

A SKETCH OF A BLUE STOCKING.

BY MISS SEDGWICK.

Mrs Laight, till the respectable age of fifty, devoted her time and talents to the ordinary occupations of those ladies of our country who are favored with a numerous progeny; that is, to minute care of her children, and thrifty management of her household concerns. She was the daughter of a President of one of our literary institutions, and had early imbibed a taste for literary pursuits, which was apparent in a slight tinge of pedantry, though she was prevented from indulging it by the pressure of domestic affairs. This taste revived with renewed force, when, by the death of her husband, and the control of an abundant income, she became mistress of her time and inclinations; and it received a fresh impetus from a visit to the place of her nativity, where, as she said, all her mental powers had been restored, by inhaling her native atmosphere, and reviving her intimacies with the literary associates of her youth. Among these, was a lady whom I shall take the liberty to call Mrs Rosewell. Her friendship was Mrs Laight's highest ambition, and she returned to *Lawrentum* (the classic name she had recently bestowed on her place, situated in the centre of a compact village), flushed with the expectation of a visit from her distinguished friend. Nothing could have been much more appalling to the younger members of her family than the annunciation

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of the approaching honor—Mrs Laight's daughters- she has half a dozen of them—are pretty, intelligent, sufficiently well instructed, and very charming girls, but they have not—not one of them (for their mother's sake I grieve to say it), a literary bias; and the ardor with which her ruling passion had recently broken forth, had inspired them with a horror of *blue-stockingsism*. Frank Laight, their eldest brother, a spirited young man, just returned from a successful voyage to South America, foresaw that his glad holiday at home was to be overclouded. His younger brothers perceived that a universal *gêne* was expected; and their imaginations presented it in the form of the sacrifice of their fishing and sporting pleasures with Frank. Anne Milnor, a lovely girl, a guest at *Lawrentum*, who was secretly cherishing a well-requited tenderness for Frank, timidly shrunk from the observation of a learned lady, whose opinion, as she anticipated, would confirm that which she feared, with too much reason, Mrs Laight had already conceived against her. All were malecontents, but the most anxious among them, and with most reason, was Leonard Clay. Mrs Rosewell was the friend of Professor Lowe; he was to attend her to *Lawrentum*, and the Professor was an admirer of Sarah Laight, a dangerous rival to Leonard; for, in addition to qualities that commended him to a young lady's favor, the Professor had Latin, Greek, science, and erudition, appliances and means to win the mother.

The mind of the majority at *Lawrentum* was unfavorable to poor Mrs. Rosewell, but the majority did not rule there; and, happily for her, hospitality was the genius

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of the place, and the whole family were perfectly amiable and dutiful to their mother.

'Heaven preserve us! Clay, are *you* reading a review?' asked Frank Laight, who found his friend in his mother's library, poring over a tri-monthly publication, with a most doleful aspect.

‘I am trying to read it; crawling through it. Your mother says we must be prepared with some topics suitable to this Mrs Rosewell, and she has set me down here to a rigmarole article, written by the lady herself.’

‘Pshaw! my dear fellow, you are irretrievably lost, if you undertake to meet these literary Amazons on their own ground. The only way to manage them is to talk them down on subjects they know nothing about. Take them *out* of books, Leonard, and they are as ignorant as you and I are *in* them. I’ll lay a wager, I’ll run this blue aground with rodomontade about my voyage, before she has been a day in the house; and do you rattle away on fishing and sporting. I’ll answer for it; you’ll *tree* her. Hang it! it is too absurd to be afraid of a woman, just because she happens to be a *mannish* writer of reviews.’—Frank was interrupted by his mother’s entrance. She requested the young men to leave the library, as she had scarcely time to put it in proper trim for Mrs Rosewell’s reception.

Frank and Leonard found the young ladies just going out to walk, and joined them. ‘Well, Anne,’ asked Frank of Miss Milnor, ‘have you prepared high converse for this benign cerulean?’

‘Not I—I shall not open my lips before her.’ ‘You are right, Anne,’ replied Frank, and then added, in a low tone of earnest compliment, ‘modesty is the

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prettiest device in the world for the seal of a young lady’s lips—speaking of lips, girls,’ he continued, raising his voice, ‘what sort of a looking person do you take this Mrs Rosewell to be?’

‘Of course,’ replied Sarah Laight, ‘she has what is called an intellectual fine face.’

‘That is to say,’ retorted Frank, ‘rolling black eyes, or deep-set gray ones, a nose like the tower of Lebanon, and cheeks ploughed with lines of thought, and furrows of reflection; in short, a striking *countenance*. Thank Heaven, Leonard, we have bright, round, dimpled cheeks, to refresh and repose our eyes upon; but have a care, Sarah, don’t you see that horse is frightened by your parasol? put it down, child!’ A horse and chaise were rapidly passing. Sarah attempted, as hidden, to lower the parasol, but the wind, which was blowing freshly, took it up, and carried it under the horse’s feet. He sheared, reared, and floundered, and would inevitably have overturned the chaise if Leonard Clay had not adroitly seized the bridle. He succeeded in holding the horse while a lady jumped from the chaise, and then springing in himself, he received the reins from the willing hands of the unskilled driver, and succeeded in subduing the terrified animal before such exclamations as, ‘Oh! Leonard, do n’t get into the chaise!’ ‘Leonard! Leonard!’ ‘Mr Clay!’ ‘Let Leonard alone; he can manage the horse.’ ‘Heavens! Sarah, how pale you are!’ Before such exclamations had well parted from the lips of his companions, another moment passed, and the young ladies’ eyes were asking ‘who this stranger could be,’ that had so suddenly descended among them?

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A lady she was, whose manner had that beautiful combination of grace, refinement, unaffectedness, and gentility, that is best described by the comprehensive word ladylike. Her countenance was bright, lovely, and still retained its symmetry and much of its early beauty, though the bloom and roundness of youth had long been gone. The stranger’s dress, a circumstance that first strikes a female eye, was arranged with taste, and just up to the suitable and becoming point of fashion, a very critical matter, one of the nicest of all the *fine arts* of women. ‘Who can she be?’ was plainly spoken by the glances of our young friends, and answered immediately by the lady’s companion, who, with a confession, that requires both courage and magnanimity, of his incompetency to manage his horse, alighted from the chaise, and was recognised by Sarah Laight as Professor Lowe. The lady, of course—the lady, who, at first sight, had captivated the bright eyes and warm hearts of the young people, was

no other than the dreaded blue-stocking, the 'benign cerulean,' the veritable author, the perpetrator of full-sized volumes, and, as Frank Laight had called her, the writer of *mannish review* – our friend, Mrs Rosewell! For a moment her sunbeams broke through the clouds of prejudice, that had settled over the minds of the group, but they had been too long gathering to be so suddenly dispersed. Frank proposed to Miss Milnor to hasten home with him, to announce Mrs Rosewell's arrival to his mother; and by this pretext, as he thought, and said, 'got his neck out of the scrape for the present.' He had, however, the grace to remark to Anne, the little resemblance Mrs

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Rosewell bore to the figure he had sketched, and to confess she had the sweetest blue eye he had ever seen, save one. Anne Milnor assented to his opinion, by putting in a blushing, smiling demurrer to the exception. Sarah Laight, never less propitious to the Professor than at this moment, when he had resigned the post of honor and of danger to Leonard Clay, clung to her sister's arm; and Miss Laight, though on ordinary occasions a young lady of exemplary propriety, only replied in monosyllables to Mrs Rosewell's efforts to sustain a conversation, so that she and the Professor were finally condemned to a stately walk, and a dull *tête a tête*, for a distance of half a mile to *Lawrentum*. Arrived there, the fervid and circumstanced reception of Mrs Laight was even more oppressive to her friend than the reserve of the young people. But Mrs Rosewell was a lady of resources, and she took refuge with the children. They had had their prejudices too, but the prejudices of childhood vanished before a genial influence, like the dews of a summer's morning. In the first hour's acquaintance, Mrs Rosewell had been conducted by the two little girls to the extremity of the garden, to try a new swing, hung for them by Leonard Clay. Hal had given her a ride on his new rocking-horse, and the little slattern, Bessie, had slunk away from her mother's reproving eye, and in the most confiding manner, thrust her foot into Mrs Rosewell's lap to get her shoe tied! Dinner was soon announced, and, as philosophers, philanthropists, savans, and blue-stockings, at a dinner table, fall or rise to the level of ordinary mortals, the admiration and awe of mother and children were forgotten

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in the common courtesies of the table, and when the suspended conversation began to revive, it flowed on naturally, in spite of Mrs Laight's efforts (to borrow her own ambitious phrase) to season it with Attic salt. Frank Laight found himself quite unexpectedly involved, and interested, too, in giving Mrs Rosewell a sketch of the modes of living among the South Americans, which somehow ended in Mrs Rosewell's asking Leonard Clay if he liked macaroni? Clay never happened to have heard the name. Macaroni sounded like Italian. He encountered Frank's eye; he fancied that his ever-ready smile was archly hovering on his lips; he was not yet disabused of the notion that an author must always talk of books; and, resolving not to be ashamed of his ignorance, he said, manfully, 'I have never seen the work, Madam; I do not read Italian.' Frank Rosewell shouted; Sarah blushed to her fingers ends, and poor Clay would have been thoroughly chagrined, if Mrs Rosewell had not graciously and gracefully assumed all the disgrace of the mistake to her blue-stocking reputation. Afterwards, when the parties came to understand one another better, Clay's blunder was the occasion of many a merry allusion among them.

When they rose from the table, Mrs Laight conducted her friend to the library. Her children, as soon as they were left to the free interchange of their impressions of their dreaded visitor, exclaimed;—'How unaffected she is!' 'How very agreeable!' 'I entirely forgot that she was anything uncommon!' 'Who would suspect she had ever published a book?' 'Or ever read one!' These may sound like equivocal compliments, but so

Mrs Rosewell did not esteem them; and any unpretending fellow-sufferer, who has been invested with the repulsive name of blue-stocking, would prefer them to fifty diplomas from as many learned societies.

Mrs Laight had put her library into complete order for her friend's reception. Alas! what a labor lost it was ! Books of scholastic divinity and philosophy, over which her father, the Doctor, had withered and dried away, body and spirit, for forty years, had been brought forth from the quiet oblivion which they had shared with their old proprietor, and were ostentatiously arranged on shelves where they bore the same relative interest to the fresh, tempting, unbound, and dog-eared volumes of modern writers, that mummies do to a beautiful piece of living and glowing humanity. 'This apartment,' said Mrs Laight, looking around her with a serene smile of enviable self-complacency, 'this apartment is yours; your sanctum sanctorum; your imperium in imperio, as my dear father would have said. Here are books, a mine of wealth; and here, my dear,' opening a writing- desk, 'are materials for more books; pens in abundance ; ink and folio paper. By the way, do tell me what was your last work?'

'My *last* work; really; I do not remember!' replied Mrs Rosewell, hesitating and half smiling.

'Not remember? that 's impossible !'

'Pardon me; I do; my last work was cutting out some vests for my boys.'

The good lady looked crest-fallen, and replied so meekly, that Mrs Rosewell was conscience-stricken.

'It is very natural, I know it is, my dear, that you should think my knowledge limited to such *works* as

you have mentioned; but I assure you I have always had a literary taste, and if I had been a man I should have devoted myself to books; but women, at least most of us, are condemned to obscure, if not useless, lives.'

'My good friend, you do your lot injustice; your life, according to Napoleon's estimate in his celebrated reply to Madame de Stael, has been illustrious.'

'How ? what do you mean ?' asked Mrs Laight, eagerly, hoping for some new revelation on her past destiny.

'Why, have you not given twelve children to the state?' Poor Mrs Laight's countenance fell; her friend proceeded; 'I cannot think there is any great merit in number, but a mother, who has twelve such children as yours, may make a Cornelian boast of them, and ought to be hailed as a benefactress to her country.'

The mother (Mrs Laight was a true-hearted one), for a moment, prevailed over her ruling passion. 'They are good children,' she said, 'all of them; kind, affectionate, and dutiful, and I ought to be satisfied with them; but it is a disappointment, that not one of them takes after me; that not one of them has the least literary turn. Sarah, indeed—Sarah has, I think, a latent talent. She writes a pretty letter; she has quite a knack at quotation, and, if she were to get into the right kind of society, her ambition might be roused. Once a reader, she might become a writer.'

'Ah! these possibilities look well for my friend, the Professor.'

'How?' exclaimed Mrs Laight, and after turning the key of the door and drawing close to her friend, she added, 'do you think the Professor is attached to Sarah ?'

‘Not precisely attached, but if he believed he might gain her affections, and your approbation, he would soon be irretrievably in love.’

‘My approbation!’ exclaimed the good lady, ‘he has it already; it is the very thing. To tell you the truth, I have long had a secret hope this might be. How delightful for us again to be connected with the college! You have my consent to give the Professor a hint that he will meet with no opposition.’

‘None from you, I perceive; but has he nothing to fear in another quarter? We have heard alarming rumors of an attachment between young Clay and Sarah, and I fancied I perceived some indications that confirmed them.’

‘Oh, that’s nothing; a mere childish predilection, which has kept alive by Frank’s intimacy with Leonard; Sarah knows my opinion of Leonard.’

‘He is a very pleasing young man. Is there any objection to him?’

‘Very pleasing! *You* cannot think so. Recollect his blunder about the macaroni! a specimen of his ignorance, my dear. He has not one particle of erudition. He was, to be sure, a great favorite with my husband, because he was a lad of integrity, intelligent about affairs, and successful in managing his own. The young people like him because he is good humored and amiable. But he is no reader; and as to writing, I do not believe he ever wrote a paragraph for a newspaper—in short, my dear friend, he has nothing of what you and I should call *mind*.’

The scale by which Mrs Rosewell graduated mind was different from her friend’s. She thought it was

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best demonstrated by the wise and successful conduct of life; and conceiving a good opinion of Clay, and guessing truly at the real position of affairs, she placed the subject in the most favorable light to the mother, and so adroitly used her influence, that she obtained Mrs Laight’s acquiescence in the propriety of giving a hint to the Professor (whose affections were too precious to put to hazard), to make a timely retreat.

This subject dismissed, and by Mrs Laight, with a sigh of disappointment, she, after a misty preface, introduced another topic, still nearer to her heart. The preface I omit. The topic was a manuscript production, which no eye had yet seen, ‘on the intellectual faculties, comprising a view of their essence—modus operandi (a scrap of Latin from her father of blessed memory)—of their sublimity and beauty, and of their use to society in general.’

Mrs Rosewell’s heart sunk within her, as she read the ominous title, and promised her friend that she would examine the closely written pages to which it was prefixed and would give her *honest* opinion as to their publication.

I promised my reader’s a sketch; and I do not mean to take them in for a story; a sketch of a *blue-stocking*, falsely so-called, and I have merely given a few circumstances, to illustrate the common impressions against those who are unfairly branded with an odious name. The are shown off as lions by the little flutterers (willing to scorch their own wings in a blaze), when they would rather pass for a sheep, or any other ‘very gentle beast, and of a good conscience.’ I can at least answer for my friend, Mrs Rosewell. She has all the

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most lovely qualities of her sex. She has well done those humble duties that lie in the obscure recesses of domestic life. She has genius without eccentricity, knowledge without pedantry, and enthusiasm without extravagance. Her colloquial gifts are hardly surpassed, yet I never detected her in the vanity of talking to display them. Her manners are so gentle and feminine, that she seems rather to ask sufferance than to claim admiration. None are impassive to her influence. It resembles the fabled effect of the sun on Memnon’s statue, eliciting melody from the cold and silent. This is by no miracle, but by the steady application

of her powers to their legitimate objects. She loves her fellow creatures, and takes a benevolent interest in whatever elevates or makes them happier. She looks on the bright side of characters, as well as of events. She finds good in everything. I have sometimes thought she gave undue encouragement to the vanity of others, but it must be confessed to be difficult to be raised to a sodden elevation, without causing dizziness.

Mrs. Rosewell is literary, and —a blue-stocking. I cannot deny it; if the most ardent devotion to knowledge and talent, even though they chance to be found in books; if a love of science; if an occasional communication to the public of the result of her studies and observations, constitutes a *blue-stocking*. But if being the most honored and beloved of wives; the most tender and capable of mothers; the most efficient and least bustling of housewives; the truest of friends, and the most attractive of women, can rescue her from this repulsive name, she deserves it no more than the veriest ignoramus in the

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land. If any doubt the truth of my portrait, I appeal to our friends of *Lawrentum*. In a visit of a month, she worked wonders there. She entered heartily into the views of the young people, and, what was more important, brought their mother to their point of sight. Sarah was permitted to plight her troth to Leonard Clay, and Frank, his to the pretty orphan, Anne Milnor, without one sigh from their mother over their unlettered destiny. She even confessed, that her girls had talents, though not a literary turn; and that her boys were clever, in their way, though they preferred fishing and sporting to books. She ceased to express her surprise (never I believe to feel it), that Mrs Rosewell loved better to ramble over the country, or romp with the children, than to immure herself in the library with the Doctor's rare books. My friend's greatest achievement, she deems it her *chef d'oeuvre*, was inducing Mrs Laight to suppress her metaphysical essay, and that, too, without wounding her vanity, or materially abating her self-complacency. Mrs Rosewell's conquest over the junior members of the family, if not as surprising, was as complete. The girls confided to her their most romantic sentiments. Leonard Clay secretly begged her to prescribe a course of reading to him, that would qualify him to elicit Sarah's latent talents; and Frank was detected in purchasing the books she had published, to beguile the tediousness of his next voyage.

I have not ventured to grace my portrait with those minute touches that would have identified it, but I doubt not that its verisimilitude will be acknowledged by those who are familiar with any of the circles of the cultivated, useful, and happy women of our country.