

ESSAY ON OLD MAIDS.

SKETCHES OF SPINSTER LIFE IN ENGLAND.

BY KATHARINE VAN DRAECKEN.

AN Old Maid! To how many does this name call up a spectral vision, sometimes associated with dislike and unpleasant remembrances, but more frequently with memories of kindness, benevolence and affection. Recollections of childhood may bring before us the maiden aunt, suggesting to an indulgent parent stronger measures of coercion; setting before the wild hoyden the decorous impeccability of her own far-off girlhood; or volunteering to her godson unwelcome sermons, enforced by a gift of good little books instead of the expected "tip." Peradventure we can even recall a day of grief and fear when, torn from home and parents, we were committed to the care of some perpendicular being who ruled over a "Young Ladies' Seminary," or "Preparatory School for Young Gentlemen;" exercising unlimited despotism over mind and body. But have none a thought of the village spinster whose cupboard was a widow's cruse of cake, jam, and ginger-wine; whose modest dwelling, and garden unrivalled in the neighbourhood for flowers and fruits, were the scene of many a welcome holiday and joyous tea-party enlivening the dreary school half-year?

By maidens yet buoyant with youth and hope, the spinster is regarded as an awful warning; an upright finger-post pointing out the way they should *not* go. Her solitude, with its consequent oddities of dress and manner, her defiance of fashion and scorn of hoop or bustle, drive girls of the period to more determined pursuit of a better future—a future bright with dreams of gaiety and pin-money. She excites in them

too a more personal hostility, by didactics and ejaculations on dress, dissipation and flirting. The waltz she holds in abomination; the all-fascinating polka or german she regards as but accelerated whirls down the same awful mælistrom.

But must the Old Maid be looked on solely as a creature incapable of sympathy with youthful feelings; as an excrescence on the face of society? Is she indeed one who has no vocation to fulfil, no consolations in her loneliness, and none to mourn her decease save the ancient tabby who is ever associated with her name and shares the odium attached to it? Let me attempt to delineate the natural history, habits, and uses of the genus by sketching specimens of some species; and I venture to say that few there are who have known intimately the early history and present life of their spinster acquaintance, but can call to mind parallels to these examples. On analysing the spinster heart, I trust to show that it may have beaten as rapidly, may enshrine memories as cherished as that of the sentimental damsel who scoffs at a tranquil apathy which is often but the slumber, not the death of feeling; the calm decay of plants crushed down to earth before they could be crowned with blossom or fruit.

Enter then this small house, whose narrow front has a single window by the side of the door. It is undistinguished from its fellows in the melancholy Paradise Row of a dull suburb save by the clean white curtains, bordered with knitted lace or netted fringe; by a cat curled in fat luxurious ease against the sunny window-pane, and a canary sus-