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MRS. OLIVE THORNE MILLER.

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Plate VII.

LITTLE more than a month after the last meeting of the A. O. U., at which greetings were sent from the Council to Mrs. Miller as the oldest living member of the Union, came the announcement of her death, on December 26, 1918. Born on June 25, 1831, she had indeed been allotted a full span, and for thirty-one of her eighty-seven years she had been associated with the American Ornithologists' Union joining four years after it was founded and being made Member in 1901 when that class was established.

Harriet Mann — for the more familiar name of Olive Thorne Miller was the pen name adopted after her marriage — was born at Auburn, New York, where her father, Seth Hunt, was a banker; but she was of New England ancestry on both sides of the family, her paternal grandfather being an importing merchant of Boston, and her great-grandfather, Captain Benjamin Mann, having organized a company during the revolution of which he was in command at Bunker Hill.

From Auburn the family moved to Ohio when she was eleven years old, making the journey, in lieu of railroads, by "packet" on the canal through the Mohawk Valley, by steamer across Lake Erie, and finally by an old-fashioned thoroughbrace coach for twenty-five miles through Ohio — a journey full of romance to an



Olive Thorne Miller

imaginative child, and described entertainingly in one of Mrs. Miller's delightful and in this case largely autobiographical child stories, 'What Happened to Barbara.' In Ohio she spent five years in a small college town where she attended private schools, among them one of the Select Schools of that generation, with an enrollment of some forty or fifty girls. At the age of nine, as she says, she "grappled with the problems of Watts on the Mind!" To offset the dreariness of such work, she and half a dozen of her intimate friends formed a secret society for writing stories, two members of the circle afterwards becoming well known writers. For writing and reading even then were her greatest pleasures. The strongest influence in her young life, she tells us, was from books. "Loving them above everything, adoring the very odor of a freshly printed volume, and regarding a library as nearest heaven of any spot on earth, she devoured everything she could lay her hands upon." As she grew older the shyness from which she had always suffered increased painfully, and coupled with a morbid sensitiveness as to what she considered her personal defects made people a terror to her; but solitary and reticent, she had the writer's passion for self expression and it is easy to understand her when she says, "To shut myself up where no one could see me, and speak with my pen, was my greatest happiness."

In 1854, she married Watts Todd Miller, like herself a member of a well known family of northern New York, and in her conscientious effort to be a model wife and to master domestic arts to which she had never been trained, she sacrificed herself unnecessarily. "Many years I denied myself the joy of my life — the use of my pen," she tells us, "and it was not until my children were well out of the nursery that I grew wise enough to return to it."

The history of the vicissitudes of her literary life is at once touching and enlightening. Full of ardor to reform the world, to prevent needless unhappiness and to set people on the right path, her first literary attempt was the essay, but as she expressed it, "the editorial world did not seem to be suffering for any effusions of mine," and her manuscripts were so systematically returned that she was about giving up, concluding during very black days that she had mistaken her calling; when a practical friend gave her a new point of view. What did the public care for the opinions of

an unknown writer? she asked. Let her give what it wanted — attractively put information on matters of fact. Then when her reputation was established, people might be glad to listen to her views of life.

Philosophically accepting the suggestion, she calmly burned up her accumulated “sentiments and opinions,” and set about writing what she termed “sugar-coated pills of knowledge” for children. The first, the facts of china-making in the guise of a story, she sent to a religious weekly which had a children’s page, and to her surprise and delight received a check for it — her first — two dollars! This was apparently in 1870, and for twelve years, she worked in what she terms that “Gradgrind field” in which during that period she published some three hundred and seventy-five articles in religious weeklies, ‘Our Young Folks,’ ‘The Youth’s Companion,’ ‘The Independent,’ ‘St. Nicholas,’ ‘The Chicago Tribune,’ ‘Harper’s,’ ‘Scribner’s,’ and other papers and magazines, on subjects ranging from the manufacture of various familiar articles, as needles, thread, and china to sea cucumbers, spiders, monkeys, and oyster farms; and during those twelve years, in addition she published five books, the best known of which were perhaps ‘Little Folks in Feathers and Fur,’ 1873, ‘Queer Pets at Marcy’s,’ 1880, and ‘Little People of Asia,’ 1882.

About this time, having lived in Chicago nearly twenty years, the Millers, with their two sons and two daughters, moved to Brooklyn, where they lived until Mr. Miller’s death. Not long after settling in Brooklyn, when she had spent twelve years mainly on miscellaneous juvenile work, Mrs. Miller was visited by a friend who gave her a new subject, completely changing the course of her life. The friend was none less than Mrs. Sara A. Hubbard, whom she had known as a book reviewer in Chicago, but who was also an enthusiastic bird woman — later an Associate of the A. O. U. — and whose greatest desire in coming to New York had been to see the birds.

As Mrs. Miller naïvely remarks, “of course I could do no less than to take her to our park, where were birds in plenty.” And here, in Prospect Park when she was nearly fifty years old — incredible as it seems in view of her later work — Mrs. Miller got her first introduction to birds. “I knew absolutely nothing

about ornithology," she confesses; "indeed, I knew by sight not more than two birds, the English Sparrow and the Robin, and I was not very sure of a Robin either! I must say in excuse for myself," she adds, "that I had never spent any time in the country and had been absorbed all my life in books. My friend was an enthusiast, and I found her enthusiasm contagious. She taught me to know a few birds, a Vireo, the charming Catbird, and the beautiful Wood Thrush, and indeed before she left me I became so interested in the Catbird and Thrush that I continued to visit the park to see them, and after about two summers' study the thought one day came to me that I had seen some things that other people might be interested in. I wrote what I had observed and sent an article to the 'Atlantic Monthly' and it was accepted with a very precious letter from Mr. Scudder, who was then editor. All this time my love of birds and my interest in them had been growing, and soon I cared for no other study. I set up a bird-room in my house to study them winters and I began to go to their country haunts in the summer."

Of the bird-room described so interestingly in 'Bird Ways' it is only necessary to say that first and last Mrs. Miller had about thirty-five species of birds which she bought from the bird stores in winter and allowed to fly about in her bird room, where she could study them unobtrusively at her desk by means of skillfully arranged mirrors. For twenty summers, from 1883 to 1903, she spent from one to three months in the country studying the wild birds, visiting among other sections, Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, North Carolina, Michigan, Colorado, Utah, and California, taking careful notes in the field and writing them up for publication at the end of the season. To one who has not known her, the method may sound deliberate and commercial, but to one who has worked joyfully by her side, each year's journey is known to have meant escape from the world, to the ministering beneficence of Nature. Let her speak for herself.— "To a brain wearied by the din of the city . . . how refreshing is the heavenly stillness of the country! To the soul tortured by the sights of ills it cannot cure, wrongs it cannot right, and sufferings it cannot relieve, how blessed to be alone with nature, with trees living free, unfettered lives, and flowers

content each in its native spot, with brooks singing of joy and good cheer, with mountains preaching divine peace and rest!"¹ Freed from city life and the tortures imposed by her profound human sympathy, each gift of fancy and imagination, each rare quality of spirit, joined in the celebration of the new excursion into fields elysian. But while each sight she saw was given glamour and charm by her imagination and enthusiasm, her New England conscience ruled her every word and note, and not one jot or tittle was let by, no word was set down, that could not pass muster before the bar of scientific truth.

Mrs. Miller's first bird book was published in 1885 and the others followed in quick succession although they were interlarded with magazine articles and books on other subjects — as 'The Woman's Club,' 1890, 'Our Home Pets,' 1894, 'Four Handed Folk,' 1896, and a series of children's stories, 1904 to 1907. Her eleven bird books, published by the Houghton, Mifflin Company, were 'Bird Ways,' 1885, 'In Nesting Time,' 1887, 'Little Brothers of the Air,' 1892, 'A Bird Lover in the West,' 1894, 'Upon the Tree Tops,' 1897, 'The First Book of Birds,' 1899, 'The Second Book of Birds,' 1901, 'True Bird Stories from my Note-Books,' 1902, 'With the Birds in Maine,' 1903, 'The Bird our Brother,' 1908, and her last book, 'The Children's Book of Birds' — a juvenile form of the First and Second Book of Birds — 1915.

The newspaper and magazine articles of this second period of Mrs. Miller's literary work, beginning with the time when she first began to study birds, were published not only in the principal religious weeklies and others of the former channels, but by various syndicates, in 'Harper's Bazar,' and the 'Atlantic Monthly.' They included not only a large number of bird papers, some of which appeared later in her books, but also articles on general subjects, proving her friend's statement, for now that her reputation had become established on a basis of fact, the public was ready to profit by her "sentiments and opinions."

Her last book of field notes — 'With the Birds in Maine' — was published in 1903, when she was seventy-two, after which time she was able to do very little active field work and her writing was confined mainly to children's books.

¹ Upon the Tree-Tops', 3, 1897.

In 1902 Mrs. Miller had visited her oldest son, Charles W. Miller, in California, and fascinated by the outdoor life and the birds and flowers of southern California, she would have returned to live, without delay, had it not been that her married daughter, Mrs. Smith, and her grandchildren lived in Brooklyn. In 1904, however, accompanied by her younger daughter, Mary Mann Miller, she did return to California, where her daughter built a cottage on the outskirts of Los Angeles on the edge of a bird-filled arroyo where rare fruits and flowers ran riot and the cottage — El Nido — became embowered in vines and trees.

From 1870–1915, as nearly as can be determined by her manuscript lists, Mrs. Miller published about seven hundred and eighty articles, one booklet on birds and twenty-four books — eleven of them on birds, her books being published mainly by the Houghton Mifflin Company and E. P. Dutton. When we stop to consider that her real work did not begin until she was fifty-four, after which four hundred and five of her articles and nineteen of her books were written, and moreover that during her later years, by remarkable self-conquest, she became a lecturer and devoted much of her time to lecturing on birds in New York, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and other towns, we come to a realization of her tireless industry and her astonishing accomplishment.

When living in Brooklyn she was a member of some of the leading women's clubs of New York and Brooklyn, giving her time to them with the earnest purpose that underlay all her work. In the midst of her busy life, it is good to recall as an example of her devotion to her friends, that for years Mrs. Miller gave up one day a week to visiting an old friend who had been crippled by an accident; and after she had gone to California took time to make for her a calendar of three hundred and sixty-five personally selected quotations from the best in literature.

Among Mrs. Miller's pleasures during her later years in the East were the meetings of the Linnæan Society held in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the A. O. U. meetings which she attended in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington, enjoying not only the papers of other workers, but the rare opportunity to meet those interested in her beloved work. In a letter written after one of the meetings she exclaimed — "You don't

know what a good time we have always. We had a real 'love feast' this time. Not only all the old standbys — Mr. Brewster, Mr. Sage, Dr. Allen, Dr. Merriam and the rest, but a lot of Audubonites and John Burroughs. I went over and stayed with Mrs. May Riley Smith and attended every session." In this same letter she speaks of her promotion to the new class of membership and says, "It is a great pleasure to have *honest work* recognized, and encourages one to keep at it."

When Mr. Brewster, in view of a discovery made by Mrs. Miller, wrote in 'The Auk,' regretting that one "gifted with rare powers of observation" should not record at least the more important of her discoveries in a scientific journal, Mrs. Miller replied in another note to 'The Auk,' confessing that she would not know what was a discovery; adding with the enthusiasm that vitalized her work — "to me everything is a discovery; each bird, on first sight, is a new creation; his manners and habits are a revelation, as fresh and as interesting to me as though they had never been observed before." Explaining her choice of a literary rather than a scientific channel of expression, she gives the key to her nature work, one of the underlying principles of all her work — "my great desire is to bring into the lives of others the delights to be found in the study of Nature."

Looking over the bookshelf where the names of Burroughs, Torrey, Miller, and Bolles call up each its own rare associations, I am reminded of a bit of advice that came long years ago from Mr. Burroughs' kindly pen — "Put your bird in its landscape" — as this seems the secret of the richness and charm of this rare company of writers, for while beguiling us with the story of the bird, they have set it in its landscape, they have brought home to us "the river and sky," they have enabled us to see Nature in its entirety.

Remembering this great boon which we owe Mrs. Miller, it seems rarely fitting that when her three score years and ten were accomplished, her last days should have been spent in the sunshine surrounded by the birds and flowers which brought her happiness in beautiful California.