

Mrs. Craik (Dinah Maria Mulock) (1826-87)

1 *In Swanage Bay*

“Twas five and forty year ago,
Just such another morn,
The fishermen were on the beach,
The reapers in the corn;
My tale is true, young gentlemen, 5
As sure as you were born.

“My tale’s all true, young gentlemen,”
The good old boatman cried
Unto the sullen, angry lads,
Who vain obedience tried; 10
“Mind what your father says to you,
And don’t go out this tide.

“Just such a shiny sea as this,
Smooth as a pond, you’d say,
And white gulls flying, and the crafts 15
Down channel making way;
And Isle of Wight, all glittering bright,
Seen clear from Swanage Bay.

“The Battery point, the Race beyond,
Just as to-day you see: 20
This was, I think, the very stone
Where sat Dick, Dolly, and me;
She was our little sister, sirs,
A small child, just turned three.

“And Dick was mighty fond of her: 25
Though a big lad and bold,
He’d carry her like any nurse,
Almost from birth, I’m told;
For mother sickened soon, and died
When Doll was eight months old. 30

“We sat and watched a little boat,
Her name the ‘Tricksy Jane,’
A queer old tub laid up ashore;
But we could see her plain;
To see her and not haul her up
Cost us a deal of pain. 35

“Said Dick to me, ‘Let’s have a pull;
Father will never know,
He’s busy in his wheat up there,
And cannot see us go: 40
These landmen are such cowards, if
A puff of wind does blow.

“I’ve been to France and back three times —
Who knows best, Dad or me,
Whether a craft’s sea-worthy or not? — 45
Dolly, wilt go to sea?”
And Dolly laughed, and hugged him tight,
As pleased as she could be.

“I don’t mean, sirs, to blame poor Dick:
What he did, sure I do: 50
And many a sail in ‘Tricksy Jane’
We’d had when she was new.
Father was always sharp; and what
He said, he meant it too.

“But now the sky had not a cloud, 55
The bay looked smooth as glass;
Our Dick could manage any boat,
As neat as ever was;
And Dolly crowed, ‘Me go to sea!’
The jolly little lass! 60

“Well, sirs, we went; a pair of oars,
My jacket for a sail;
Just round ‘Old Harry and his Wife’ —
Those rocks there, within hail —
And we came back. — D’ye want to hear 65
The end o’ the old man’s tale?

“Ay, ay, we came back, past that point,
But then a breeze up-sprung;
Dick shouted, ‘Hoy! down sail!’ and pulled
With all his might among 70
The white sea-horses that uprear’d
So terrible and strong.

“I pulled too; I was blind with fear —
But I could hear Dick’s breath
Coming and going, as he told 75
Dolly to creep beneath
His jacket, and not hold him so:
We rowed for life or death.

“We almost reached the sheltered bay,
We could see father stand 80
Upon the little jetty here,
His sickle in his hand —
The houses white, the yellow fields,
The safe and pleasant land.

“And Dick, though pale as any ghost, 85
Had only said to me,
‘We’re all right now, old lad!’ when up
A wave rolled — drenched us three —
One lurch — and then I felt the chill
And roar of blinding sea. 90

“I don’t remember much but that —
You see, I’m safe and sound;
I have been wrecked four times since then,
Seen queer sights, I’ll be bound:
I think folks sleep beneath the deep, 95
As calm as under ground.”

“But Dick and Dolly?” “Well, poor Dick!
I saw him rise and cling
Upon the gunwale of the boat —
Floating keel up — and sing 100
Out loud, ‘Where’s Doll?’ — I hear him yet,

As clear as any thing.

“Where’s Dolly? I no answer made;
For she dropped like a stone
Down through the deep sea — and it closed: 105
The little thing was gone.
‘Where’s Doll?’ three times — then Dick loosed hold,
And left me there alone.”

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“It’s five and forty year since then,”
Muttered the boatman gray, 110
And drew his rough hand o’er his eyes,
And stared across the bay;
“Just five and forty year!” — And not
Another word did say.

“But Dolly?” ask the children all, 115
As they about him stand; —
“Poor Doll! she floated back next tide
With seaweed in her hand.
She’s buried o’er that hill you see,
In a churchyard on land. 120

“But where Dick lies, God know! He’ll find
Our Dick at judgment day.”
The boatman fell to mending nets,
The boys ran off to play;
And the sun shone and the waves danced 125
In quiet Swanage Bay.

1881

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