

THE PROUD LADYE.

BY MRS SEBA SMITH.

CHAPTER I.

Leave, if thou would'st be lonely,
Leave nature for the crowd;
There seek for one, one only,
With kindred mind endowed.—HOFFMAN.

THE world is coming to an end. Of this there can be no doubt. A close observer of life and human events cannot fail to arrive at such a conclusion. Let him not go to the prophecies of Daniel, nor attempt to lift the veil of the dread Apocalypse in confirmation of this faith—a stronger is before him, even like unto the handwriting upon the wall at the feast of Belshazzar. Men have been weighed in the balance, and love has been found wanting. Love has ceased to be.

Indeed, how could it be otherwise? Love becomes a puny weakling in the midst of luxury and sloth, and the bantling dies outright, when consigned to the hands of the pains-taking. He is a robust child, nourished by mountain airs, and strong in the wild haunts of wood and water. What is there now to foster his growth? He is rocked in the whirlwind, vigorous in peril, dauntless where peals the shrill clarion of battle, and unshrinking amid pestilence and death. How shall we seek now the test of his faith, the proof of his constancy? Where is the knight to put spear in rest for "Ladye love,"—where the "Ladye" to keep her "troth plight" "seven twelvemonths and a day?"

Such things must have existed—there is the argument of tradition in their favour; and yet they seem like creations of the fancy. Times have changed. The love of the olden time, the tried and the true, has ceased to be. Women divide their affections now between pleasure, fashion and dress, and love comes in the shape of a fine establishment, with a retinue of dangling coxcombs, and artificial commonplaceisms. Men pull a love letter and a price current at the same moment from their pockets, and read each with equal interest, and one serves as well as the other to light a cigar, there being no difference in their combustibility.

The god who gave inspiration to the poet, who nerved the soldier, and folded his wings in lady's bower, whispering of faith and valour, and thus wiling the long, long days of exile, has ceased to be—and what have we in his stead? What is the divinity of modern times? Alas for the little burly imp, with twinkling eyes and tinsel wings, wings too small to be of any earthly service

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either for approach or escape, and alas for the votaries of such a divinity! Cupid and the divine Psyche, love wedded to the soul, seek in vain for a human shrine. They have taken their departure. Woe is us; for the end of all things must be at hand. Love is the bond that holds the very universe in harmony. It binds the material together, atom by atom, and to the spiritual it is the spark snatched from the altar of the Eternal—it is the one principle of conservation—it is the light in the midst of darkness—it is the ark upon the deluge of life. Woe to the heart from whence it hath taken its departure.

It is the separation of holy writ. It is the being consigned from the right to the left hand in judgment. It is the removal of the seeming good, leaving the blackness of despair. It is to put out the candle of the Lord in his own temple of the human soul.

Let us, while the memory of Love's existence is yet spared us, recall a legend of the olden times,—those times of robust and manly attachment, of earnest constancy and knightly faith—those days of womanly tenderness, of womanly devotion, and proud womanly self-respect, when falsehood was dishonour, and fickleness a crime.

It was a marvel to the gallants of the time that Lady Blanch, with wealth, beauty, and sole mistress both of her fortune and herself, should adhere to a life of entire maidenly seclusion. Rarely was she seen either at tilt or tournament, though when there, no maiden won more admiring eyes than Blanch of Instetten. She was an orphan, her mother having died at the moment that made her such, and from that time the little Blanch became the one sole object of attachment to the bereaved father.

She became his pet, his companion, the motive for existence. He directed her studies, shared her sports, and himself inducted her into the accomplishments of hawk and hound, careful always to infuse a noble reserve, that made the fair girl receive knightly service from himself only. Thence it was that the Lady Blanch was early called the "proud ladye;" and when it was rumoured that the inheritor of broad lands and ancestral beauty disdained the gentle passion, many were the admirers who sought to awaken the latent tenderness believed to be lurking in her heart.

Blanch received them with proud courtesy, and it may be that her lively wit, her goodness of heart, her gentle yet noble bearing, deepened the very passion she cared not to inspire. Many were the lances broken in her honour, and many the

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gallant knight who coveted death, but found renown upon the battle field, in his vain efforts to forget the haughty smile of Blanch of Instetten.

If Lady Blanch's was a proud, hers was by no means a cold nature. Her voice breathed the very soul of tenderness, and there were times when her dark eye became liquid with its concealed wealth of womanly sensibility. She was ever alive to all gentle appeals, and her soul dwelt amid all that was pure and beautiful.

It may be that she received admiration as a right, homage as her due, and thus failed to perceive the obligation—but then one smile from Blanch was worth a thousand of those lightly bestowed, and one gentle word of sympathy from one so full of truth and earnestness was a thing never to be forgotten.

Blanch was not too proud for love, but then she had never loved. The gallant and the gay knelt at her shrine, but their offerings were calmly rejected, not because they were unworthy, but because she had never felt the want of an oblation. She sat in her maidenly bower, perhaps the only one content with its seclusion; for, sooth to say, her maidens yawned and wished their lady less of a saint that they might join in other devotions.

At length the Baron of Instetten was gathered to his fathers, leaving Blanch sole inheritor of his title and estates; and leaving her also with no protector save her own innocence and womanly discretion. Blanch wept long and fervently the loss of her only friend, and her hitherto haughty bearing became touched with a grace of gentle tenderness, a half appealing softness blending with her pride, that made her beauty far more dangerous than in the days of her untouched gladness of heart. It may be that new yearnings were born of this, her first grief, a new perception of the worth of the affections, and a new and strange loneliness pressed heavily upon her heart.

Her palfrey neighed in his stall, her hounds crouched listlessly at her feet, and the keen eye of the falcon grew tame as he pecked the silken jesses that held him from the blue sky; yet Blanch hummed an idle lay, touched her harp with careless fingers, or looked sadly from the battlements where her broad lands lay beneath her, solitary, and with no stirring signs of life.

How she wished she had a brother, who might share and direct her amusements. Never was maiden so isolated and forlorn. Her very freedom became an annoyance, fettered as it was by a pride that admitted of no compromise. Then the prosy and puzzling accounts of the old steward—satisfactory to the last degree, for he would have periled life sooner than his fair mistress should be defrauded of her patrimony;—these and other details of her estate became exceedingly irksome to her.

Another maiden might have bethought herself of a lover, but Blanch thought of a secretary. Lovers were to be had in abundance, the more now that the Baron of Instetten could no longer

usurp knightly privileges; but on this subject Blanch was proud as ever, scarcely deigning to allow her admirers the privilege of holding her stirrup while she mounted, or even to fasten the jesses of her hawk on her slender wrist. Sooth to say, the decorum of the castle was severe to the last degree. The old priest had a holiday in shriving, for never were maidens with less upon their consciences, and never was lady better content so to be.

No sooner did Lady Blanch think of a secretary than she wondered she had not sooner thought of the same thing. She wondered she could so long have lived without one. She accordingly wrote a letter to Sir Ralph, an old friend of her father's, explaining her views, and craving his assistance.

In a marvellously short space of time, the messenger returned, bearing an epistle from the worthy knight, in which he fully approved her plan, and most fortunately it was in his power immediately to second her. The son of his game-keeper, having been an invalid in early life had imbibed a fondness for books, and other gentle accomplishments unsuited to his condition. This he had heretofore been led to regret, but now that he could be of service to so estimable a lady, he rejoiced in the circumstance. On the morrow he would appear ready for all honourable service.

CHAPTER II.

Far better one unpurchased heart,
Than glory's proudest name.—TUCKERMAN.

Lady Blanch, with a woman's ready fancy, completed the picture slightly sketched by Sir Ralph. She imagined a pale, slender youth, timid and distrustful, shrinking from observation, and nervously alive to even the slightest appearance of neglect or ridicule. He was of course a little awkward, but then he was quiet and respectful, and she thought how sad, how miserable it must be, to live on with a soul and a body at odds, a mind adapted to loftiest aims, and a condition debased to the meanest.

Blanch's sympathies were all enlisted. She even read a homily to the ladies of her household, in which she cautioned them to observe the greatest courtesy with regard to the young secretary; to treat him as far as possible as one of gentle blood, for nobility was after all but the external symbol of an inward grace, and woman, of all others, should be ready to recognise the sentiment.

Blanch was seated in the midst of her maidens; a favourite hound, Solway, crouched at her feet, and her fingers were playing amid the cords of her harp, when the secretary was announced. She did not raise her eyes till he had advanced nearly to the centre of the room, when she arose courteously to greet him.

One glance, however, revealed what sad antics the fancy will play, and how unlike were her illusions to the reality. Blanch hesitated—coloured slightly at first, and then more deeply as her proud eye detected the smile lurking about the lips of her maidens—and then the homily flashed upon her recollection, yet she received him with gentle breeding, and motioned him to a seat.

Instead of the pale, abashed youth she had anticipated, she beheld a tall, almost athletic stranger, of quiet but assured bearing, his short curly hair and abundant moustache looking more suited to the knightly beaver than the light, graceful cap of velvet which he now held in his hand, together with a scroll of parchment as the insignia of his profession. The closely fitting garments revealed limbs little in accordance with those of an invalid, and the small horn of ink, with its silver chain and mountings, looked half incongruous upon the broad chest that seemed better adapted to shield and cuirass.

Notwithstanding the wave of Blanch, the stranger preserved his standing attitude, firm and manly, with his eyes bent upon the floor, and not till a slight movement of the lady's, revealing that she had finished reading a letter he had brought from his patron, did he alter his position, and then as he met her smile of approval, he knelt gracefully upon one knee, saying he was most happy to be in the service of so fair a lady.

Blanch was abashed, her fair colour rose to her cheek, and yet the subdued fire of those strange eyes, the respectful manner, and more than all, the rich, manly voice, had in them nothing to offend.

"Sir Secretary," said the lady, willing to relieve the embarrassment, "a string has just snapped from my harp, let me beg you to replace it."

"I will, lady, and then if it please thee, will sing thee a song, an humble one of mine own making."

Blanch smiled assent; the stranger sank upon one knee, adjusted the harp, and then sang the following song, in a voice of thrilling melody:—

SONG.

Distrust me not, mine own,
My sighs are all for thee—
On thee I think alone,
Whate'er my fate may be.

Then smile, beloved smile,
Dispel these maiden fears,
I would not thus beguile
Thy tenderness to tears.

If others be as fair,
What are their charms to me,
I neither know nor care,
For thou art all to me!

The words were exceedingly simple, yet their

import did not in the least promote the interest of the secretary in the eyes of his fair auditors. They seemed to imply that his troth was plighted, and that he was most chivalrously faithful to his fair ladye.

Now though either maiden would have spurned the imputation of being willing to appropriate the stranger, yet when he came among them, and thus early announced his preference elsewhere, a decided prejudice grew up against him; a determination to be chary of smiles and courtesies so little likely to be appreciated; for every woman knows, that although she may be entirely indifferent to a man herself, yet her vanity is always slightly piqued when she finds another is about to win him from her. A broad avowal of a preference she regards all but equivalent to an insult—as half cautioning her to beware of the hazards of his own seductiveness, and a hint that it is all over so far as she is concerned.

Had the stranger been a knight of birth or renown, the whole artillery of female coquetry and rivalry might have been brought to bear against him; but a poor secretary, the son of a game-keeper, and he presume to be in love, and to be constant too—the idea was preposterous. How they would like to see the Dulcinea—see her "winnowing grain," a rank country wench, no doubt, and then came the pretty toss of the head and curling of the lip, and the bridling air which women only use.

Even Blanch scrutinized the stranger with new interest, not displeased certainly, at the probable state of his affections, yet she could not help canvassing his claims to so much fidelity and so much devotion. Her sympathy was undoubtedly lessened by the circumstance; but then she half blushed that she should have given the subject a thought, and then she raised her eyes, and encountered those of the secretary fixed earnestly but respectfully upon her face. They were instantly withdrawn, but not till she felt the blood rush tumultuously to her temples.

Never was secretary more assiduous in his duties, and never was one more versatile in his accomplishments. Hawking or hunting, feats of arms or trials of strength, in all he was equally at home, and never did gentle minsirel sing sweeter madrigals in lady's bower, or beneath her easement pour forth more impassioned love-notes than did Roland the secretary to the ears of the fair Lady Blanch. Yet they were not for her; his allusions were to one away, who possessed the very soul of tenderness, and who was worthy the devotion of a tried and true heart. If passion dwelt upon his lips, or spoke in the flashes of his eye, it was for the absent, the beloved. If his voice sank to the low tones of earnest and soul-breathing tenderness, it was still for the fond heart from which his fate had exiled him.

Blanch listened and sighed, and smiled her approval of his constancy. She even forgot her

pride, and heard him describe charms such as exist only in the fancy of a lover. Always thoughtful and high-toned in her feelings, she grew grave. She wondered at the strange fascination that now grew about that simple word, *love*, hitherto disregarded by her. She wondered at the crowd of pleasant fancies that now gathered around it, and the sweet, tender images it suggested, and then she glanced at the handsome secretary, and thought that had she been lowly born, Roland were indeed a being to be loved. She would beg the history of his love, she would take the fair girl into her own service, and be a gentle sister to her.

She hinted her plan to Roland. A strange light beamed from his eyes, and he knelt to kiss the fair hand she had extended towards him. Blanch trembled and withdrew it, but then his eyes met hers, and surely they expressed but grateful homage, and she half repented her coldness.

"The lady of his love was proud, even as herself. He was doomed to perpetual banishment."

His voice was low, and the colour forsook his cheek.

"But she loves thee."

"It may be, lady, but she has exiled me, and for ever; she would not debase her ancestry by wedding the base born."

Blanch drew herself up, as at the conscious blood of her own veins. Roland beheld the movement, and one slight shade of sadness crossed his brow; and then his manner was cold, even proud, notwithstanding its gentle courtesy.

Blanch's eyes were fixed upon the green lawn that sloped beneath them, and the secretary slightly apart, looked down upon her clear brow, and the ringlets that swept her neck and bosom, and read thoughts that even pride may not repress.

"Shall I sing a madrigal, lady, one to which gentle ears have before deigned to listen?"

"An it please thee, but I hope it may prove grave and thoughtful, for meseems thy songs are wont to dwell too much upon the vain conceits of lovers."

After a few preluding notes upon the harp, he sung the song of

THE LOVE OF LADY ANN.

In her bower the Lady Ann
Wept her love apart,
"Why so much of pride, ladye,
With a loving heart!

Broad and fertile are thy lands,
Stately is thy hall,
But a faithful heart, ladye,
Far outweighs them all.

Thou may'st choose thy gilded bower,
Nursing grief within,
And thy lover will forget
Love he failed to win.

Thou may'st sit in gilded bower,
I the free woods roam;
Never should a lingering bride
Share with me a home.

Truth of heart and strength of arm,
These I bring to thee;
But thy pride hath spurned the gift—
Fare-thee-well, ladye."

On the latchet is his glaive,
Scarce he deigns a sigh;
But the maiden's gushing tears
Tremble in her eye.

In the stirrup is his foot—
Thus do lovers part—
He to bear his pride alone,
She a breaking heart.

Trembling, doubtful, Lady Ann,
Half in fear arose,
Then with beating heart she sped,
And her arms she throws,

Clasping him with wild embrace,
Pride and home forgot,
She hath left her stately towers
For a lowly lot.

Blanch listened with a slight curl of the lip, and spite of herself the colour went and came upon her cheek, as thought after thought crossed through her mind.

"I fear my poor song hath failed to please thee," murmured the secretary in a low voice.

"I will commend the manner most willingly, Sir Secretary, but as to the matter, it is that of a bold and reckless damsel, with a taste ill befitting her gentle breeding."

"The accident of birth either in hall or hovel, Lady, cannot affect the soul—that may be noble, though the muscles and sinews be base born."

"It may be so, but it is unseemly for a maiden to debase her gentle birth by an alliance therewith."

A sharp expression of pain crossed the face of Roland—he went on—

"Love, Lady, levelleth all distinctions. There is neither base nor noble there—the strong arm, the true heart; ay, Lady, the heart ennobled by one pure passion, is more truly gentle than that which beats beneath the proudest blazonry, and is yet incapable of the sentiment."

The eye of Blanch fell, she turned aside, and then her proud heart kindling at its own consciousness, she bent her head slightly and withdrew.

Reaching the library, she gave one look around the large quaint room with its rude ornaments and strange devices; the light streaming through the stained glass fell in softened shadows upon the tassellated floor, mellowing all things to a soft and tender melancholy. A sense of loneliness, a wild

and undefined yearning grew upon the heart of the proud girl, and she threw herself into a chair, and leaning her head upon both hands, and these upon the table, she wept abundantly.

Raising her eyes, she perceived the glove of the secretary lying upon the table beside her; scarcely conscious of what she did, she pressed it to her lips.

"Blanch," exclaimed the secretary, and he was at her feet.

One moment he showered kisses upon her unresisting hand, she even murmured his name in one low whisper, then she drew herself up, and motioned him to rise.

"Nay, Blanch, you love me. I have long felt it, and you, you are the idol of my idolatry."

"You have the secret of a weak maiden's heart, Sir Secretary, but little will it avail you," she added almost bitterly, as her native pride returned.

"I can bear your scorn, Lady," said the secretary, rising respectfully to his feet, "but wherever I may go, the memory of this one moment of bliss will be more than a reward for years of exile, years of suffering. The base born secretary hath won the heart of the proud Lady Blanch."

She would have recalled him, she would have uttered one word of kindness, but it was too late—he was gone.

CHAPTER III.

No one is so accursed by fate,
No one so wholly desolate,
But some heart, though unknown,
Responds unto his own.—LONGFELLOW.

Two years were past. The haughty Blanch had become the gentle, sympathizing, meek-hearted woman. A touching sadness lingered about her air, almost hallowing her singular beauty. The duties of her high-born station were duly performed, and she shared the amusements of the time with a quiet grace that told neither hope nor fear were at variance in her heart. No troublous nor discordant motion disturbed her serene composure.

At first she shrank to confess even to herself the love she bore the noble-minded secretary. But as time wore on, and all the many proofs of his magnanimity, his gentleness and manliness of character came home to her memory, she grew even proud of her love; proud that she had that within herself to perceive and appreciate such qualities in whatsoever station, and then she grew proudly grateful even for the love of the poor secretary, she who had hitherto slighted that of knight and baron bold.

Love, in whatsoever shape, is allied to religion. Most fervently did she kneel at the shrine of

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the Virgin, and bless her for these beautiful emotions that carried her out of self, and gave an elevation and freedom to her existence. The consciousness of having awakened the holiest emotions in one high and manly heart, from henceforth invested her with a new and almost religious dignity. A beautiful enthusiasm mingled with the sentiment. She would devote herself to this one ideal. She would hazard no other attachment, but in maidenly seclusion live upon the images the tenderness of this presented. Indeed her proud heart recoiled from all other associations.

The love of a gentle and confiding woman, with its perpetual appeals to tenderness and protection, must be dear, very dear to a manly heart; but then it too often lacketh that exclusive and earnest devotion which imparts a last touch of value, its sympathies are too readily excited, and the images of others, faint and shadowy it may be, yet still images, too often sit side by side with the beloved.

But the love of a proud woman with its depths of untold tenderness, rarely stirred, yet when once awakened, welling up a perpetual fountain of freshness and beauty, its concentrated and earnest faith, its unmingled sympathies, its pure shrine, raised to the beloved, burning no incense upon strange altars, and admitting no strange oblations, the love of such an one should invest manhood with tenfold dignity—should make him feel as a priest in the very presence of the divinity.

Blanch had no one to whom she might appeal either for counsel or aid in her solitary life. Sir Ralph was engaged in the wars of that unsettled period, and his pertinacious silence in regard to Roland annoyed and surprised her. His communications were brief, and she felt with pain that an air of coldness pervaded them. He had been her father's friend, and though bluff and somewhat stern, he was brave as a lion, and upright even to romance.

Occasionally he spoke of a nephew of his, who shared with him the perils of war, and touched upon his gentle qualities with a sad and yet earnest interest. In reply to an epistle from Blanch, in which she gently hinted the pain she felt at his estrangement, the baron replied in a vein of half playful severity:

"I am an old soldier, Blanch. I never knew what fear or dishonour meant. In battle or in principle there is but one way with Ralph, and that is, advance, but when it comes to a woman, by all the saints in the calendar, I never know what is the way. Here is the proud daughter of my best beloved friend, never deigning a smile upon the gallants of the age, and yet deprecating the coldness of an old man like me. Blanch, Blanch, I am no carpet knight, or I might have wild dreams. But I know better. My noble, my generous, my brave nephew, you must see him, Blanch, and yet no, he shall never endure the scorn of any woman. I would have him shun the cold, haughty Blanch, as he would the evil eye.

"I give thee my blessing, child of my friend, and only regret that when beauty was given thee, a heart was withholden. I shall visit thee shortly, and Roland, thy whilom secretary, will be with me, unless his shyness should prevent it, in which case my nephew claims the gentle privilege of seeing thee."

The last paragraph drove the blood from the face of Blanch. A thousand thoughts rushed upon her brain. She would see him only once—she could control her emotions—he would feel that the illusion was over—he might not come—she would forbid him her presence. Then came the wild thrill of pleasure at the thought she should once more hear the tones of his voice, meet the glance of those dark, love-lit eyes. Her reverie closed by a flood of tears.

Not many days after, the warden announced the approach of Sir Ralph and his train. Blanch and her maidens descended to the great hall to welcome her old and faithful friend. One glance amid his retainers showed that the secretary had refrained his visit, and she moved onward with a sense of relief.

The greeting of the baron was as cordial as his age and long friendship would seem to justify, and then he begged her courtesy in behalf of his nephew. The stranger raised his visor, and Blanch suppressed a cry of surprise. But the cold self-possession of the quondam secretary called into action her maidenly pride, and spite of her varying colour she ushered the way to the audience room with her ordinary composed grace.

Sir Ralph was puzzled—he was convinced that each was absorbed in the love of the other, and

he could not understand so much of stately punctilio.

After the first ceremony of reception was over, Blanch stepped upon the terrace that she might find relief from her almost suffocating emotions. Roland approached her, but she did not lift her eyes, or betray tokens of consciousness.

"Blanch, I have had dreams, wild and romantic dreams of womanly tenderness and devotion, such as I may never hope to realize. A mere boy I put spear in rest for you, and was rewarded with your coldness and scorn. I loved you still wildly, passionately. As a base-born dependant I won the love, ay, Blanch, it is true, I won the love of thy proud heart, and yet was an exile. And now," he had taken her passive hand in his, "I come not again to encounter scorn, for I feel that I am dear to thee."

Blanch bent her head, and the tears gushed to her eyes—she would have retired, but he gently detained her.

"Blanch, I may have been wrong. It may be that thy high-born pride, that spurned a base alliance, was worthy thy high-souled taste. It may be that I e'ected too much for love, and would have debased thee in thine own eyes by my selfish romance. It may."

Blanch buried her face in his bosom.

But why detail more. He who had won the proud maiden's love as an humble secretary could not fail to retain it as a brave knight and true. And the legend saith Sir Ralph retracted his reproach that the fates that gave Blanch beauty denied her a heart.

ON THE EVENING PRECEDING COMMENCEMENT IN ——— COLLEGE.

For four long years in union sweet,
We've often met, and kindly ever:
To-morrow—and again we'll meet
And part again, but part for ever.
Asunder torn, at random tossed,
Some hopes preserved and many lost.

O for a hand aside to fling
The veil that hides futurity;
To show events that time will bring,
To show the men that we will be,
The joys, the sorrows we will have,
How spend a life, where find a grave.

Woes may await us: cares perhaps
More dark than any youth has proven:
But oh, the robe affection wraps
Around our hearts is firmly woven;
Its threads are feelings closely knit,
Too close for cares to sunder it.

However bright, however drear,
May be life's coming changeful weather,

The friends of youth will still be dear,
And dear the hours we spent together.
Hope's wishes die, love's tendrils sever,
But memory's stores are hers for ever.

As once of old a Grecian sage,*
Seeing the shield his arm had bore
In battles of a long-past age,
Remembered all he was before,
And in the Samian he was then,
Recalled the Trojan he had been.

So in life's course should we e'er meet,
With those we loved when we were young,
Whose features pictured kind and sweet,
In memory's temple we have hung,
How would their faces bring to view
The scenes, the joys that boyhood knew.

* Pythagoras, who supported the doctrine of metempsychosis, affirmed that on entering a temple of Juno and seeing a shield hung on the wall, he recollected himself to have been Euphorbus, who had borne that shield during the Trojan war. P.