

met me with a tearful countenance and told me that Doctor Potter had disappeared. So he had. I think that he was ashamed to meet me again, and therefore ran away. The widows thought not. They came to the conclusion, that, like Enoch and Elijah before him, he had been translated. They cried for him a good deal more than he was worth, quarrelled scandalously among themselves, sold their house at a loss, and dispersed. I know nothing more of them. Neither do I know anything further of my neighbor, the prophet.

W. D. Howells

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 nearing masses of drift-wood,
Daintily breathed about with hazes 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 ! ' — Fell her voice with a thrilling 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:—
 "Instantly, all the people, with looks of reproach and compassion,
 Flocked round the prostrate 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, there, 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 to stop her. 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 like the subtle breath of an infinite sorrow upon us.