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Old Maids

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THE LYCEUM.

No. II.

OLD MAIDS.

I abominate the cant that is in so many people's mouths, against "OLD MAIDS." Instead of being a bye-word of ridicule, they would, if the world were just, be a synonyme of *useful virtue*. According to my observation—and it has not been narrow, lazy, or brief—they, as a class, have among them more purity and active goodness, than any other set, either in Christendom or in Heathenese;—lay it off by what category you will. I do not even except the preachers; or the *fauqirs*, or the *Bramins*.

The preachers, indeed—who made them preachers (under Providence, I mean—wherever He has had any hand in it—)? Who paid for their instruction—their clothing—their books: or got them paid for? Who raised the money for their out-fit, when they began their apostleship? By whom are their stockings knit,—their other garments made,—their charges of travel and subsistence lightened if not defrayed, by a hundred expedients which themselves could neither take thought of nor time for, if they were true to their great calling?—Why, the answer must be, "OLD MAIDS!"

But the least praiseworthy, in my view, are those who busy themselves so *very* much in knitting, sewing, and begging for the preachers. When they are noisy and ostentatious about it, indeed;—when they enact the sturdy beggar, and the roaring lion, in their charities;—I give them up entirely to the maligner. These, however, are not fair specimens. Their behavior is not characteristic of old maids; but of what may be called *roarers*, of whom more, methinks, are married than single.

The old maids whose knight I now constitute myself (so far as duty to the partner of my bosom will allow—the third, whom Heaven has blessed me withal) are *silent* and *active* doers of good. 'Tis not alone in teaching or patronizing Sunday-schools,—or promoting missions, foreign and domestic,—or speeding on the Colonization Society,—or getting subscribers to Moral-Reform newspapers—or playing the part of corresponding secretary to some Anti-Tobacco-chewing, or Anti-Young Men's-standing-in-the Church-door Society—(though all these are laudable)—'tis not alone in these kinds of goodness that the ladies excel, for whom I am doing battle. 'Tis chiefly in other walks. Is a poor woman sick? They visit her, with medicines and food suitable to her case: they nurse her: they second the doctor,—nay, under his instruction they outdo him,—in ministering to her comfort, and her cure. Is a poor boy or man in want of clothes? They make him new ones, or prevail upon their fathers or brothers to supply him from their superfluities. Is a whole family prostrate with fever so malignant, that the cry of *CONTAGION* is raised, and the prudent neighbors all stand aloof, as if the very house had a plague-spot conspicuous on its front? Some despised (or at least ridiculed) *old maid* is the person to brave the danger, and save others' lives at the peril of her own: to watch by the sick, and wait upon them: to make their beds, to change their clothes, to adjust their pillows, to mix their medicines, to breathe

the tainted atmosphere around them! And all this so noiselessly,—so (almost) *stealthily*,—that, when you detect her in the fact, you might suppose her bent on some wicked errand, if the consciousness of well-doing did not glow in her cheek and beam in her eye, despite her endeavors at concealment.

A common stratagem with them is, when they can spare money, to choose a confidential male friend as the medium of their bounty. I know many who thus in secret deal out large sums, yearly. I have myself, at different times, been almoner in this way for no less than five.

Until the middle of my second marriage—I love to estimate time by the lives of my dear departed wives—they are periods within which memory locates a happiness equal to that I now enjoy—until the middle of my second marriage, I was what is called rather *precise*: there was something *prim* and *demure* in my manner: owing, probably, to early bashfulness. Whenever this preciseness appeared, a coxcomb acquaintance of mine used to call me an *old maid*. So, also, if I refused to join in a game at cards, or to take a glass of punch or Madeira;—or hesitated to laugh at a jest which had only obsceneness to recommend it;—I was called *old-maidish*. Once, because I would not vote in an election, for the candidate of my party, on account of his bad moral character,—it was ridiculed as an *old-maidish* scruple. The blockheads! They did not know that even then I held *old maids* in a reverence which made such taunts not only hurtless, but positively grateful to me. Every assimilation of me to that class, I deemed the highest praise.

And good reason had I, so to deem.—Look beyond the narrow pale, within which we have hitherto ranged in quest of female merit,—and whom do we see blazoned on high, among authors who have enlightened and blessed (or who *will* bless) mankind? Hannah More—Elizabeth Carter—Elizabeth Hamilton—Jane Taylor—Miss Edgeworth—Miss Sedgwick*—spinsters, all!—Whom does Gibbon commemorate, as the person who, by affectionate and judicious cares, gave his mind its earliest bent towards knowledge, and his infant heart the first love of virtue?—A maiden aunt—Miss Porten!

(I will not name queen Elizabeth amid such a galaxy; because, in my opinion, she is not worthy of a place there. I cannot think of her, without remembering Essex—Hutton—Raleigh—Leicester, and Mary, Queen of Scots.)

Better reason still, had I, for deeming the epithet “old-maidish” a term of exalted praise. The earthly Being, to whom, after father and mother, I owe the most,—is a maiden aunt—my aunt H*****. It is an article of my devoutest belief, that she was nearer to perfection than any of the human race whom I have ever known: that she united, in larger degrees, *goodness of heart* with *clearness and strength of mind*;—not a speculative, fireside *goodness*, either,—such as constitutes a *good-natured, good-for-nothing* sort of a person; but a goodness, constantly exerting itself to promote the happiness of all around—from her own servant-maid or her poorest neighbor, to the high-born lady in a

* Miss Martineau's name, too, I had written here: but on second thoughts I erase it, and await further developments.

chariot and four. I learned from her, more than even from my parents, of whatever traits or attainments stand forth in my own consciousness, as useful or valuable. She taught me betimes, a hundred little pieces of good-manners, by which, of a certainty, my whole walk through life has been greatly smoothed. She habituated me to speak evil of no one: to rise early: to practise neatness in dress and person: to be courteous and obliging to my companions: and to be satisfied with simple fare. Not a precept of hers, but was confirmed by her example.—She inducted me into the pleasantest and best paths of literature. Of many books, before I could read them, she would narrate to me the contents, in a style irresistibly captivating,—and at seasons, when, if they had any moral, it was sure to tell upon my mind. I remember particularly the Shepherd of Salisbury plain, Lazy Lawrence, The Life of Cornaro, and several of the stories in Sandford and Merton; which, coming from her lips, made impressions not even yet effaced.—Among the “Hymns for Infant minds,” she taught me, orally, some of the best: my memory clings to them still; and I would fain hope, that my life has been the better for them. That one, called “My Mother,” necessarily refines the sentiment of filial tenderness and gratitude in the infantile bosom: and it would take a heart of stone, in a child, to resist the impulse to obedience, conveyed in the hymn having this stanza;

“When I am bid, I'll freely bring
Whatever I have got;
And never touch a pretty thing,
If mother tells me not.”

When I was a stout school-boy, and even near manhood, my aunt more than once prevailed upon me to lay aside trashy reading, and take up some standard author. The Rambler, and The Spectator, besides much historical and other useful reading, do I owe to these her well-timed suggestions.—In short, she was to me much more than Miss Porten to Gibbon, or Mentor to Telemachus. Nor was there any narrow favoritism in the case: far from caring exclusively for me, she took equal pains with some half a score other nephews and nieces. She was mother, sister, and friend, to us all. When my earliest association of the epithet was with such a character as hers,—say, reader, had I not reason to deem it praise, to be called “Old Maid?”

I have not mentioned the Sisters of Charity, whose heroic self-devotion defies small-pox, cholera, and all the worst forms of pestilence, to relieve the sufferer. Nor was it needful: such is the affluence of arguments to sustain my cause, that many pages would not exhaust them.

Hard is the task, of expelling error from the world! Refute a sophistry,—and it constantly renews itself. The old similitude of a spider's web, repaired as often as it is destroyed—or the older one of the Hydra, whose heads grew again as fast as they were lopped off;—faintly typifies the self-reviving energy of falsehood. The calumny that I have now been combating, therefore, must be expected still to live; but some of the coxcombs who repeat it, may perchance feel themselves rebuked into silence, by the indignant words of truth: and many, both men and women, may possibly hereafter allow, that there is no reproach in the name of “OLD MAID.”