)*

Contest?

BIXBY

Yeah. We'll test each other.

*(pointing to his diary)*

I remember every single thing in this book.

SAM

Okay.

*They exchange diaries.*

BIXBY

*(reading from SAM'S diary)*

What's yer deepest water at St. Louis?

SAM

It's "no bottom" all the way. You could run a church steeple through there.

BIXBY

Good.

SAM

Now me.

*(he pages through BIXBY'S diary trying to find  
a tough one)*

How much hay did you load at Harper's Ferry last stop?

BIXBY

Ooh. You think you got me.

*(beat)*

Only had one horse aboard then. Five bails of hay got him home.

SAM

That's right!

BIXBY

*(SAM'S book)*

How many pulls on the backing bell'll get ya movin' again?

SAM

Two pulls means dead slow. One pull means full back.

BIXBY

Excellent!

SAM

What's the Starboard Leadsman's full name?

BIXBY

Richard Wayne Hampton. Comes from Tuscaloosa.

*(beat - he finds a question)*

If I steam from Olive Branch to Hickman, how many states do I enter?

SAM

Three: Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri. A touch more 'n you're in Tennessee.

*BIXBY nods "yes."*

SAM (CONT'D)

*(he starts a question)*

How many ..?

*(but he's found something in BIXBY's diary)*

Sir. There's a flower.

*SAM hold up a flower that was pressed inside BIXBY'S diary.*

SAM (CONT'D)

What's this?

*There is a pause as BIXBY looks at the flower.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Sir. What's this?

BIXBY

I. Don't. Remember.

SAM

*(with a chuckle)*

Well. I do believe I'm gonna win this round. You said you had this whole book in your memory, and here it looks like I've / found ...

BIXBY

*(interrupting him)*

Jasmine.

*SAM can tell something is happening to BIXBY.*

SAM

Sir?

BIXBY

It's Arabian Jasmine.

*(beat)*

Wonderful, isn't it? They call it "The Maid of Orleans."

***MUSIC No. 25 "I Remember" <<Track11>> begins.***

BIXBY (CONT'D)

Funny how things you want to remember don't always stay with you.

SAM

*(now sensing BIXBY'S mood)*

No, sir.

BIXBY

And things you don't want to remember ... well ... Some things you can't forget, Sam.

BIXBY (CONT'D)

I REMEMBER  
GOLDEN HAIR, CHEEKS THAT BLUSH  
WITH EV'RY GLANCE.

I REMEMBER  
LAUGHING LIPS, BODIES JOINED  
IN DANCE.

AND I RECALL A LOVING KISS,  
A TENDER TEAR, I'LL TELL YOU THIS:  
THAT I HAVE KNOWN A WOMAN'S LOVE.  
THAT, I CAN'T FORGET.

I REMEMBER  
BRIDAL TROVE, SILKEN GOWN  
AND BATED BREATH.  
I REMEMBER  
PARSON'S WORDS, "NONE SHALL PART,  
BUT DEATH."

AND I REMEMBER MAN AND WIFE,  
HAPPY TIMES, A JOYOUS LIFE,  
YES I REMEMBER EV'RY DAY.  
THAT, I CAN'T FORGET.

ONE LIFE NOW GONE.  
YET, I LIVE ON.

I REMEMBER

FEVER FIRST - ILLNESS NEXT -  
SEVERE.  
I REMEMBER  
FRIGHTENED CRIES, DOCTOR'S WORDS,  
UNCLEAR.

THEN I RECALL A SUDDEN STILL.  
A PEACE AT LAST, A HELL UNTIL  
I CAN FORGET A WOMAN'S LOVE.  
THAT, I CAN'T FORGET.

NO, I CAN'T FORGET A WOMAN'S LOVE.  
THAT, I CAN'T FORGET.

SAM

You ... you had a wife, sir.

BIXBY

I did.

SAM

*(getting upset)*

I'm sorry. I didn't know.

BIXBY

Of course you didn't, son.

*(beat)*

That's why I took to the river.

*The MUSIC ends. A pause. Then BIXBY sees something up ahead - something that will give him the opportunity to break the mood. He moves from the wheel, a whole new excitement in his demeanor.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

Hah. Take 'er.

*SAM hesitates, fumbling.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

Take the wheel, boy! Good lesson comin' up.

*SAM moves to the wheel. There is a moment of silence as he steers for a while. BIXBY stares out.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

*(he's pointing it out to SAM)*

You see that long slanting line on the face of the water? That's a reef. If you hit it you would knock this boat's brains out. You see the little fringes of water at the upper end?

SAM

*(looking where BIXBY points)*

Yes, sir.

BIXBY

Well, that's the low place. You can climb over there. Cross and follow along close under the reef.

*(beat)*

Now, get ready. Wait till I give the word. Stand by - wait - wait - keep her well in hand. This is gonna take both of us.

*(very dramatic pause)*

NOW! Cramp her down! Snatch her, snatch her!

*BIXBY seizes the other side of the wheel and they both work hard to spin it to one side and hold it down. It is hard work, and it's the first time we've seen them work the wheel in unison. SOUND: the noise of the big boat's shakings and creakings are heard.*

*MUSIC No. 26 CHORD. BIXBY freezes in the tableau of holding the wheel. SOUND stops. SAM addresses the audience.*

SAM

I remember that moment so clearly. It was the first time Mr. Bixby and I worked the wheel together. Like one pilot. And we did, fighting together, both of our strengths pitted against the mighty river. We fought hard. And we held that wheel - together. We held it fast.

*SOUND continues. BIXBY unfreezes, and they burst back into their battle with the wheel.*

BIXBY

Now, watch her. Watch her like a cat, or she'll get away from you. When she fights strong, let up on her a trifle. Now, look out. Look out. There you go!

*(he calls into the talking tube)*

Stop the starboard wheel, Ben! Quick! Ship up to back. Set her back!

*More noise, rolling, and fighting the wheel, then both SAM and BIXBY relax.*

## BIXBY (CONT'D)

There you go.

*(beat)*

Now.

*(beat)*

Good.

*(beat)*

Well done.

*SAM addresses the audience.*

## SAM

I felt - finally - that we shared something. And I felt - finally - that he saw me as a worthy contender to become what I dreamed of becoming. A Steamboatman. A true Steamboatman.

*Relaxation and relief set in. BIXBY looks at his watch.*

## BIXBY

Think you know how to run the next few miles?

## SAM

*(responding mechanically)*

Go inside the first snag above the point, outside the next one, start out ...

## BIXBY

That's all right. I'll be back before the next point.

*BIXBY leaves the pilothouse, but doesn't go out of sight. He watches the goings-on in the pilothouse. SAM, on his own at the wheel, becomes a study in poorly-won pride. Not long after BIXBY is gone, SAM begins to gesture, posture, and speak to himself as if speaking to a lovely woman.*

## SAM

Evenin', ma'am.

*(beat)*

A man who spends 'is life on a boat has skin like leather and a heart wrapped in barbed wire.

*(beat)*

Yes, I am the pilot of the great ship *Paul Jones*. It's a mean, rugged, manly life - steering as I am now. By Myself.

*MUSIC No. 27 Underscore begins.*

SAM (CONT'D)

*(he turns to inspect the cabin)*

Everything appears to be ... ship shape.

*(he poses with an imaginary pipe)*

Yes ma'am. The river calls to a man such as m'self. A man of grit 'n drive 'n spit 'n gumption.

*(he spits, hits the wheel, cleans it off, then turns to the speaking tube, calling into it)*

Fine job there, Ben!

*(he looks out the side window - still speaking to an imaginary woman)*

This here, it's not a part of the river I'm *terribly* familiar with, but no matter. The *true* river. The river in my mind. That's what matters. There, see where we rounded - that water, why that's ... that's ...

*(panic - all pretense falls)*

Holy steampipe. It's a reef! Oh, no! A reef!

*(beat)*

Mister Bixby ... Mister Bix ...

*MUSIC ends. In a frenzy, SAM looks around for BIXBY, then grabs the wheel, spins it in panic to one side, and begins a flurry of bell ringings. The SOUND of the creaking boat is everywhere.*

SAM (CONT'D)

We're headin' straight to it. Oh, we're gonna crash! Holy buckets, that reef is *chasin'* me!

*A turn of the wheel in a completely opposite direction. More bell ringings. More creaking. SAM is in a frenzy.*

*The CREW act out the back-and-forth turns that SAM makes - all leaning to the same side, all sliding to the side opposite of SAM'S turn of the wheel.*

SAM (CONT'D)

*(bracing for an inevitable crash)*

We're about to climb that tree! Oh, no! OH, NO!

*SOUND: branches and shoreline scraping the side of the boat; the chugging of the overworked engine; the creak and thud of the boat going aground. Everything shakes with the final impact.*

*Then a moment of silence.*

*BIXBY walks in calmly, toothpick in teeth.*

BIXBY

You're aground.

SAM

I know.

*BIXBY takes the wheel, turns to the speaking tube, and speaks.*

BIXBY

*(into speaking tube)*

Stop the starboard. Stop the larboard. Set her back on both, Ben.

***SOUND:** the slow chug of the engine reversing - pulling the boat out with it. The boat is obviously fine, now. BIXBY hesitates, looks around, then turns to SAM.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

*(tongue firmly in cheek)*

If someone hails you from shore, you need to let the engineers know you're pickin' up passengers.

SAM

*(blushing, but angry)*

Weren't pickin' up no passengers!

BIXBY

*(still sarcastic)*

Ah, you were goin' for firewood. Well, Ben'll tell you when he needs wood - that's / how ...

SAM

*(interrupting)*

Wasn't after wood!

BIXBY

*(peering outside the boat)*

Well, then. I can't help but wonder what you're doin' way over here. You're practically ashore.

*(beat)*

You are pilotin' an aquatic vehicle.

SAM

I was gettin' away from a reef!

BIXBY

There's no reef within three miles of here.

SAM

I reckon there is. I reckon I saw it. It was as real as that one yonder.

*He points toward the bow. BIXBY looks out at it. Pause.*

BIXBY

Ah. Well. Let's find out. Run over it.

SAM

*(surprise)*

Do you give that as an order?

BIXBY

Yes. Run over it. I take full responsibility.

*SAM gives the wheel a noticeable turn, and both are quiet as they approach the reef.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

That's it. Straight into her.

*SAM braces himself. When he expects impact, he shouts.*

SAM

WAHHHHHHHHHHH!

*But nothing happens. SAM is perplexed, checking the water around the boat.*

BIXBY

It's a wind reef. The wind does that.

SAM

But it looks exactly like a true reef.

*(beat)*

I will *never ever* be able to tell them apart. Never!

BIXBY

You givin' up on me again?

SAM

No, sir. I'm just not *nearly* as good at this as I expected.

BIXBY

I wasn't either. But by and by you will naturally know one reef from the other - and you'll never be able to explain how you know 'em apart.

*A moment of tacit agreement. Then ...*

**SOUND:** *A loud explosion in the distance - much closer than the first - and the red light of fire. Looking out in the direction of the sound, the two of them freeze, as if unable to leave the pilothouse. Then BIXBY jumps to life, joining the MATE and others in ad lib panic: "Get 'er starboard, Ben. Full speed!" "Get buckets lined up," "We'll need blankets," etc.*

*SAM stands alone, frozen - looking out in the direction of the explosion.*

*The SOUND of the explosion has morphed into a single low drone - SAM continues to stare out toward the sound - then MUSIC No. 28 Underscore begins.*

SAM

*(to the audience)*

As far as my brother was concerned, we'd had our last shared adventure. Henry was aboard the *New Orleans* when both boilers exploded in fire and heat. It was almost a week before I could reach him. He was one of forty critical patients lying on the floor of a great public hall in Memphis. His burns and scalds were monstrous. And six days after the fire, his wandering mind busied itself with matters far away, and his hour struck. I held my dead young brother in my arms. He had approached the river with the same youthful joy that I had. Perhaps that Mississippi sunset had never faded for him.

*The CREW assemble, join arms. SAM steps before them, and together they defiantly sing. MUSIC No. 29 "Flights of Angels" <<Track 12>> is sung a cappella.*

SAM (CONT'D)

CAST THE RIVER CALM, THE WATER STILL.  
SOOTHE THE STORMING SEAS UNTIL  
FLIGHTS OF ANGELS SING THEE TO  
THY REST.

SAM & COMPANY  
 STAY THE MIGHTY WAVES AND STOP THE RAIN.  
 FREE YOUR SOUL FROM HOPELESS PAIN.  
 FLIGHTS OF ANGELS SING THEE TO  
 THY REST.

CLOSE YOUR WAND'RING EYES AT LAST.  
 TURN YOUR HEAD T'WARD HOME.

SAM  
 SILENCE EV'RY WAVE, THE RIVER WILD.  
 COMFORT NOW, MY BLESSED CHILD.

SAM & COMPANY  
 FLIGHTS OF ANGELS SING THEE TO  
 THY REST.

SAM  
 FLIGHTS OF ANGELS SING THEE TO  
 THY REST.

*When the song is over, SAM is discovered at the wheel. BROWN walks into the pilothouse. SAM, unknowing, is humming a song. From behind, BROWN looks HIM over head to foot. Then ...*

BROWN  
 SHUTTUP! This ain't an opry house.

SAM  
*(recoiling in shock)*  
 Mister Brown.

BROWN  
 Ahhhh. "Mister Brown, Mister Brown." Horace Bixby's cub has to work with every pilot on this boat - you know that much, doncha?

SAM  
 Yessir.

BROWN  
*(deaf)*  
 What?

SAM  
 Yes, sir!

BROWN

“Yessir,” is right. Dod-blamed “Yessir.”

*(beat)*

Bixby’s down jawin’ with the Captain an’ you gotta work with me.

*(beat)*

Where was a rat-rascal like you born?

SAM

In Florida, Missouri. Raised in Hannibal. Raised on a farm.

BROWN

Raised on a farm! Lollygaggin’ with the cows and chickens, eh?

*(beat)*

Dern sight shoulda stayed on the farm - left the pilotin’ to us PROFESSIONALS!

*BIXBY comes to the door of the pilothouse and barks to SAM.*

BIXBY

Cub!

SAM

Yessir.

BIXBY

Right away! Emergency. The Captain needs to stop at the Weaver Plantation below! Tell the pilot, please. Quick!

*HE goes. SAM takes a formal stance in the pilot house in order to address BROWN.*

SAM

Yessir.

*(loudly - for BROWN)*

Mister Brown! The Captain says to stop at the Weaver Plantation!

*No reaction from BROWN.*

SAM (CONT’D)

Mister BROWN!

BROWN

QUIET!

*(beat)*

Might have that kinda noise on the farm, boy. But here in a pilot house we got *manners*.

SAM

*(loudly)*

Sir. The Captain has ordered ...

BROWN

Shut yer stupid *mouth*, boy! *QUIET!*

*BIXBY enters the pilothouse.*

BIXBY

Bring her about, Mister Brown.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

What?

BIXBY

Bring her about. Didn't my cub tell you to land at the Weaver Plantation?

BROWN

Your cub didn't say a word.

BIXBY

I just gave him an order.

BROWN

He don't take orders. He didn't say nothin', he didn't do nothin'. He wanders around like that donkey down in steerage.

BIXBY

*(to SAM)*

Did you tell him or not?

SAM

I did, sir.

BROWN

*(to SAM)*

You shut your mouth! You never said anything of the kind.

*BIXBY exits.*

SAM

I did tell you, Mr. Brown.

BROWN

That's a lie!

SAM

*(to BROWN)*

You lie yourself! I did tell you!

*BROWN leaves the wheel to confront SAM.*

BROWN

*(to SAM)*

Let me teach you something: you are a worthless use of good clothing, boy. You think you're pilot material, but you'll never have a boat as long as I'm alive, you dod-durned chicken-plucker.

*(beat)*

Now, you leave this pilot-house. Out with you!

SAM

Y'know what? You're a lyin' old fool, Mr. Brown. And you don't even know how to *cuss* right!

BROWN

You curb your snagged tongue, boy.

*(beat)*

Too bad you weren't the one got blowed up on the *New Orleans* instead of your brother.

SAM

*(instant emotion)*

*You take that back, you old lizard.*

*BROWN takes one of his pugilistic stances, but SAM quickly hits him in the face with his free fist. BROWN falls. When it is over*

...

BROWN

OUT WITH YOU!

SAM

*(to audience as he scurries out of the pilothouse)*

So, there. There it was.

*(beat)*

I had committed the crime of crimes. I had lifted my hand against a pilot on duty! I was booked for the penitentiary for sure. But I wasn't afraid of him any more. When he ordered me out of the pilot-house, I stopped to criticize his grammar.

*(back to BROWN)*

SAM (CONT'D)

You know, if you were a man of enterprise, you'd know how to use the English language to fabricate a decent curse. Instead, you offer "DOD-DURNED." What the fire-hill blazes kinda cussin' is "dod-durned," you slimy ol' frog? Why, I've got five-year-old nieces can conjure up a better cuss, you old fool!

BROWN

OUT!

*Agitated, SAM comes down from the pilot-house to the deck below as he speaks.*

SAM

*(to audience)*

Well, I was damn sure of one thing: now, I am done for.

*(beat - angry at himself)*

Now I am done for.

*BIXBY has come up behind the boy, unbeknownst.*

BIXBY

Son.

*SAM jumps with fright, and turns to look into BIXBY'S face.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

Follow me.

*BIXBY leads SAM to a separate area of the stage.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

So you have been fighting Mr. Brown?

SAM

Yes, sir.

BIXBY

Do you know that this is a very serious matter?

SAM

Yes, sir.

BIXBY

Are you aware that this boat was ploughing down the river fully two minutes with no one at the wheel?

Yes, sir. SAM

Did you strike him first? BIXBY

Yes, sir. SAM

What with? BIXBY

My right, sir. SAM

Hard? BIXBY

Middling. SAM

Did it knock him down? BIXBY

He ... He did fall, sir. SAM

Did you follow up? Did you do anything further? BIXBY

Yes, sir. SAM  
*(Meekly)*

*Pause. BIXBY seems almost afraid to hear more.*

What did you do? BIXBY

Discredited his curses, sir. SAM

Discredited his curses? BIXBY

SAM

Yes, sir.

BIXBY

Severely?

SAM

I compared him to a five-year-old girl.

*BIXBY stifles a laugh.*

BIXBY

*(loud - for others' benefit)*

You have been guilty of a great crime; and don't you ever be guilty of it again, on this boat.

*SAM leaves, awkwardly passing right by BROWN as he does.*

*BIXBY turns to see BROWN, who confronts him.*

BROWN

Bixby.

*BIXBY remains.*

BROWN (CONT'D)

That cub. I won't turn a wheel on this boat again while that cub stays.

BIXBY

Mr. Brown. He needn't come round when you're on watch.

BROWN

No, sir. I won't stay on the same boat with him.

BIXBY

Mr. Brown, he's just a boy.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

What?

BIXBY

*(louder)*

HE'S JUST A BOY!

BROWN

*(intensely)*

There. You said it.

*(beat)*He sure as shivers is *just a boy*. He's no snap-blasted pilot, I'll tell ya that!*(beat - then he draws his line in the sand)*

No, sir. I'll not have it. I know he's a favorite of yours. But I'll not have it! One of us has got to go ashore. The cub or me.

BIXBY

*(wryly - after a beat)*

Very well.

BROWN

*(deaf)*

What?

BIXBY

*(louder)*

I say VERY WELL.

***MUSIC No. 30 "Snatch It (Reprise)."*** *The CREWMEMBERS begin the percussive riff for "Snatch It." A CREWMEMBER brings BROWN'S luggage and hands it to him. As they sing, the CREWMEMBERS lift him and pass him around.*

BROWN

What? WHAT?

*(beat)*

No. NO. Get your hands off me.

CREWMEMBER

SNATCH 'IM UP. SNATCH 'IM UP.

CREWMEMBERS

'VAST HEAVING!

CREWMEMBER

SNATCH 'IM UP. SNATCH 'IM UP.

CREWMEMBERS

'VAST HEAVING!

CREWMEMBER

SNATCH 'IM UP, SNATCH 'IM UP,  
ON TO SOLID GROUND.  
DROP 'IM ON THE LOADIN' DOCK  
AN' TURN THE BOAT AROUND.

DROP 'IM IN A GUNNY SACK,  
DROP 'IM IN A CAN.  
DROP 'IM ON HIS HEAD,  
'CAUSE HE'S A NASTY LITTLE MAN.

SNATCH 'IM UP!

CREWMEMBERS

SNATCH 'IM UP!

ALL

'VAST HEAVIN'!

CREWMEMBER

SNATCH 'IM UP!

CREWMEMBERS

SNATCH 'IM UP!

ALL

'VAST HEAVIN'!

*BROWN has been carried off by the CREWMEMBERS. The percussion ends.*

*SAM is heading slowly, like a grown man now, to the pilothouse - he addresses the audience.*

SAM

I was almost sorry to see Mr. Brown go. He deserved to live out his days as a pilot, and by heaven he had achieved something I was far from earning.

*(beat)*

I killed him a few more times in my dreams - just for safety's sake - but my heart wasn't in it. I wished him nothing but Godspeed.

*SAM reaches the pilothouse and takes the wheel.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Well. I developed quite a reputation after that: The Cub Who Pounded Brown. And I'd be lyin' if I didn't say I got pretty full of myself. The confrontation had given me a certain confidence.

*BIXBY, at another place onstage, barks out questions.*

BIXBY

How many trees mark the island at Fern's point?

SAM

Two oaks and a palmetto, which, let's face it, ain't really a tree.

BIXBY

What's the purpose of that island?

SAM

Marks the shelf reef to the north and the sliptide to the west.

BIXBY

Sliptides move north to south usually, don't they?

SAM

Sliptides move any which way they want. You know that.

BIXBY

Where's your deepest water?

SAM

'Bout a half-mile north of here.

BIXBY

*(chuckling)*

Hah. Believe, if you think about it, we passed it about two minutes ago.

SAM

Believe, if you think about it, that's where it was last month when we passed. I'm answerin' today's questions with today's information.

*(beat - to audience)*

See what I mean? I imagine I was worse than most.

*(beat)*

But I was certainly humbled by what happened next.

*BIXBY stands still, fidgeting slightly, as if he can't bring himself to say something. We notice that he has a leather folder under his arm. He reaches and pulls a fountain pen from his jacket.*

BIXBY

*(clearing his throat)*

A-hem.

SAM

*(thinking he meant it as a wake up)*

Yessir. I got 'er.

BIXBY

No. Uh.

*(beat)*

Reckon it's about time.

SAM

*(still facing out)*

You want to take 'er, sir?

BIXBY

Time for some ... ceremonials.

SAM

*(still not getting it)*

What's that, Mr. Bixby?

BIXBY

I'll have your witness. I have here a piece of paper that needs to be signed in your presence.

*MUSIC. Underscore No. 31 begins.*

SAM

*(it hits him)*

Oh.

BIXBY

'Course, I can only sign it once.

*(beat)*

But I promise you, Sam - I'd sign it fifty times if I could.

SAM

*(humbled)*

Thank you, sir.

BIXBY

*(writing on the document, which rests on the  
leather folder)*

Young man, by this signature I verify your learning and capabilities as a steamboat pilot of a full-sized ship on the entire length of this august body known as the Mississippi River.

*(a flourish)*

I hereby pledge my signature as verification of your capability.

*BIXBY hands the paper to SAM, shakes his hand graduation style, and pats him on the back.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

You take the night off. I got 'er from here.

*SAM is transfixed by the license - can't take his eyes off of it.  
HE heads away from the pilothouse.*

SAM

Yessir.

*MUSIC plays as SAM walks to the edge of the deck. He holds the license in front of him. He studies it, leaving it open like a handkerchief. MATE comes up from behind.*

MATE

Snatch it, cub. Don't wanna lose anything.

*MUSIC ends.*

SAM

*(jumping with surprise)*

Oh. Hah. Yeah. Lookit here, Mr. Malloy.

MATE

Got yerself a rag fer cleanin' up grease?

*(beat)*

Hankie?

*(beat)*

Blow yer runny nose?

SAM

*(coming back down to Earth)*

Might 's well be.

MATE

What is it?

SAM

License. Pilot's license.

*(beat)*

With one signature.

MATE

Damn.

*(beat)*

Worth 'bout the same as a hankie, ain't it?

SAM

A hankie's much more useful.

MATE

One signature, eh?

SAM

*(the big words help hide the pain)*

Fella needs two. To get himself stationed in more proximity to a pilotin' situation.

MATE

Oh, that I know.

SAM

Guess everyone knows that.

*MUSIC Underscore No. 32 begins.*

SAM (CONT'D)

*(beat - giving in to pain)*

I imagine this right here, this is where my dream comes to a halt. Right here on this deck leanin' on the railin' with a paper ain't worth a hankie.

MATE

What dream?

SAM

All I wanted.

*(beat)*

All I ever wanted.

*(beat)*

To be a pilot. Be a steamboatman.

*MATE pulls an old folded piece of paper from his own jacket.*

*SAM watches as MATE unfolds the paper.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Whatchoo got there? Swab rag?

MATE

Keep my swab in the back pocket.

SAM

Hankie?

MATE

Nah. 'Slike yours. It's a pilot's license.

SAM

*(with a chuckle)*

Pilot's License?

MATE

*(looking at it)*

Damn. Two signatures on this one.

SAM

*(laughing)*

What're you doin' with a pilot's license?

*SAM looks over and studies the paper. His expression changes.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Says "John Malloy."

*(pause)*

That's you. Mister Malloy, that's you.

MATE

It is, cub.

SAM

*(incredulous)*

You ... you've got a pilot's license.

MATE

I do. Been a pilot for some years.

SAM

But you don't ..?

*SAM'S voice trails off. MATE speaks when he has mustered the courage to tell his story.*

MATE

Fear.

*(beat)*

I worked hard and I got this and I thought it was what I wanted to be and ... then fear took over.

*(pause as he becomes agitated)*

I took the wheel of my first boat and I was all of a sudden overcome with the idea of several hundred pounds of pressured steam in a big teakettle behind me and, Sam, I froze like a slab of Ontario ice. I couldn't move. Outta fear. Shift pilot had to take over.

*(beat)*

They put me off at the next stop - along with a whole new collection of nicknames.

*(beat)*

A boat's a fearful thing, cub. I didn't want to fight it. But I do love this river.

*(beat)*

I love this river in a mighty way.

*(beat)*

I'm happy where I am.

*(beat)*

Horace Bixby's the only man who'll have me on his boat. Says he's seen well enough of the world to understand crippin' fear. What it'll do to a man.

*(beat)*

He treats me like an equal.

SAM

Oh.

MATE

But, on the good side of the river: I've kept up my license, and I can damn sure sign off on a new pilot.

*(he pulls out a pencil and signs the license)*

*SAM is holding)*

Young man, by this signature I verify your learning and capabilities as a steamboat pilot of a full-sized ship on the entire length of this august body known as the Mississippi River.

*(a flourish)*

I hereby pledge my signature as verification of your capability.

*(he's done)*

There ya go, cubby. Don't let fear take you. You're gonna make us all proud.

*MATE takes his time folding his license, returns it to his pocket, and starts off. The MUSIC ends.*

SAM

Mister Malloy!

MATE

Yes.

SAM

*(almost in tears)*

I have fear. I have fear, too.

*(beat)*

Matter 'f truth, if I'd listened to my fear, my brother'd be alive today.

*(long pause)*

Thank you, sir.

MATE

Go after the world, Sam. Snatch it up, boy. Snatch it.

*LIGHTS change. SAM puts on a pilot's hat. He is now older, piloting alone. The sign on the boat now reads, "The Natchez."*

SAM

*(to audience, as he folds the license and puts it in his diary)*

So, that's how I achieved what I had wanted my whole life. I held in my hand a piece of paper signed by two men.

*MUSIC No. 33 Underscore begins. CREWMEMBERS fit him with a pilot's cap and jacket.*

SAM (CONT'D)

Probably the two finest men I ever met.

*(beat)*

The river carried me to three more boats, a hundred more trips.

*(beat)*

Bein' a Steamboatman didn't feel like I thought it would.

*(beat)*

And time didn't seem to make it any better.

*(beat)*

Then, one day, years later - long after I had received my license with two signatures, long after I had my own boat, long after I had said goodbye to Henry - a passenger came aboard.

*MUSIC ends. BIXBY steps into the pilothouse. SAM, facing front, doesn't even look at him.*

BIXBY

What kinda water you got?

SAM

Mississippi brown.

BIXBY

*(puzzled, but playing along)*

What's Mississippi brown?

SAM

Brown Mississippi water.

*(beat)*

Whatever you do, don't drink it.

BIXBY

You can't drink it?

SAM

Could if you had some other water to wash it down with.

*(beat)*

Know what I heard? I heard that every glass full of Mississippi brown holds nearly an acre of land in solution.

*BIXBY laughs.*

BIXBY

Horace Bixby. Pilot's Association.

SAM

I knew it was you.

BIXBY

I stopped by at your grandmother's last trip down. Took me to see Henry's grave. She was most generous.

*(beat)*

Woman makes the damnedest biscuits I ever tasted.

SAM

She's a fine person.

BIXBY

She is that.

SAM

Not sure she'll ever forgive me for Henry.

*(beat)*

SAM (CONT'D)

Not sure I want her to.

*(beat)*

Henry was young, an' he was green. But he was a steamboatman through and through. No doubt in my mind about that.

BIXBY

No doubt whatsoever.

*Pause. Then another smile crosses BIXBY'S face.*

BIXBY (CONT'D)

I've been given a job on the Cuthbert line.

*(beat)*

'S a good job. Big beautiful boat. Came to see if you'd be my alternate.

SAM

*(after a moment)*

My gracious. There was a time when I'd've given most anything to be alternate to Mister Horace Bixby.

BIXBY

Be proud to have you. Need a good pilot.

SAM

You know. When you first took me on, you asked what I'd do when the river meant nothing to me anymore.

*(beat)*

You remember that?

BIXBY

I do.

SAM

I told you that would never happen.

BIXBY

It always happens.

*There is a pause. MUSIC No. 34 Underscore begins.*

SAM

*(struggling - this is difficult)*

People who come to this river are as different as mud and water. Like Mississippi Brown.

*(beat)*

SAM (CONTD)

People who come to admire the sunset - itchin' for travel and adventure.

*(beat)*

And people who come to get away from pain, grief. From fear. From loss.

*(beat)*

I think the Almighty, he looked down on this river and said, "Here - this big ditch. This gutter. I'll fill it with celebration and adventure. But I'll soak it through and through with regret."

*(beat)*

You told me once to learn the true river. Well, I learned the truth, and I don't much care for it.

BIXBY

*(with understanding)*

That's not just the river, you know. That's the world.

SAM

*(steadfast)*

I'm gonna thank you, Mr. Bixby, for your very generous offer. But I don't believe I'm much longer for this kinda work.

BIXBY

I understand.

*(beat)*

Doesn't mean you won't tip a glass with me this evenin'?

SAM

Doesn't mean that at all.

BIXBY

*(as he leaves)*

See you after your shift.

*BIXBY leaves. The MUSIC continues. SAM walks down from the pilothouse. As he watches, the CREWMEMBERS disassemble the boat, returning us to the bare stage at the beginning of the play.*

*Then, after a moment, he turns and addresses the audience again.*

SAM

*(to audience)*

I still think about that sunset I saw with Henry. I try to get it back. But, no. The romance and the beauty are all gone from the river.

## SAM (CONT'D)

*(beat)*

Wasn't too many years later that the big paddlewheelers were all but gone. Railroads saw to that. And we decided to turn brother on brother and have ourselves a war. So. No sooner than they'd begun, my days as a pilot were over.

*(beat - he pulls out his diary and opens it)*

But, I still had the book. Somehow it seems to be what got me through. I write in it ev'ry day. Haven't stopped - and it's worked out pretty well.

*The **MUSIC** is done. Then, quietly ... SAM walks down to the edge of the bare, empty stage. He is framed in a small spotlight.*

## SAM (CONT'D)

*(he pauses, thinking back)*

When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was to be a steamboatman.

*(beat)*

That was to be a steamboatman.

*SAM smiles. As he does, **MUSIC NO. 35 Chord**. And on the button, he slams the diary shut.*

**BLACKOUT**

*Then, the **MUSIC** jumps in, and the entire company sings.  
**MUSIC No. 36 "Great Big Boat (R)." <<Track 13>>***

ALL

IT'S A GREAT BIG JOY  
RIDIN' ON A CUSHION MADE OF STEAM,  
RIDIN' DOWN THE MIDDLE OF A DREAM  
THAT CHANGED MY LIFE FROM NIGHT TO DAY.

SAM

I'M A GREAT BIG BOY!

ALL

LEAVIN' FROM A MISSISSIPPI TOWN,  
TRAVELIN' THE RIVER UP AND DOWN  
WHERE I HEAR EV'RYBODY SAY:  
"GREAT BIG BOAT ON THE GREAT BIG WATER."  
"GREAT BIG BOAT ON THE GREAT BIG WATER."

**BLACKOUT**