

# POEMS

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Poems by William D. Howells

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**WILLIAM D. HOWELLS**

**POEMS**





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BY

WILLIAM D. HOWELLS



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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 per-  
fume .  
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 in-  
scrutable 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 va-  
por,  
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,