

**WILLIAM
HOWELLS**

POEMS

William Howells

Poems

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William D. Howells

Poems

THE PILOT'S STORY

I

It was a story the pilot told, with his back to his hearers,—
Keeping his hand on the wheel and his eye on the globe of the jack-
staff,
Holding the boat to the shore and out of the sweep of the current,
Lightly turning aside for the heavy logs of the drift-wood,
Widely shunning the snags that made us sardonic obeisance.

II

All the soft, damp air was full of delicate perfume
From the young willows in bloom on either bank of the river,—
Faint, delicious fragrance, trancing the indolent senses
In a luxurious dream of the river and land of the lotus.
Not yet out of the west the roses of sunset were withered;
In the deep blue above light clouds of gold and of crimson
Floated in slumber serene; and the restless river beneath them
Rushed away to the sea with a vision of rest in its bosom;
Far on the eastern shore lay dimly the swamps of the cypress;
Dimly before us the islands grew from the river's expanses,—
Beautiful, wood-grown isles, with the gleam of the swart inundation
Seen through the swaying boughs and slender trunks of their willows;
And on the shore beside us the cotton-trees rose in the evening,
Phantom-like, yearningly, wearily, with the inscrutable sadness
Of the mute races of trees. While hoarsely the steam from her 'scape-
pipes
Shouted, then whispered a moment, then shouted again to the silence,
Trembling through all her frame with the mighty pulse of her engines,
Slowly the boat ascended the swollen and broad Mississippi,
Bank-full, sweeping on, with tangled masses of drift-wood,
Daintily breathed about with whiffs of silvery vapor,
Where in his arrowy flight the twittering swallow alighted,
And the belated blackbird paused on the way to its nestlings.

III

It was the pilot's story:—"They both came aboard there, at Cairo,
From a New Orleans boat, and took passage with us for Saint Louis.
She was a beautiful woman, with just enough blood from her mother
Darkening her eyes and her hair to make her race known to a trader:
You would have thought she was white. The man that was with her,—
you see such,—

Weakly good-natured and kind, and weakly good-natured and vicious,
Slender of body and soul, fit neither for loving nor hating.

I was a youngster then, and only learning the river,—

Not over-fond of the wheel. I used to watch them at monte,
Down in the cabin at night, and learned to know all of the gamblers.

So when I saw this weak one staking his money against them,
Betting upon the turn of the cards, I knew what was coming:

They never left their pigeons a single feather to fly with.

Next day I saw them together,—the stranger and one of the gamblers:

Picturesque rascal he was, with long black hair and moustaches,

Black slouch hat drawn down to his eyes from his villanous forehead.

On together they moved, still earnestly talking in whispers,

On toward the fore-castle, where sat the woman alone by the gangway.

Roused by the fall of feet, she turned, and, beholding her master,

Greeted him with a smile that was more like a wife's than another's,

Rose to meet him fondly, and then, with the dread apprehension

Always haunting the slave, fell her eye on the face of the gambler,—

Dark and lustful and fierce and full of merciless cunning.

Something was spoken so low that I could not hear what the words
were;

Only the woman started, and looked from one to the other,

With imploring eyes, bewildered hands, and a tremor

All through her frame: I saw her from where I was standing, she shook
so.

'Say! is it so?' she cried. On the weak, white lips of her master

Died a sickly smile, and he said, 'Louise, I have sold you.'

God is my judge! May I never see such a look of despairing,

Desolate anguish, as that which the woman cast on her master,

Gripping her breast with her little hands, as if he had stabbed her,

Standing in silence a space, as fixed as the Indian woman

Carved out of wood, on the pilot-house of the old Pocahontas!

Then, with a gurgling moan, like the sound in the throat of the dying,

Came back her voice, that, rising, fluttered, through wild incoherence,

Into a terrible shriek that stopped my heart while she answered:—

'Sold me? sold me? sold—And you promised to give me my freedom!—

Promised me, for the sake of our little boy in Saint Louis!

What will you say to our boy, when he cries for me there in Saint Louis?

What will you say to our God?—Ah, you have been joking! I see it!—

No? God! God! He shall hear it,—and all of the angels in heaven,—

Even the devils in hell!—and none will believe when they hear it!
Sold me!’—Her voice died away with a wail, and in silence
Down she sank on the deck, and covered her face with her fingers.”

IV

In his story a moment the pilot paused, while we listened
To the salute of a boat, that, rounding the point of an island,
Flamed toward us with fires that seemed to burn from the waters,—
Stately and vast and swift, and borne on the heart of the current.
Then, with the mighty voice of a giant challenged to battle,
Rose the responsive whistle, and all the echoes of island,
Swamp-land, glade, and brake replied with a myriad clamor,
Like wild birds that are suddenly startled from slumber at midnight,
Then were at peace once more; and we heard the harsh cries of the
peacocks
Perched on a tree by a cabin-door, where the white-headed settler’s
White-headed children stood to look at the boat as it passed them,
Passed them so near that we heard their happy talk and their laughter.
Softly the sunset had faded, and now on the eastern horizon
Hung, like a tear in the sky, the beautiful star of the evening.

V

Still with his back to us standing, the pilot went on with his story:—
“All of us flocked round the woman. The children cried, and their
mothers
Hugged them tight to their breasts; but the gambler said to the captain,—
‘Put me off there at the town that lies round the bend of the river.
Here, you! rise at once, and be ready now to go with me.’
Roughly he seized the woman’s arm and strove to uplift her.
She—she seemed not to heed him, but rose like one that is dreaming,
Slid from his grasp, and fleetly mounted the steps of the gangway,
Up to the hurricane-deck, in silence, without lamentation.
Straight to the stern of the boat, where the wheel was, she ran, and the
people
Followed her fast till she turned and stood at bay for a moment,
Looking them in the face, and in the face of the gambler.
Not one to save her,—not one of all the compassionate people!
Not one to save her, of all the pitying angels in heaven!
Not one bolt of God to strike him dead there before her!
Wildly she waved him back, we waiting in silence and horror.
Over the swarthy face of the gambler a pallor of passion
Passed, like a gleam of lightning over the west in the night-time.
White, she stood, and mute, till he put forth his hand to secure her;

Then she turned and leaped,—in mid-air fluttered a moment,—
Down then, whirling, fell, like a broken-winged bird from a tree-top,
Down on the cruel wheel, that caught her, and hurled her, and crushed
her,
And in the foaming water plunged her, and hid her forever.”

VI

Still with his back to us all the pilot stood, but we heard him
Swallowing hard, as he pulled the bell-rope for stopping. Then,
turning,—
“This is the place where it happened,” brokenly whispered the pilot.
“Somehow, I never like to go by here alone in the night-time.”
Darkly the Mississippi flowed by the town that lay in the starlight,
Cheerful with lamps. Below we could hear them reversing the engines,
And the great boat glided up to the shore like a giant exhausted.
Heavily sighed her pipes. Broad over the swamps to the eastward
Shone the full moon, and turned our far-trembling wake into silver.
All was serene and calm, but the odorous breath of the willows
Smote with a mystical sense of infinite sorrow upon us.

FORLORN

I

Red roses, in the slender vases burning,
Breathed all upon the air,—
The passion and the tenderness and yearning,
The waiting and the doubting and despair.

II

Still with the music of her voice was haunted,
Through all its charméd rhymes,
The open book of such a one as chanted
The things he dreamed in old, old summer-times.

III

The silvern chords of the piano trembled
Still with the music wrung
From them; the silence of the room dissembled
The closes of the songs that she had sung.

IV

The languor of the crimson shawl's abasement,—
Lying without a stir
Upon the floor,—the absence at the casement,
The solitude and hush were full of her.

V

Without, and going from the room, and never
Departing, did depart
Her steps; and one that came too late forever
Felt them go heavy o'er his broken heart.

VI

And, sitting in the house's desolation,
He could not bear the gloom,
The vanishing encounter and evasion
Of things that were and were not in the room.

VII

Through midnight streets he followed fleeting visions
Of faces and of forms;
He heard old tendernesses and derisions
Amid the sobs and cries of midnight storms.

VIII

By midnight lamps, and from the darkness under
That lamps made at their feet,
He saw sweet eyes peer out in innocent wonder,
And sadly follow after him down the street.

IX

The noonday crowds their restlessness obtruded
Between him and his quest;
At unseen corners jostled and eluded,
Against his hand her silken robes were pressed.

X

Doors closed upon her; out of garret casements
He knew she looked at him;
In splendid mansions and in squalid basements,
Upon the walls he saw her shadow swim.

XI

From rapid carriages she gleamed upon him,
Whirling away from sight;
From all the hopelessness of search she won him
Back to the dull and lonesome house at night.

XII

Full early into dark the twilights saddened
Within its closed doors;
The echoes, with the clock's monotony maddened,
Leaped loud in welcome from the hollow floors;

XIII

But gusts that blew all day with solemn laughter
From wide-mouthed chimney-places,
And the strange noises between roof and rafter,
The wainscot clamor, and the scampering races

XIV

Of mice that chased each other through the chambers,
And up and down the stair,
And rioted among the ashen embers,
And left their frolic footprints everywhere,—

XV

Were hushed to hear his heavy tread ascending
The broad steps, one by one,
And toward the solitary chamber tending,
Where the dim phantom of his hope alone

XVI

Rose up to meet him, with his growing nearer,
Eager for his embrace,
And moved, and melted into the white mirror,
And stared at him with his own haggard face.

XVII

But, turning, he was 'ware *her* looks beheld him
Out of the mirror white;
And at the window yearning arms she held him,
Out of the vague and sombre fold of night.

XVIII

Sometimes she stood behind him, looking over
His shoulder as he read;
Sometimes he felt her shadowy presence hover
Above his dreamful sleep, beside his bed;

XIX

And rising from his sleep, her shadowy presence
Followed his light descent
Of the long stair; her shadowy evanescence
Through all the whispering rooms before him went.

XX

Upon the earthy draught of cellars blowing
His shivering lamp-flame blue,
Amid the damp and chill, he felt her flowing
Around him from the doors he entered through.

XXI

The spiders wove their webs upon the ceiling;
The bat clung to the wall;
The dry leaves through the open transom stealing,
Skated and danced adown the empty hall.

XXII

About him closed the utter desolation,
About him closed the gloom;
The vanishing encounter and evasion
Of things that were and were not in the room

XXIII

Vexed him forever; and his life forever
Immured and desolate,
Beating itself, with desperate endeavor,
But bruised itself, against the round of fate.

XXIV

The roses, in their slender vases burning,
Were quenched long before;
A dust was on the rhymes of love and yearning;
The shawl was like a shroud upon the floor.

XXV

Her music from the thrilling chords had perished;
The stillness was not moved
With memories of cadences long cherished,
The closes of the songs that she had loved.

XXVI

But not the less he felt her presence never
Out of the room depart;
Over the threshold, not the less, forever
He felt her going on his broken heart.

PLEASURE-PAIN

*“Das Vergnügen ist Nichts als ein höchst angenehmer Schmerz.”—
Heinrich Heine.*

I

Full of beautiful blossoms
Stood the tree in early May:
Came a chilly gale from the sunset,
And blew the blossoms away;

Scattered them through the garden,
Tossed them into the mere:
The sad tree moaned and shuddered,
“Alas! the Fall is here.”

But all through the glowing summer
The blossomless tree throve fair,
And the fruit waxed ripe and mellow,
With sunny rain and air;

And when the dim October
With golden death was crowned,
Under its heavy branches
The tree stooped to the ground.

In youth there comes a west-wind
Blowing our bloom away,—
A chilly breath of Autumn
Out of the lips of May.

We bear the ripe fruit after,—
Ah, me! for the thought of pain!—
We know the sweetness and beauty
And the heart-bloom never again.

II

One sails away to sea,
One stands on the shore and cries;
The ship goes down the world, and the light
On the sullen water dies.

The whispering shell is mute,
And after is evil cheer:
She shall stand on the shore and cry in vain,
Many and many a year.

But the stately, wide-winged ship
Lies wrecked on the unknown deep;
Far under, dead in his coral bed,
The lover lies asleep.

III

Through the silent streets of the city,
In the night's unbusy noon,
Up and down in the pallor
Of the languid summer moon,

I wander, and think of the village,
And the house in the maple-gloom,
And the porch with the honeysuckles
And the sweet-brier all abloom.

My soul is sick with the fragrance
Of the dewy sweet-brier's breath:
O darling! the house is empty,
And lonelier than death!

If I call, no one will answer;
If I knock, no one will come:
The feet are at rest forever,
And the lips are cold and dumb.

The summer moon is shining
So wan and large and still,
And the weary dead are sleeping
In the graveyard under the hill.

IV

We looked at the wide, white circle
Around the Autumn moon,
And talked of the change of weather:
It would rain, to-morrow, or soon.

And the rain came on the morrow,
And beat the dying leaves
From the shuddering boughs of the maples
Into the flooded eaves.

The clouds wept out their sorrow;
But in my heart the tears
Are bitter for want of weeping,
In all these Autumn years.

V

The bobolink sings in the meadow,
The wren in the cherry-tree:
Come hither, thou little maiden,
And sit upon my knee;

And I will tell thee a story
I read in a book of rhyme;
I will but fain that it happened
To me, one summer-time,

When we walked through the meadow,
And she and I were young.
The story is old and weary
With being said and sung.

The story is old and weary:
Ah, child! it is known to thee.
Who was it that last night kissed thee
Under the cherry-tree?

VI

Like a bird of evil presage,
To the lonely house on the shore
Came the wind with a tale of shipwreck,
And shrieked at the bolted door,

And flapped its wings in the gables,
And shouted the well-known names,
And buffeted the windows
Afeared in their shuddering frames.

It was night, and it is morning,—

The summer sun is bland,
The white-cap waves come rocking, rocking,
In to the summer land.

The white-cap waves come rocking, rocking,
In the sun so soft and bright,
And toss and play with the dead man
Drowned in the storm last night.

VII

I remember the burning brushwood,
Glimmering all day long
Yellow and weak in the sunlight,
Now leaped up red and strong,

And fired the old dead chestnut,
That all our years had stood,
Gaunt and gray and ghostly,
Apart from the sombre wood;

And, flushed with sudden summer,
The leafless boughs on high
Blossomed in dreadful beauty
Against the darkened sky.

We children sat telling stories,
And boasting what we should be,
When we were men like our fathers,
And watched the blazing tree,

That showered its fiery blossoms,
Like a rain of stars, we said,
Of crimson and azure and purple.
That night, when I lay in bed,

I could not sleep for seeing,
Whenever I closed my eyes,
The tree in its dazzling splendor
Against the darkened skies.

I cannot sleep for seeing,
With closed eyes to-night,
The tree in its dazzling splendor
Dropping its blossoms bright;

And old, old dreams of childhood

Come thronging my weary brain,
Dear, foolish beliefs and longings:
I doubt, are they real again?

It is nothing, and nothing, and nothing,
That I either think or see:
The phantoms of dead illusions
To-night are haunting me.

IN AUGUST

All the long August afternoon,
The little drowsy stream
Whispers a melancholy tune,
As if it dreamed of June
And whispered in its dream.

The thistles show beyond the brook
Dust on their down and bloom,
And out of many a weed-grown nook
The aster-flowérs look
With eyes of tender gloom.

The silent orchard aisles are sweet
With smell of ripening fruit.
Through the sere grass, in shy retreat,
Flutter, at coming feet,
The robins strange and mute.

There is no wind to stir the leaves,
The harsh leaves overhead;
Only the querulous cricket grieves,
And shrilling locust weaves
A song of Summer dead.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

The wet trees hang above the walks
Purple with damps and earthish stains,
And strewn by moody, absent rains
With rose-leaves from the wild-grown stalks.

Unmown, in heavy, tangled swaths,
The ripe June-grass is wanton blown;
Snails slime the untrodden threshold-stone;
Along the sills hang drowsy moths.

Down the blank visage of the wall,
Where many a wavering trace appears,
Like a forgotten trace of tears,
From swollen eaves the slow drops crawl.

Where everything was wide before,
The curious wind, that comes and goes,
Finds all the latticed windows close,
Secret and close the bolted door.

And with the shrewd and curious wind,
That in the archéd doorway cries,
And at the bolted portal tries,
And harks and listens at the blind,—

Forever lurks my thought about,
And in the ghostly middle-night
Finds all the hidden windows bright,
And sees the guests go in and out,

And lingers till the pallid dawn,
And feels the mystery deeper there
In silent, gust-swept chambers, bare,
With all the midnight revel gone;

But wanders through the lonesome rooms,
Where harsh the astonished cricket calls,
And, from the hollows of the walls
Vanishing, start unshapen glooms;

And lingers yet, and cannot come
Out of the drear and desolate place,
So full of ruin's solemn grace,
And haunted with the ghost of home.

BUBBLES

I

I stood on the brink in childhood,
And watched the bubbles go
From the rock-fretted, sunny ripple
To the smoother tide below;

And over the white creek-bottom,
Under them every one,
Went golden stars in the water,
All luminous with the sun.

But the bubbles broke on the surface,
And under, the stars of gold
Broke; and the hurrying water
Flowed onward, swift and cold.

II

I stood on the brink in manhood,
And it came to my weary brain,
And my heart, so dull and heavy
After the years of pain,—

That every hollowest bubble
Which over my life had passed
Still into its deeper current
Some heavenly gleam had cast;

That, however I mocked it gayly,
And guessed at its hollowness,
Still shone, with each bursting bubble,
One star in my soul the less.

LOST BELIEFS

One after one they left us;
The sweet birds out of our breasts
Went flying away in the morning:
Will they come again to their nests?

Will they come again at nightfall,
With God's breath in their song?
Noon is fierce with the heats of summer,
And summer days are long!

O my Life, with thy upward liftings,
Thy downward-striking roots,
Ripening out of thy tender blossoms
But hard and bitter fruits!—

In thy boughs there is no shelter
For the birds to seek again.
The desolate nest is broken
And torn with storms and rain!

LOUIS LEBEAU'S CONVERSION

Yesterday, while I moved with the languid crowd on the Riva,
Musing with idle eyes on the wide lagoons and the islands,
And on the dim-seen seaward glimmering sails in the distance,
Where the azure haze, like a vision of Indian-Summer,
Haunted the dreamy sky of the soft Venetian December,—
While I moved unwilling in the mellow warmth of the weather,
Breathing air that was full of Old World sadness and beauty
Into my thought came this story of free, wild life in Ohio,
When the land was new, and yet by the Beautiful River
Dwelt the pioneers and Indian hunters and boatmen.

Pealed from the campanili, responding from island to island,
Bells of that ancient faith whose incense and solemn devotions
Rise from a hundred shrines in the broken heart of the city;
But in my reverie heard I only the passionate voices
Of the people that sang in the virgin heart of the forest.
Autumn was in the land, and the trees were golden and crimson,
And from the luminous boughs of the over-elms and the maples
Tender and beautiful fell the light in the worshippers' faces,
Softer than lights that stream through the saints on the windows of
churches,
While the balsamy breath of the hemlocks and pines by the river
Stole on the winds through the woodland aisles like the breath of a
censer.

Loud the people sang old camp-meeting anthems that quaver
Quaintly yet from lips forgetful of lips that have kissed them;
Loud they sang the songs of the Sacrifice and Atonement,
And of the end of the world, and the infinite terrors of Judgment:—
Songs of ineffable sorrow, and wailing, compassionate warning
Unto the generations that hardened their hearts to their Savior;
Songs of exultant rapture for them that confessed him and followed,
Bearing his burden and yoke, enduring and entering with him
Into the rest of his saints, and the endless reward of the blessed.
Loud the people sang; but through the sound of their singing
Broke inarticulate cries and moans and sobs from the mourners,
As the glory of God, that smote the apostle of Tarsus,
Smote them and strewed them to earth like leaves in the breath of the
whirlwind.

Hushed at last was the sound of the lamentation and singing;
But from the distant hill the throbbing drum of the pheasant
Shook with its heavy pulses the depths of the listening silence,
When from his place arose a white-haired exhorter, and faltered:
“Brethren and sisters in Jesus! the Lord hath heard our petitions,
So that the hearts of his servants are awed and melted within them,—

Even the hearts of the wicked are touched by his infinite mercy.
All my days in this vale of tears the Lord hath been with me,
He hath been good to me, he hath granted me trials and patience;
But this hour hath crowned my knowledge of him and his goodness.
Truly, but that it is well this day for me to be with you,
Now might I say to the Lord,—‘I know thee, my God, in all fulness;
Now let thy servant depart in peace to the rest thou hast promised!’”

Faltered and ceased. And now the wild and jubilant music
Of the singing burst from the solemn profound of the silence,
Surged in triumph, and fell, and ebbled again into silence.

Then from the group of the preachers arose the greatest among them,—
He whose days were given in youth to the praise of the Savior,
He whose lips seemed touched, like the prophet’s of old, from the altar,
So that his words were flame, and burned to the hearts of his hearers,
Quickening the dead among them, reviving the cold and the doubting.
There he charged them pray, and rest not from prayer while a sinner
In the sound of their voices denied the Friend of the sinner:

“Pray till the night shall fall,—till the stars are faint in the morning,—
Yea, till the sun himself be faint in that glory and brightness,
Faint in the light which shall dawn in mercy for penitent sinners.”
Kneeling, he led them in prayer; and the quick and sobbing responses
Spake how their souls were moved with the might and the grace of the
Spirit.

Then while the converts recounted how God had chastened and saved
them,—

Children, whose golden locks yet shone with the lingering effulgence
Of the touches of Him who blessed little children forever;
Old men, whose yearning eyes were dimmed with the far-streaming
brightness

Seen through the opening gates in the heart of the heavenly city,—
Stealthily through the harking woods the lengthening shadows
Chased the wild things to their nests, and the twilight died into
darkness.

Now the four great pyres that were placed there to light the
encampment,

High on platforms raised above the people, were kindled.
Flaming aloof, as it were the pillar by night in the Desert
Fell their crimson light on the lifted orbs of the preachers,
Fell on the withered brows of the old men, and Israel’s mothers,
Fell on the bloom of youth, and the earnest devotion of manhood,
Fell on the anguish and hope in the tearful eyes of the mourners.

Flaming aloof, it stirred the sleep of the luminous maples
With warm summer-dreams, and faint, luxurious languor.
Near the four great pyres the people closed in a circle,
In their midst the mourners, and, praying with them, the exhorters,
And on the skirts of the circle the unrepentant and scorners,—

Ever fewer and sadder, and drawn to the place of the mourners,
One after one, by the prayers and tears of the brethren and sisters,
And by the Spirit of God, that was mightily striving within them,
Till at the last alone stood Louis Lebeau, unconverted.

Louis Lebeau, the boatman, the trapper, the hunter, the fighter,
From the unlucky French of Gallipolis he descended,
Heir to Old World want and New World love of adventure.
Vague was the life he led, and vague and grotesque were the rumors
Through which he loomed on the people,—the hero of mythical hearsay,
Quick of hand and of heart, impatient, generous, Western,
Taking the thought of the young in secret love and in envy.
Not less the elders shook their heads and held him for outcast,
Reprobate, roving, ungodly, infidel, worse than a Papist,
With his whispered fame of lawless exploits at St. Louis,
Wild affrays and loves with the half-breeds out on the Osage,
Brawls at New Orleans, and all the towns on the rivers,
All the godless towns of the many-ruffianed rivers.
Only she who loved him the best of all, in her loving
Knew him the best of all, and other than that of the rumors.
Daily she prayed for him, with conscious and tender effusion,
That the Lord would convert him. But when her father forbade him
Unto her thought, she denied him, and likewise held him for outcast,
Turned her eyes when they met, and would not speak, though her heart
broke.

Bitter and brief his logic that reasoned from wrong unto error:
“This is their praying and singing,” he said, “that makes you reject me,—
You that were kind to me once. But I think my fathers’ religion,
With a light heart in the breast and a friendly priest to absolve one,
Better than all these conversions that only bewilder and vex me,
And that have made men so hard and women fickle and cruel.
Well, then, pray for my soul, since you would not have spoken to save
me,—
Yes; for I go from these saints to my brethren and sisters, the sinners.”
Spoke and went, while her faint lips fashioned unuttered entreaties,—
Went, and came again in a year at the time of the meeting,
Haggard and wan of face, and wasted with passion and sorrow.
Dead in his eyes was the careless smile of old, and its phantom
Haunted his lips in a sneer of restless, incredulous mocking.
Day by day he came to the outer skirts of the circle,
Dwelling on her, where she knelt by the white-haired exhorter, her
father,
With his hollow looks, and never moved from his silence.

Now, where he stood alone, the last of impenitent sinners,
Weeping, old friends and comrades came to him out of the circle,
And with their tears besought him to hear what the Lord had done for
them.

Ever he shook them off, not roughly, nor smiled at their transports.
Then the preachers spoke and painted the terrors of Judgment,
And of the bottomless pit, and the flames of hell everlasting.
Still and dark he stood, and neither listened nor heeded;
But when the fervent voice of the white-haired exhorter was lifted,
Fell his brows in a scowl of fierce and scornful rejection.
“Lord, let this soul be saved!” cried the fervent voice of the old man;
“For that the Shepherd rejoiceth more truly for one that hath wandered,
And hath been found again, than for all the others that strayed not.”

Out of the midst of the people, a woman old and decrepit,
Tremulous through the light, and tremulous into the shadow,
Wavered toward him with slow, uncertain paces of palsy,
Laid her quivering hand on his arm and brokenly prayed him:
“Louis Lebeau, I closed in death the eyes of your mother.
On my breast she died, in prayer for her fatherless children,
That they might know the Lord, and follow him always, and serve him.
O, I conjure you, my son, by the name of your mother in glory,
Scorn not the grace of the Lord!” As when a summer-noon’s tempest
Breaks in one swift gush of rain, then ceases and gathers
Darker and gloomier yet on the lowering front of the heavens,
So broke his mood in tears, as he soothed her, and stilled her entreaties,
And so he turned again with his clouded looks to the people.

Vibrated then from the hush the accents of mournfullest pity,—
His who was gifted in speech, and the glow of the fires illumined
All his pallid aspect with sudden and marvellous splendor:
“Louis Lebeau,” he spake, “I have known you and loved you from
childhood;
Still, when the others blamed you, I took your part, for I knew you.
Louis Lebeau, my brother, I thought to meet you in heaven,
Hand in hand with her who is gone to heaven before us,
Brothers through her dear love! I trusted to greet you and lead you
Up from the brink of the River unto the gates of the City.
Lo! my years shall be few on the earth. O my brother,
If I should die before you had known the mercy of Jesus,
Yea, I think it would sadden the hope of glory within me!”

Neither yet had the will of the sinner yielded an answer;
But from his lips there broke a cry of unspeakable anguish,
Wild and fierce and shrill, as if some demon within him
Bent his soul with the ultimate pangs of fiendish possession;
And with the outstretched arms of bewildered imploring toward them,
Death-white unto the people he turned his face from the darkness.

Out of the sedge by the creek a flight of clamorous killdees
Rose from their timorous sleep with piercing and iterant challenge,
Wheeled in the starlight, and fled away into distance and silence.
White in the vale lay the tents, and beyond them glided the river,

Where the broadhorn¹ drifted slow at the will of the current,
And where the boatman listened, and knew not how, as he listened,
Something touched through the years the old lost hopes of his
childhood,—
Only his sense was filled with low, monotonous murmurs,
As of a faint-heard prayer, that was chorused with deeper responses.

Not with the rest was lifted her voice in the fervent responses,
But in her soul she prayed to Him that heareth in secret,
Asking for light and for strength to learn his will and to do it:
“O, make me clear to know if the hope that rises within me
Be not part of a love unmeet for me here, and forbidden!
So, if it be not that, make me strong for the evil entreaty
Of the days that shall bring me question of self and reproaches,
When the unrighteous shall mock, and my brethren and sisters shall
doubt me!

Make me worthy to know thy will, my Savior, and do it!”
In her pain she prayed, and at last, through her mute adoration,
Rapt from all mortal presence, and in her rapture uplifted,
Glorified she rose, and stood in the midst of the people,
Looking on all with the still, unseeing eyes of devotion,—
Vague, and tender, and sweet, as the eyes of the dead, when we dream
them

Living and looking on us, but they cannot speak, and we cannot,—
Knowing only the peril that threatened his soul’s unrepentance,
Knowing only the fear and error and wrong that withheld him,
Thinking, “In doubt of me, his soul had perished forever!”
Touched with no feeble shame, but trusting her power to save him,
Through the circle she passed, and straight to the side of her lover,
Took his hand in her own, and mutely implored him an instant,
Answering, giving, forgiving, confessing, beseeching him all things;
Drew him then with her, and passed once more through the circle
Unto her place, and knelt with him there by the side of her father,
Trembling as women tremble who greatly venture and triumph,—
But in her innocent breast was the saint’s sublime exultation.

So was Louis converted; and though the lips of the scorners
Spared not in after years the subtle taunt and derision
(What time, meeker grown, his heart held his hand from its answer),
Not the less lofty and pure her love and her faith that had saved him,
Not the less now discerned was her inspiration from heaven
By the people, that rose, and embracing and weeping together,
Poured forth their jubilant songs of victory and of thanksgiving,
Till from the embers leaped the dying flame to behold them,
And the hills of the river were filled with reverberant echoes,—
Echoes that out of the years and the distance stole to me hither,
While I moved unwilling in the mellow warmth of the weather;

¹ The old-fashioned flatboats were so called.

Echoes that mingled and faded and fell with the fluttering murmurs
In the hearts of the hushing bells, as from island to island
Swooned the sound on the wide lagoons into palpitant silence.

CAPRICE

I

She hung the cage at the window:
“If he goes by,” she said,
“He will hear my robin singing,
And when he lifts his head,
I shall be sitting here to sew,
And he will bow to me, I know.”

The robin sang a love-sweet song,
The young man raised his head;
The maiden turned away and blushed:
“I am a fool!” she said,
And went on broidering in silk
A pink-eyed rabbit, white as milk.

II

The young man loitered slowly
By the house three times that day;
She took her bird from the window:
“He need not look this way.”
She sat at her piano long,
And sighed, and played a death-sad song.

But when the day was done, she said,
“I wish that he would come!
Remember, Mary, if he calls
To-night—I’m not at home.”
So when he rang, she went—the elf!—
She went and let him in herself.

III

They sang full long together
Their songs love-sweet, death-sad;
The robin woke from his slumber,
And rang out, clear and glad.
“Now go!” she coldly said; “’tis late;”

And followed him—to latch the gate.

He took the rosebud from her hair,
While, “You shall not!” she said;
He closed her hand within his own,
And, while her tongue forbade,
Her will was darkened in the eclipse
Of blinding love upon his lips.

SWEET CLOVER

“... My letters back to me.”

I

I know they won the faint perfume,
That to their faded pages clings,
From gloves, and handkerchiefs, and things
Kept in the soft and scented gloom

Of some mysterious box-poor leaves
Of summer, now as sere and dead
As any leaves of summer shed
From crimson boughs when autumn grieves!

The ghost of fragrance! Yet I thrill
All through with such delicious pain
Of soul and sense, to breathe again
The sweet that haunted memory still.

And under these December skies,
As bland as May's in other climes,
I move, and muse my idle rhymes
And subtly sentimentalize.

I hear the music that was played,—
The songs that silence knows by heart!—
I see sweet burlesque feigning art,
The careless grace that curved and swayed

Through dances and through breezy walks;
I feel once more the eyes that smiled,
And that dear presence that beguiled
The pauses of the foolish talks,

When this poor phantom of perfume
Was the Sweet Clover's living soul,
And breathed from her as if it stole,
Ah, heaven! from her heart in bloom!

II

We have not many ways with pain:
We weep weak tears, or else we laugh;
I doubt, not less the cup we quaff,
And tears and scorn alike are vain.

But let me live my quiet life;
I will not vex my calm with grief,
I only know the pang was brief,
And there an end of hope and strife.

And thou? I put the letters by:
In years the sweetness shall not pass;
More than the perfect blossom was
I count its lingering memory.

Alas! with Time dear Love is dead,
And not with Fate. And who can guess
How weary of our happiness
We might have been if we were wed?

Venice.

THE ROYAL PORTRAITS. (AT LUDWIGSHOF.)

I

Confronting each other the pictures stare
Into each other's sleepless eyes;
And the daylight into the darkness dies,
From year to year in the palace there:
But they watch and guard that no device
Take either one of them unaware.

Their majesties the king and the queen,
The parents of the reigning prince:
Both put off royalty many years since,
With life and the gifts that have always been
Given to kings from God, to evince
His sense of the mighty over the mean.

I cannot say that I like the face
Of the king; it is something fat and red;
And the neck that lifts the royal head
Is thick and coarse; and a scanty grace
Dwells in the dull blue eyes that are laid
Sullenly on the queen in her place.

He must have been a king in his day
'Twere well to pleasure in work and sport:
One of the heaven-anointed sort
Who ruled his people with iron sway,
And knew that, through good and evil report,
God meant him to rule and them to obey.

There are many other likenesses
Of the king in his royal palace there;
You find him depicted everywhere,—
In his robes of state, in his hunting-dress,
In his flowing wig, in his powdered hair,—
A king in all of them, none the less;

But most himself in this on the wall
Over against his consort, whose
Laces, and hoops, and high-heeled shoes
Make her the finest lady of all
The queens or courtly dames you choose,

In the ancestral portrait hall.

A glorious blonde: a luxury
Of luring blue and wanton gold,
Of blanchéd rose and crimson bold,
Of lines that flow voluptuously
In tender, languorous curves to fold
Her form in perfect symmetry.

She might have been false. Of her withered dust
There scarcely would be enough to write
Her guilt in now; and the dead have a right
To our lenient doubt if not to our trust:
So if the truth cannot make her white,
Let us be as merciful as we—must.

II

The queen died first, the queen died young,
But the king was very old when he died,
Rotten with license, and lust, and pride;
And the usual Virtues came and hung
Their cypress wreaths on his tomb, and wide
Throughout his kingdom his praise was sung.

How the queen died is not certainly known,
And faithful subjects are all forbid
To speak of the murder which some one did
One night while she slept in the dark alone:
History keeps the story hid,
And Fear only tells it in undertone.

Up from your startled feet aloof,
In the famous Echo-Room, with a bound
Leaps the echo, and round and round
Beating itself against the roof,—
A horrible, gasping, shuddering sound,—
Dies ere its terror can utter proof

Of that it knows. A door is fast,
And none is suffered to enter there.
His sacred majesty could not bear
To look at it toward the last,
As he grew very old. It opened where
The queen died young so many years past.

III

How the queen died is not certainly known;
But in the palace's solitude
A harking dread and horror brood,
And a silence, as if a mortal groan
Had been hushed the moment before, and would
Break forth again when you were gone.

The present king has never dwelt
In the desolate palace. From year to year
In the wide and stately garden drear
The snows and the snowy blossoms melt
Unheeded, and a ghastly fear
Through all the shivering leaves is felt.

By night the gathering shadows creep
Along the dusk and hollow halls,
And the slumber-broken palace calls
With stifled moans from its nightmare sleep;
And then the ghostly moonlight falls
Athwart the darkness brown and deep.

At early dawn the light wind sighs,
And through the desert garden blows
The wasted sweetness of the rose;

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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