A LITTLE OLD WOMAN

Aldis, Mary, 1872-1949

There's a twinkling little old woman
Brings me sandwiches after my Turkish bath.
Her cheeks are brown and pink,
And her eyes, behind her gold-bowed spectacles,
Smile in a curious fashion as if to say
"I know you're worried about that letter in the pocket of your dress,
Hanging out there, but I'll take care of it."

She sets the tray down on a chair beside my couch
And trots away to another languid lady in a sheet,
And as I fall asleep she says to me
"Don't worry honey, I'll take care of it."
Perhaps it's only in my dreams she says it,
But anyway she's there.

Once after she had hooked me up
She raised her sober dress
To show me that she too could wear a lace-trimmed petticoat;
And a dainty thing it was, with tiny rosebuds
Festooned all around.
She dropped her skirt and laughed.
"I've got one . . . too," she said.
This was uncanny, so I said Good-day.

Next time I went I met him at the door
With a market basket!
It seems he brought the dainties every day
She made up into sandwiches for us who lolled about.
I took a look at him,—
A delicate, chiselled face with soft blue eyes,
Under his chin from ear to ear a fringe of yellow down,
Around a bald spot, curls of whity-gold;
He blinked a little as she gave him charges
Then wandered thoughtfully away
Clutching his basket.
He wore a black frock coat too big for him,
And on his head, a round black hat like a French Cure's.

So that was why she wore the petticoat
And smiled so knowingly—
But how she worked!
I wouldn't work like that. 
Perhaps she kept that little thing for pleasuring. 
Well, this is a woman's world, why not, 
If so be that he pleased her?

The steamy, scented atmosphere that day 
Seemed teeming with intrigue; 
I looked at the strapping, bare-legged wench 
Who brought my sheet 
Enquiring mutely, "Have you got a lover?"
And when a person next me roused herself 
To ask the time, 
I thought, "Ah-ha! He's waiting!"

It chanced when sandwiches were brought 
I found myself alone 
With her of the spectacles and petticoat. 
I wanted to go to sleep, 
But I wanted more to find out how 
She got a lover, 
And how she kept him.

After some skirmishing I asked straight out, 
"Was that your husband with the market basket?"
"My husband's dead," she said, and grinned 
And took a chair beside my couch. 
"Who is he, then?" I said. 
"He's mine," she answered. "Mine! I paid for him five hundred dollars cool, 
And now he likes me!"

I sat up at that. 
"You paid for him?" I gulped. 
"Why yes, he lived up-stairs, you know. 
His heart is bad; he hadn't any cash; 
He got hauled up on a breach-of.promise suit; 
I paid it for him. 
Now he lives with me!"

She emphasized her "me" triumphantly. 
I looked her over. 
Certainly there was something there of vividness, 
Of quick vitality. 
He and his funny hat and goldy curls—
Well, anything may be.
"Are you happy now?" I asked.
She smiled and bridled.
"The business pays," she said.
"You ladies pay good prices for your food
And then the tips besides.
He gets the things for me and brings 'em fresh,
Then what do you suppose he does the rest of the time?
(His heart is bad, you know)
Writes verses all day long for the Sunday papers;
Mostly they don't get in,
But every now and then he gets two dollars.
I bought him an Underwood last week.
He was so pleased,
Only the punctuation isn't right.
It isn't a second-hand; cost me a hundred and twenty-five;
I saved it up—"

The bell rang and she rose.
"Say! please don't tell them anything about—
About—my husband."
And she vanished.