

Classic Poetry Series

Austin Dobson

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

A Dead Letter

I DREW it from its china tomb;—
It came out feebly scented
With some thin ghost of past perfume
That dust and days had lent it.

An old, letter,—folded still!
To read with due composure,
I sought the sun-lit window-sill,
Above the gray enclosure,

That glimmering in the sultry haze,
Faint flowered, dimly shaded,
Slumbered like Goldsmith's Madam Blaize,
Bedizened and brocaded.

A queer old place! You 'd surely say
Some tea-board garden-maker
Had planned it in Dutch William's day
To please some florist Quaker,

So trim it was. The yew-trees still,
With pious care perverted,
Grew in the same grim shapes; and still
The lipless dolphin spurted;

Still in his wonted state abode
The broken-nosed Apollo;
And still the cypress-arbor showed
The same umbrageous hollow.

Only,—as fresh young Beauty gleams
From coffee-colored laces,—
So peeped from its old-fashioned dreams
The fresher modern traces;

For idle mallet, hoop, and ball
Upon the lawn were lying;
A magazine, a tumbled shawl,
Round which the swifts were flying;

And, tossed beside the Guelder rose,
A heap of rainbow knitting,
Where, blinking in her pleased repose,
A Persian cat was sitting.

"A place to love in,—live,—for aye,
If we too, like Tithonus,
Could find some God to stretch the gray
Scant life the Fates have thrown us;

"But now by steam we run our race,
With buttoned heart and pocket;

Our Love's a gilded, surplus grace,—
Just like an empty locket!

"The time is out of joint.' Who will,
May strive to make it better;
For me, this warm old window-sill,
And this old dusty letter."

II

"Dear John (the letter ran), it can't, can't be,
For Father's gone to Chorley Fair with Sam,
And Mother's storing Apples,—Prue and Me
Up to our Elbows making Damson Jam:
But we shall meet before a Week is gone,—
'T is a long Lane that has no turning,' John!

"Only till Sunday next, and then you 'll wait
Behind the White-Thorn, by the broken Stile—
We can go round and catch them at the Gate,
All to Ourselves, for nearly one long Mile;
Dear Prue won't look, and Father he'll go on,
And Sam's two Eyes are all for Cissy, John!

"John, she 's so smart,—with every ribbon new,
Flame-colored Sack, and Crimson Padesoy;
As proud as proud; and has the Vapours too,
Just like My Lady;—calls poor Sam a Boy,
And vows no Sweet-heart's worth the Thinking-on
Till he 's past Thirty ... I know better, John!

"My Dear, I don't think that I thought of much
Before we knew each other, I and you;
And now, why, John, your least, least Finger-touch,
Gives me enough to think a Summer through.
See, for I send you Something! There, 't is gone!
Look in this corner,—mind you find it, John!"

III

This was the matter of the note,—
A long-forgot deposit,
Dropped in an Indian dragon's throat,
Deep in a fragrant closet,

Piled with a dapper Dresden world,—
Beaux, beauties, prayers, and poses,—
Bonzes with squat legs undercurled,
And great jars filled with roses.

Ah, heart that wrote! Ah, lips that kissed!
You had no thought or presage
Into what keeping you dismissed
Your simple old-world message!

A reverent one. Though we to-day
Distrust beliefs and powers,
The artless, ageless things you say
Are fresh as May's own flowers,

Starring some pure primeval spring,
Ere Gold had grown despotic,—
Ere Life was yet a selfish thing,
Or Love a mere exotic!

I need not search too much to find
Whose lot it was to send it,
That feel upon me yet the kind,
Soft hand of her who penned it;

And see, through twoscore years of smoke,
In by-gone, quaint apparel,
Shine from yon time-black Norway oak
The face of Patience Caryl,—

The pale, smooth forehead, silver-tressed;
The gray gown, primly flowered;
The spotless, stately coif whose crest
Like Hector's horse-plume towered;

And still the sweet half-solemn look
Where some past thought was clinging,
As when one shuts a serious book
To hear the thrushes singing.

I kneel to you! Of those you were,
Whose kind old hearts grow mellow,—
Whose fair old faces grow more fair
As Point and Flanders yellow;

Whom some old store of garnered grief,
Their placid temples shading,
Crowns like a wreath of autumn leaf
With tender tints of fading.

Peace to your soul! You died unwed—
Despite this loving letter.
And what of John? The less that 's said
Of John, I think, the better.

Austin Dobson

A Familiar Epistle

DEAR COSMOPOLITAN,—I know
I should address you a Rondeau,
Or else announce what I 've to say
At least en Ballade fratriséé
But No: for once I leave Gymnasticks,
And take to simple Hudibrasticks,
Why should I choose another Way,
When this was good enough for GAY?

You love, my FRIEND, with me I think,
That Age of Lustre and of Link;
Of Chelsea China and long "s"es,
Of Bag-wigs and of flowered Dresses;
That Age of Folly and of Cards,
Of Hackney Chairs and Hackney Bards;
—No H-LTS, no K-G-N P-LS were then
Dispensing Competence to Men;
The gentle Trade was left to Churls,
Your frowsy TONSONS and your CURLLS;
Mere Wolves in Ambush to attack
The AUTHOR in a Sheep-skin Back;
Then SAVAGE and his Brother-Sinners
In Porridge Island div'd for Dinners;
Or doz'd on Covent Garden Bulks,
And liken'd Letters to the Hulks;—
You know that by-gone Time, I say,
That aimless easy-moral'd Day,
When rosy Morn found MADAM still
Wrangling at Ombre or Quadrille,
When good SIR JOHN reel'd Home to Bed,
From Pontack's or the Shakespeare's's Head;
When TRIP convey'd his Master's Cloaths,
And took his Titles and his Oaths;
While BETTY, in a cast Brocade,
Ogled MY LORD at Masquerade;
When GARRICK play'd the guilty Richard,
Or mouth'd Macbeth with Mrs. PRITCHARD;
When FOOTE grimaced his snarling Wit;
When CHURCHILL bullied in the Pit;
When the CUZZONI sang—
 But there!
The further Catalogue I spare,
Having no Purpose to eclipse
That tedious Tale of HOMER'S Ships;—
This is the MAN that drew it all
From Pannier Alley to the Mall,
Then turn'd and drew it once again
From Bird-Cage-Walk to Lewknor's Lane;—
Its Rakes and Fools, its Rogues and Sots;
Its brawling Quacks, its starveling Scots;
Its Ups and Downs, its Rags and Garters,
Its HENLEYS, LOVATS, MALCOLMS, CHARTRES,

Its Splendor, Squalor, Shame, Disease;
Its quicquid agunt Homines;—
Nor yet omitted to pourtray
Furens quid possit Foemina;—
In short, held up to ev'ry Class
NATURE'S unflatt'ring looking-Glass;
And, from his Canvas, spoke to All
The Message of a JUVENAL.

Take Him. His Merits most aver:
His weak Point is—his Chronicler!

Austin Dobson

A Gage D'Amour

Hi There! I see you're enjoying the site, and just wanted to extend an invitation to register for our free site. The members of oldpoetry strive to make this a fun place to learn and share - hope you join us! - Kevin

Austin Dobson

A Garden Song

HERE in this sequester'd close
Bloom the hyacinth and rose,
Here beside the modest stock
Flaunts the flaring hollyhock;
Here, without a pang, one sees
Ranks, conditions, and degrees.

All the seasons run their race
In this quiet resting-place;
Peach and apricot and fig
Here will ripen and grow big;
Here is store and overplus,--
More had not Alcinoüs!

Here, in alleys cool and green,
Far ahead the thrush is seen;
Here along the southern wall
Keeps the bee his festival;
All is quiet else--afar
Sounds of toil and turmoil are.

Here be shadows large and long;
Here be spaces meet for song;
Grant, O garden-god, that I,
Now that none profane is nigh,--
Now that mood and moment please,--
Find the fair Pierides!

Austin Dobson

A Rondeau to Ethel

"IN teacup-times"! The style of dress
Would suit your beauty, I confess;
BELINDA-like, the patch you 'd wear;
I picture you with powdered hair,—
You 'd make a charming Shepherdess!
And I—no doubt—could well express
SIR PLUME'S complete conceitedness,—
Could poise a clouded cane with care
"In teacup-times"!

The parts would fit precisely—yes:
We should achieve a huge success!
You should disdain, and I despair,
With quite the true Augustan air;
But ... could I love you more, or less,—
"In teacup-times"?

Austin Dobson

Ars Victrix

YES; when the ways oppose—
When the hard means rebel,
Fairer the work out-grows,—
More potent far the spell.

O Poet, then, forbear
The loosely-sandalled verse,
Choose rather thou to wear
The buskin—strait and terse;

Leave to the tiro's hand
The limp and shapeless style;
See that thy form demand
The labor of the file.

Sculptor, do thou discard
The yielding clay,—consign
To Paros marble hard
The beauty of thy line;—

Model thy Satyr's face
For bronze of Syracuse;
In the veined agate trace
The profile of thy Muse.

Painter, that still must mix
But transient tints anew,
Thou in the furnace fix
The firm enamel's hue;

Let the smooth tile receive
Thy dove-drawn Erycine;
Thy Sirens blue at eve
Coiled in a wash of wine.

All passes. Art alone
Enduring stays to us;
The Bust outlasts the throne,—
The Coin, Tiberius;

Even the gods must go;
Only the lofty Rhyme
Not countless years o'erthrow,—
Not long array of time.

Paint, chisel, then, or write;
But, that the work surpass,
With the hard fashion fight,—
With the resisting mass.

Austin Dobson

For a Copy of Theocritus

O SINGER of the field and fold,
Theocritus! Pan's pipe was thine,—
Thine was the happier Age of Gold.

For thee the scent of new-turned mould,
The bee-hives, and the murmuring pine,
O Singer of the field and fold!

Thou sang'st the simple feasts of old,—
The beechen bowl made glad with wine...
Thine was the happier Age of Gold.

Thou bad'st the rustic loves be told,—
Thou bad'st the tuneful reeds combine,
O Singer of the field and fold!

And round thee, ever-laughing, rolled
The blithe and blue Sicilian brine...
Thine was the happier Age of Gold.

Alas for us! Our songs are cold;
Our Northern suns too sadly shine:—
O Singer of the field and fold,
Thine was the happier Age of Gold!

Austin Dobson

In After Days

IN after days when grasses high
O'er-top the stone where I shall lie,
Though ill or well the world adjust
My slender claim to honour'd dust,
I shall not question nor reply.

I shall not see the morning sky;
I shall not hear the night-wind sigh;
I shall be mute, as all men must
In after days!

But yet, now living, fain would I
That some one then should testify,
Saying--'He held his pen in trust
To Art, not serving shame or lust.'
Will none?--Then let my memory die
In after days!

Austin Dobson

O Fons Bandusae

O BABBLING Spring, than glass more clear,
Worthy of wreath and cup sincere,
To-morrow shall a kid be thine
With swelled and sprouting brows for sign,—
Sure sign!—of loves and battles near.

Child of the race that butt and rear!
Not less, alas! his life-blood dear
Must tinge thy cold wave crystalline,
O babbling Spring!

Thee Sirius knows not. Thou dost cheer
With pleasant cool the plough-worn steer,—
The wandering flock. This verse of mine
Will rank thee one with founts divine;
Men shall thy rock and tree revere,
O babbling Spring!

Austin Dobson

On A Fan

CHICKEN-SKIN, delicate, white,
Painted by Carlo Vanloo,
Loves in a riot of light,
Roses and vaporous blue;
Hark to the dainty frou-frou!
Picture above, if you can,
Eyes that could melt as the dew,—
This was the Pompadour's fan!

See how they rise at the sight,
Thronging the CEil de Boeuf through,
Courtiers as butterflies bright,
Beauties that Fragonard drew,
Talon-rouge, falbala, queue,
Cardinal, Duke,—to a man,
Eager to sigh or to sue,—
This was the Pompadour's fan!

Ah, but things more than polite
Hung on this toy, voyez-vous!
Matters of state and of might,
Things that great ministers do;
Things that, may be, overthrew
Those in whose brains they began;
Here was the sign and the cue,—
This was the Pompadour's fan!

ENVOY

Where are the secrets it knew?
Weavings of plot and of plan?
—But where is the Pompadour, too?
This was the Pompadour's Fan!

Austin Dobson

On the Future of Poetry

Bards of the Future! you that come
With striding march, and roll of drum,
What will your newest challenge be
To our prose-bound community?
What magic will you find to stir
The limp and languid listener?
Will it be daring and dramatic?
Will it be frankly democratic?
Will Pegasus return again
In guise of modern aeroplane,
Descending from a cloudless blue
To drop on us a bomb or two?
I know not. Far be it from me
To darken dark futurity;
Still less to render more perplexed
The last vagary, or the next.
Leave Pindus Hill to those who list,
Iconoclast or anarchist --
So be it. "They that break shall pay."
I stand upon the ancient way.
I hold it for a certain thing,
That, blank or rhyming, song must sing;
And more, that what is good for verse,
Need not, by dint of rhyme, grow worse.
I hold that they who deal in rhyme
Must take the standpoint of the time --
But not to catch the public ear,
As mountebank or pulpiteer;
That the old notes are still the new,
If the musician's touch be true --
Nor can the hand that knows its trade
Achieve the trite and ready-made;
That your first theme is Human Life,
Its hopes and fears, its love and strife --
A theme no custom can efface,
Common, but never commonplace;
For this, beyond all doubt, is plain:
The Truth that pleased will please again,
And move men as in bygone years
When Hector's wife smiled through her tears.

Austin Dobson

The Cradle

HOW steadfastly she worked at it!
How lovingly had drest
With all her would-be-mother's wit
That little rosy nest!

How longingly she 'd hung on it!—
It sometimes seemed, she said,
There lay beneath its coverlet
A little sleeping head.

He came at last, the tiny guest,
Ere bleak December fled;
That rosy nest he never prest...
Her coffin was his bed.

Austin Dobson

The Forgotten Grave

OUT from the City's dust and roar,
You wandered through the open door;
Paused at a plaything pail and spade
Across a tiny hillock laid;
Then noted on your dexter side
Some moneyed mourner's "love or pride;"
And so,—beyond a hawthorn-tree,
Showering its rain of rosy bloom
Alike on low and lofty tomb,—
You came upon it—suddenly.

How strange! The very grasses' growth
Around it seemed forlorn and loath;
The very ivy seemed to turn
Askance that wreathed the neighbor urn.
The slab had sunk; the head declined,
And left the rails a wreck behind.
No name; you traced a "6,"—a "7,"—
Part of "affliction" and of "Heaven;"
And then, in letters sharp and clear,
You read—O Irony austere!—
"Tho' lost to Sight, to Mem'ry dear."

Austin Dobson

The Ladies Of St. James's

THE LADIES of St. James's
Go swinging to the play;
Their footmen run before them,
With a "Stand by! Clear the way!"
But Phyllida, my Phyllida!
She takes her buckled shoon,
When we go out a-courting
Beneath the harvest moon.

The ladies of St. James's
Wear satin on their backs;
They sit all night at Ombre,
With candles all of wax:
But Phyllida, my Phyllida!
She dons her russet gown,
And runs to gather May dew
Before the world is down.

The ladies of St. James's!
They are so fine and fair,
You 'd think a box of essences
Was broken in the air:
But Phyllida, my Phyllida!
The breath of heath and furze,
When breezes blow at morning,
Is not so fresh as hers.

The ladies of St. James's!
They 're painted to the eyes;
Their white it stays for ever,
Their red it never dies:
But Phyllida, my Phyllida!
Her color comes and goes;
It trembles to a lily,—
It wavers to a rose.

The ladies of St. James's!
You scarce can understand
The half of all their speeches,
Their phrases are so grand:
But Phyllida, my Phyllida!
Her shy and simple words
Are clear as after rain-drops
The music of the birds.

The ladies of St. James's!
They have their fits and freaks;
They smile on you—for seconds,
They frown on you—for weeks:
But Phyllida, my Phyllida!
Come either storm or shine,
From Shrove-tide unto Shrove-tide,

Is always true—and mine.

My Phyllida! my Phyllida!
I care not though they heap
The hearts of all St. James's,
And give me all to keep;
I care not whose the beauties
Of all the world may be,
For Phyllida—for Phyllida
Is all the world to me!

Austin Dobson

To A Greek Girl

WITH breath of thyme and bees that hum,
Across the years you seem to come,—
Across the years with nymph-like head,
And wind-blown brows unfilleted;
A girlish shape that slips the bud
In lines of unspoiled symmetry;
A girlish shape that stirs the blood
With pulse of Spring, Autonoe!

Where'er you pass,—where'er you go,
I hear the pebbly rillet flow;
Where'er you go,—where'er you pass,
There comes a gladness on the grass;
You bring blithe airs where'er you tread,—
Blithe airs that blow from down and sea;
You wake in me a Pan not dead,—
Not wholly dead!—Autonoe!

How sweet with you on some green sod
To wreathe the rustic garden-god;
How sweet beneath the chestnut's shade
With you to weave a basket-braid;
To watch across the stricken chords
Your rosy-twinkling fingers flee;
To woo you in soft woodland words,
With woodland pipe, Autonoe!

In vain,—in vain! The years divide:
Where Thames rolls a murky tide,
I sit and fill my painful reams,
And see you only in my dreams;—
A vision, like Alcestis, brought
From under-lands of Memory,—
A dream of Form in days of Thought,—
A dream,—a dream, Autonoe!

Austin Dobson

Urceus Exit

I INTENDED an Ode,
And it turn'd to a Sonnet
It began a la mode,
I intended an Ode;
But Rose cross'd the road
In her latest new bonnet;
I intended an Ode;
And it turn'd to a Sonnet.

Austin Dobson

With Pipe And Flute

WITH pipe and flute the rustic Pan
Of old made music sweet for man;
And wonder hushed the warbling bird,
And closer drew the calm-eyed herd,—
The rolling river slower ran.

Ah! would,—ah! would, a little span,
Some air of Arcady could fan
This age of ours, too seldom stirred
With pipe and flute!

But now for gold we plot and plan;
And, from Beersheba unto Dan,
Apollo's self might pass unheard,
Or find the night-jar's note preferred;—
Not so it fared, when time began,
With pipe and flute!

Austin Dobson