

"La Belle Dame Sans Mercy"

By John Keats

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Among the pieces printed at the end of Chaucer's works, and attributed to him, is a [translation, under this title](#), of a poem of the celebrated Alain Chartier, Secretary to Charles the Sixth and Seventh. It was the title which suggested to a friend the verses at the end of our present number. We wish Alain could have seen them. He would have found a Troubadour air for them, and sung them to La Belle Dame Agnes Sorel, who was however not Sans Mercy. The union of the imaginative and the real is very striking throughout, particularly in the dream. The wild gentleness of the rest of the thoughts and of the music are alike old; and they are also alike young; for love and imagination are always young, let them bring with them what times and accompaniments they may. If we take real flesh and blood with us, we may throw ourselves, on the facile wings of our sympathy, into what age we please. It is only by trying to feel, as well as to fancy, through the medium of a costume, that writers become mere fleshless masks and cloaks,--things like the trophies of the ancients, when they hung up the empty armour of an enemy. A hopeless lover will still feel these verses, in spite of the introduction of something unearthly. Indeed any lover, truly touched, or any body capable of being so, will feel them; because love itself resembles a visitation; and the kindest looks, which bring with them an inevitable portion of happiness because they seem happy themselves, haunt us with a spell-like power, which makes us shudder to guess at the sufferings of those who can be fascinated by unkind ones.

People however need not be much alarmed at the thought of such sufferings now-a-days; not at least in some countries. Since the time when ladies, and cavaliers, and poets, and lovers of nature, felt that humanity was a high and not a mean thing, love in general has become either a grossness or a formality. The modern systems of morals would ostensibly divide women into two classes, those who have no charity, and those who have no restraint; while men,

poorly conversant with the latter, and rendered indifferent to the former, acquire bad ideas of both. Instead of the worship of Love, we have the worship of Mammon; and all the difference we can see between the sufferings attending on either is, that the sufferings from the worship of Love exalt and humanize us, and those from the worship of Mammon debase and brutalize. Between the delights here is no comparison.-- Still our uneasiness keeps our knowledge going on.

A word or two more of Alain Chartier's poem. "Mr. Aleyn," saith the argument, "secretary to the king of France, framed this dialogue between a gentleman and a gentlewoman, who finding no mercy at her hand, dieth for sorrow." We know not in what year Chartier was born; but he must have lived to a good age, and written this poem in his youth, if Chaucer translated it; for he died in 1449, and Chaucer, an old man, in 1400. The beginning however, as well as the goodness of the version, looks as if our countryman had done it; for he speaks of the translations having been enjoined him by way of penance; and the Legend of Good Women was the result of a similar injunction, in consequence of his having written some stories not so much to the credit of the sex! He,--who as he represents, had written infinite things in their praise! But the Court-ladies, it seems, did not relish the story of Troilus and Cressida. The exordium, which the translator

has added, is quite in our poet's manner. He says, that he rose one day, not well awaked; and thinking how he should bet enter upon his task, he took one of his morning walks,

Till I came to a lusty green valley
Full of flowers, to see a great pleasaunce;
And so, boldly, (with theier benign sufferance
Which read this book, touching this mattere)
Thus I began, if it please you to hear.

Master Aleyn's dialogue, which is very long, will not have much interest except for those who are in the situation of his lover and belle Dame; but his introduction of it, his account of his riding abroad, thinking of his lost mistress,--his hearing music in a garden, and being pressed by some friends who saw him to come in,--is all extremely lively and natural. At his entrance, the ladies, "every one by one," bade him welcome "a great deal more than he was worthy." They are waited upon, at their repast, not by "deadly servants," but by gentlemen and lovers; of one of whom he proceeds to give a capital picture.

Emong all other, one I gan espy,
Which in great thought ful often came and went,
As one that had been ravished utterly:
In his language not greatly diligent,
His countenance he kept with great torment,
But his desire farre passed his reason,
For ever his eye went after his entent,
Full many a time, when it was no season.

To make chere, sore himselfe he pained,
And outwardly he fained great gladnesse:
To sing also, by force he was constrained,
For no pleasaunce, but very shamefastness;
For the complaint of his most heavinesse
Came to his voice.

But to return to our other Belle Dame.

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCY.

1 Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
2 Alone and palely loitering;
3 The sedge has wither'd from the lake,
4 And no birds sing.

5 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
6 So haggard and so woe-begone?
7 The squirrel's granary is full,
8 And the harvest's done.

9 I see a lily on thy brow,
10 With anguish moist and fever dew,
11 And on thy cheeks a fading rose
12 Fast withereth too.

13 I met a lady in the meads,
14 Full beautiful — a fairy's child,
15 Her hair was long, her foot was light,
16 And her eyes were wild.

17 I set her on my pacing steed,
18 And nothing else saw all day long,
19 For sidelong would she lean, and sing
20 A fairy's song.

21 I made a garland for her head,
22 And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
23 She look'd at me as she did love,
24 And made sweet moan.

25 She found me roots of relish sweet,
26 And honey wild, and manna dew,
27 And sure in language strange she said —
28 I love thee true.

29 She took me to her elfin grot,
30 And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,
31 And there I shut her wild wild eyes
32 So kiss'd to sleep.

33 And there we slumber'd on the moss
34 And there I dream'd, ah woe betide,

35 The latest dream I ever dream'd
36 On the cold hill side.

37 I saw pale kings and princes too,
38 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
39 They cried — "La belle Dame sans mercy
40 Hath thee in thrall!"

41 I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam,
42 With horrid warning gaped wide,
43 And I awoke and found me here,
44 On the cold hill side.

45 And this is why I sojourn here,
46 Alone and paleley loitering.
47 Though the sedge has wither'd from the lake,
48 And no birds sing.

CAVIARE