

Austin Dobson (1840-1921)

3 *My Landlady*

A small brisk woman, capped with many a bow;
“Yes,” so she says, “and younger, too, than some,”
Who bids me, bustling, “God speed,” when I go,
And gives me, rustling, “Welcome,” when I come.

“Ay, sir, ’tis cold, — and freezing hard, — they say; 5
I ’d like to give that hulking brute a hit —
Beating his horse in such a shameful way! —
Step here, sir, till your fire ’s blazed up a bit.”

A musky haunt of lavender and shells,
Quaint-figured Chinese monsters, toys, and trays — 10
A life’s collection — where each object tells
Of fashions gone and half-forgotten ways: —

A glossy screen, where wide-mouth dragons ramp;
A vexed inscription in a sampler-frame;
A shade of beads upon a red-capped lamp; 15
A child’s mug graven with a golden name;

A pictured ship, with full-blown canvas set;
A card, with sea-weed twisted to a wreath,
Circling a silky curl as black as jet,
With yellow writing faded underneath. 20

Looking, I sink within the shrouded chair,
And note the objects slowly, one by one,
And light at last upon a portrait there, —
Wide-collared, raven-haired. “Yes, ’tis my son!”

“Where is he?” “Ah, sir, he is dead — my boy! 25
Nigh ten long years ago — in ’sixty-three;
He ’s always living in my head — my boy!
He was left drowning in the Southern Sea.

“There were two souls washed overboard, they said,
And one the waves brought back; but he was left. 30
They saw him place the life-buoy o’er his head;
The sea was running wildly; — he was left.

“He was a strong, strong swimmer. Do you know,
When the wind whistled yesternight, I cried,
And prayed to God, — though ’twas so long ago, — 35
He did not struggle much before he died.

“’Twas his third voyage. That ’s the box he brought, —
Or would have brought — my poor deserted boy!
And these the words the agents sent — they thought
That money, perhaps, could make my loss a joy. 40

“Look, sir, I ’ve something here that I prize more:
This is a fragment of the poor lad’s coat, —
That other clutched him as the wave went o’er,
And this stayed in his hand. That ’s what they wrote.

“Well, well, ’tis done. My story ’s shocking you; — 45
Grief is for them that have both time and wealth:
We can’t mourn much, who have much work to do;
Your fire is bright. Thank God, I have my health!”

1872

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