

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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