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FATHER MILLER AND HIS MIDNIGHT CRY.

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I.

October twenty-fourth, A. D. 1844 is a memorable date in the history of religious fanaticism in the United States—a culminating point. That was the day when, according to the predictions of one William Miller—last of the eminent prophets of Millenarianism—the world and all that was therein would be burned up, root and branch.

“Day of wrath! oh, day of mourning!
Heaven and earth in ashes burning!”

For twelve years he had been sounding his “midnight cry” —“Behold He cometh!” His lectures upon the prophecies had been given in all of the large Eastern cities, and that in response to urgent invitation from leading orthodox churches, and invariably to crowded audiences and with accession of converts. His followers exceeded fifty thousand in 1844; the majority church-members of high standing. Like their zealous leader the most of his disciples gave themselves and all that they possessed to plucking brands from the burning. There was no uncertain note in Father Miller’s “midnight cry,” grounded as it was upon scriptural interpretation as approved by eminent authorities of orthodoxy; it was the legitimate, the inevitable outcome of the school of the letter, of the literal interpretation of an infallible Bible applied to the durations of the periods of the prophet Daniel—to the times and dividing of times—the twenty-three hundred days, etc., by a devout seeker after divine truth, resolved upon knowing if possible just when the end of all things would be. Refuting the accuracy of Father Miller’s mathematical calculations was out of the question. So plain did he make upon tables (his astounding charts) his interpretations of prophetic-

al mysteries; his simple sums in addition and subtraction bringing but one answer—A. D. 1843.

When 1843 went by, he was not long in discovering wherein lay his chronological mistake; he had reckoned from Roman time; Jewish time gave 1844—"a merciful extension"—deeper research giving the month and the day as well. Upon the tenth day of the seventh month, the day of the feast of the atonement ("year of Jubilee"); "and presumably at the hour of even" the awful consummation would take place.

Only a few months more for adding to the few that would be saved.

Up and down the land went the Millerite preachers that summer of 1844, scattering their alarm tracts, and exhorting sinners to repent; the astounding chart of Father Miller, a conspicuous feature of their outfit. There was no hamlet too remote for the shouters of the glad tidings; to have found man, woman or child who had not heard that the world was coming to an end, and that very year, would have been well nigh impossible. Ample demonstration of the faith of the believers was everywhere to be seen; many of their fields were uncultivated; their crops unharvested; and not a few were known to have given away stores of valuable merchandise; a hatter in Rochester, N. Y., freely distributing his entire stock. Why send children to school? Why worry about debts overdue? Why lay in store of fuel; why economize? Why provide for existence on earth beyond October twenty-fourth?

One man there was, who when dared by his scoffer of a son to sign a deed conveying to him a fine farm upon January, 1845, did so at once; another confessed a crime of which he had never been suspected.

The open believers were easily identified; but not those of that greater multitude whose hidden fears were veritable convictions, so contagious and wide-spread was the awful expectancy that the exceptionally hilarious presidential campaign of that summer did something to mitigate with its parades, coons, log-cabins and Whig-pole raisings.

September saw the believers gathering at the head-centers

of the movement; in Boston, Philadelphia, Rochester, and many of the lesser towns of the New England and Middle States almost continuous meetings were held in large public halls. Father Miller's big tent, with its band of preachers was in great demand, hastening from place to place. Because of the lawless pranks of the scoffers at these meetings the police was often a necessity; the "conversion" of scoffers by no means infrequent, and always attended with outbursts of intense emotionalism expressed in a crude hymnody,—hymns that the intelligent leaders of the movement tried in vain to suppress.

"You will see your Lord a-coming
On the resurrection morning
To the old church-yard.
While the band of music, (repeat)
Will be sounding through the air,"

was a favorite of the movement; a distinguished doctor of divinity confessing in a description he wrote of a meeting he attended, that "the barbaric ecstasy" with which that hymn was sung by the multitude, to the tune of "The Old Granite State," had nearly taken him off his feet. The *Dies Irae* uplifted by a host to whom its every word was a personal appeal for mercy, was impressively different from its rendering by the trained choristers to-day.

Considering the enormous output of publications that fell from the presses of the fanaticism that summer, and were freely distributed, it passes understanding that almost nothing of it all can be found to-day. Descendants of those who gave lavishly of their substance lest a doomed world should not have a sufficiency of Midnight Cries in various forms—those who as little children suffered martyrdom from isolation and ridicule as truly as did the little Christians of the early church from beasts of the arena, as adults must have enjoyed supremely destroying utterly anything and everything recalling their old terrible dread of the day that should burn as an oven with stubble like unto themselves. Even under the the heads of Millenarianism little is found in our reference

libraries throwing light upon Millerism at its culmination in 1844,—the light that synchronous records alone can furnish.

For anything akin to fair understanding of what has been called “the great religious cyclone of the century” acquaintance with its earliest publications; its tracts, hymns, the sermons of William Miller, etc., are indispensable. None too soon has President Strong, of the Rochester Theological Seminary, undertaken a collection of the bibliography of the fanaticism; the fact that Father Miller was a good Baptist, as were the majority of his converts, making it eminently fitting that such a collection should have place in Rockefeller Hall (Rochester, N. Y.). The identical chart used by Father Miller at his lectures has been contributed—its mathematical reckonings of the prophetic periods; its grotesque portraitures of apocalyptic mysteries, etc., something unique for the divinity student of to-day.

The true and close relation between the fanaticism and orthodoxy in the first year of the movement, when its marvelous momentum was gained, is too frequently overlooked by those who seek to know its origin and evolutions. John Fiske’s happy phrase, “fungus growth of crankery,” was not called out by Millerism; nor may it be applied to a movement that was rooted in venerated dogma, and whose ultimate mission it has been to demonstrate the error of that system of biblical interpretation of which it was the fruit.

William Miller, of Low Hampton, Washington county, New York, was a typical lay-Bible student of seventy years ago, the superior of many; a well-to-do farmer, a genial public-spirited “all-round-sort-of-man”; prosperous; the local poet; and popular speech-maker of a wide section; Captain in the War of 1812; Constable, Sheriff, Justice of the Peace; good husband and citizen; and until his conversion (presumably in a Baptist revival) an exceptionally wide reader for those days—familiar with the writings of Voltaire, Hume, and Thomas Paine, whose views he advocated to the great distress of his pious family. To atone for having browsed in infidel pastures, he prayerfully resolved, upon his conversion, to de-

vote the whole of his spare time to the study of his Bible. He soon focalized upon discovering when the end of the world would be, believing that the question of Daniel had not been asked for nought—"How long shall it be to the end of these wonders?"

Surely Daniel had not been inspired to ask what could not be answered through prayerful study of the periods foretelling just when "these wonders" would end. Relying solely upon divine aid he consecrated himself to his task; he would not use a commentary even; the Holy Spirit alone should lead him into all the truth. To him, his Bible was infallible, its every word and every marginal note; its chronology, translation, punctuation, division into chapter and verse as well; and scarcely less so his Josephus and Rollin. Questioning the reliability of Daniel as a historian he would have looked upon as rank atheism. The higher criticism of this our day was then in embryo. If the chronology of the past, as given in his Bible was infallible then reckonings for the future based upon that chronology would be equally so; his whole equipment for research—that of undiluted literalism.

For some fourteen years he searched the Scriptures with unremitting diligence; never diverted from his one subject. Naturally, he soon knew his Bible by heart. Not until about 1831 did he reach perfect certitude and final conviction that A. D. 1843,¹ was plainly foretold as the year when the world would come to an end. And then was his soul heavy unto death, because no way of escape could he see from going forth without delay to proclaim the speedy coming, and what were twelve years at the longest for saving a remnant of the children of men? And who so unfitted as he for consecration to the tremendous work? After bitter struggle he rose up and entered upon his mission by preparing a scheme of lectures, the first of which he delivered to his towns-folk, his circuit speedily enlarging; crowds pressing to hear him; a general approval of his gospel the common result, calls for his lectures

¹A. D. 1844, Jewish time.

increasing; first from small towns; then the large cities, he doing his best to fill the urgent demands upon him. Notable revivals followed his lectures, with marked increase of Bible study; the Bible Society reporting large sales wherever Father Miller lectured; the only compensation he asked or would accept was his traveling expenses; nor did he complain when those were not defrayed. When his fixing the very year of the end was denounced as contrary to the plain declaration that in an hour unlooked for the Son of man would come,—“of that day and hour knoweth no man but my Father only”—he had ready answers, recapitulating in the words of the Gospels the signs that were to precede the coming of the Son of Man—all of which he confidently affirmed had been fulfilled—his chart giving the date of the fulfillment of each, notably that of the signs in the sun and in the moon, and the falling of the stars from heaven. . . . “When ye shall see all these things come to pass *know* that it is nigh, even at the door.” The generation that should see the last of those things come to pass was to see the coming of the Son of Man. The last of the signs predicted had been given; even in their day in the falling of the stars from heaven.² The darkening of the sun when birds and poultry had gone to roost at mid-day they had seen with their own eyes (referring to a recent total eclipse). How could they help *knowing* that the time of the end was near, having seen “these things” come to pass? That the very year of the consummation had been given in the periods of the prophet Daniel his charts made clear as noon-day—A. D. 1843 (revised A. D. 1844).

The published *Lectures of William Miller* in book form had a large sale; one volume included his *Dream of The Last Day*, about the only thing in the way of fiction that his followers permitted themselves to read; but then it was anything but fiction for them. For the children of the fanaticism it partly filled the void evolved from stern denial of story-books; that terrible dream, with a leaflet catechism upon the book of Daniel comprising the juvenile literature of the movement.

²The memorable meteoric shower of 1833.

The break between Father Miller and orthodoxy did not come until some two years before the culmination of the fanaticism in the tenth day movement. Comet of a prophet that he was, until then it was generally admitted that he was within the orthodox system, great as were occasional difficulties in predicating his track. The open rupture came about 1841 or 1842, when he called upon his followers to "come out of Babylon," to sever their relations with churches that were not sounding the Midnight Cry. A reactionary tide of opposition set in at once;—Father Miller's interpretations of the prophecies of the second coming were shown to disagree entirely with the pre-Millennarian doctrine of a reign of a thousand years of righteousness on earth antedating the destruction of the planet. Pre-Millennarianism, according to Father Miller, was a device of Satan to lure sinners to destruction. His followers soon severed their relations with the churches to which they had belonged, glorying in the cross of censure and derision laid upon them by former brethren.

With the coming in of 1843 Millerism was emphatically in the air throughout the Atlantic states and in those of the Middle West, as a review of the files of standard newspapers of those years will show; the topic was at the front; "*Signs and Wonders*" and like headlines were conspicuous in several leading journals, a special column for that considerable contingent of patrons reading its newspaper, Bible in hand, alert for first reports from the battle of Armageddon; of the rising up at last of the King of the South against the King of the North; the exact whereabouts of the he-goat stamping the residue under its feet, etc.

Something of an idea of what those "last-day" meetings were like, the awful expectancy attending that final sun-setting, has been handed down in private letters, journals and traditional reminiscences. In one letter we read how the writer withdrew with her husband to a secluded corner of the crowded hall at midnight, an impressive hush prevailing, and holding her open watch in her hand, listened until day-break for the first blast from Gabriel's trumpet.

And the walls of Nineveh fell not.

* * *

And here let it be noted that as yet nothing has been found in the synchronous authoritative records of the fanaticism going to prove what is universally accepted as fact, that ascension robes were a part of the believer's outfit. Surely they would have been in evidence upon the tenth day if ever; but not a glimpse of one is given. We do find, however, abundant evidence that the ascension-robe was the creation of the scoffer's brain; and that Father Miller's offer of a reward for an ascension robe or a clue to one belonging to a sane believer never brought one to light. Nor is it true that when the tenth day went by, and then the seventh month and then the year, that all but a mere handful of Father Miller's disciples forsook him and fled. The tenacity with which the great majority "hung on" while "the vision tarried," and continued to hang on for years, their successors in faith "hanging on" still, is a significant feature of the movement.

Under the smitten gourd of prophecy his disappointed followers gathered around him, Bibles in hand, to learn of him just how long the tarrying time would be; the probable duration of which had been wholly overlooked in his previous mathematical calculations. Again the key of the letter was depended upon. . . . After the midnight cry of "go ye out to meet him," there had been a delay in the appearance of the bridegroom, a delay long enough for the trimming, but not for the refilling of lamps. There had not been time enough to go out and buy oil for empty lamps. *There* was the clue. "Watch therefore." Could they not watch for him one hour?

II.

With the passing of the tenth day, it was impressed upon Father Miller that "while time continues" it was best his disciples should have a fitting name; that of Millerite had always been offensive to him, and to all of his followers. He called a meeting at Albany, April 25, 1845, for fixing upon a name,

at which he presented that of Adventist, urging its adoption; it was unanimously accepted, and is still retained by that large and increasing sect, whose divers divisions are unified in their veneration of a common founder, in their one faith in the literal, speedy second coming. "Father Miller's calculations as to the exact time of the end were correct in the main," they agree to-day in saying; "fuller revelation has confirmed, not refuted, his doctrine."

With the sudden subsidence of the intense emotionalism characterizing the fanaticism at its height, spiritual fermentations followed inevitably and then disintegration in the main body began, with gradual but unmistakable waning of that blind allegiance to Father Miller, that seriously handicapped the many new prophets rising up, each with a fuller interpretation, throwing light upon "the tarrying time."

Father Miller's sturdy opposition to any new light that he held to be false doctrine, was the cause of several early secessions from the main body; first of these was that of the petty but audacious faction that before the winter of 1844-1845 was over was holding meetings separate from "the regulars," the "Shut-doorers;" a short-lived outcome of extreme literalism that may not be overlooked in a study of the fanaticism. "The Shut-doorers" had found in their interpretation of Scripture warrant for fully believing that upon the tenth day of the seventh month the door of mercy had been shut inexorably, against all but those who with lamps trimmed and burning had been looking for his coming and were ready to meet him on that day. Then the door had been shut.

After "the Shut-doorers" came the Feet-washers, with their gospel grounded upon the plain commandment, "If I have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash each others' feet. . . . do as I have done unto you;" another secession, the zeal of the heroic restorationists unequal, however, to reverent observance of the oriental rite in sparsely-heated assembly rooms that cold winter, the exactions of "the heady and high-minded" in the matter of individual basins and towels fruitful of discord. That larger secession of several years after that made

the keeping of the Jewish Sabbath obligatory upon all good Adventists was laid upon more enduring foundations, as is seen in the increasing numbers of the Seventh Day Adventists of to-day.

Anything in the way of justifiable diversion from the prolonged strain of the tarrying time (how long those wise virgins must have been in trimming their well-filled lamps), was welcome indeed to the watchers of heavens giving no sign of parting as a scroll.

Such diversion came after four or five years of disappointed expectancy in a special revelation. Mrs. Clorinda S. Minor, of the Church of Philadelphia, the Lady Paula of the fanaticism, claimed to have received divine orders that she must go up to Jerusalem without delay and found there a School of Agriculture, nigh unto Zion, a Mission school for the native Jews, whose deplorable ignorance of farming and vegetable gardening was a reproach unto the believers in the speedy second coming; for was not the Messiah to descend upon Jerusalem? Her portrayal of the condition it was in enlisted the interest of the thrifty farmers and good housewives at once. The land of promise must be made ready for His coming. Her appeals for financial aid, her long effusive letters to the churches scattered abroad, became a marked feature of the Sunday services of the Adventists generally; her pictures of the desolation at that day were vividly drawn, the desolation that the proposed school of agriculture would soon make to blossom as the rose. When funds enough had been raised to pay her frugal traveling expenses to Palestine she set forth in blissful ignorance of the lions in her way; her encounters with those lions, as described in her letters to the Saints at home, delightfully entertaining for the little Adventists, especially; a veritable carpet of dreams, transporting them from the Jerusalem of the apocalyptic visions—of which they were full weary—to an actuality, “a really is.”

Fever stricken, barely surviving the awful discomforts of her journey, she reached Jerusalem at last; her estatic confidence in the success of her mission increasing with the mas-

tery of the lions in the way. "An Israelite indeed," she wrote, had welcomed her upon her arrival as the long-expected deliverer of his people, one Meshullam, a Jew, of whom her letters were overladen, all in praise of his piety, business tact, indispensableness, etc. Financial Manager of the Colony she made him at once, and published a leaflet—straightway—*Meshullam*. The wide circulation of its rosy account of the colony accomplishing great things. Fine crops of corn and beans, potatoes and radishes were in sight, and no end of half-naked, starving Jews and Arabs, future pupils and beneficiaries, when the tide of prosperity had sudden check—Meshullam was a grievous disappointment, a tricky knave,—in short, he had turned Mrs. Minor and her colonists out of doors; devoured their substance,—defeating her in the courts, etc. Through some five years of like experience she held on, never losing heart nor faith seemingly, even when her support was almost entirely cut off because of dwindling confidence in her mission, at the source of supplies. . . . Almost alone and among strangers, impoverished, she died. Upon the headstone at her lonely grave on the plains of Sharon was inscribed: "Mrs. C. S. Minor; from Philadelphia, U. S. A. Industrial Missionary to the Jews: Died November 6, 1855, aged forty-six years. 'She hath done what she could.'"³

III.

The end of this world came to William Miller November 30, 1849. He died at Low Hampton, Washington county, New York, aged sixty-eight years. Upon his monument in the graveyard at Low Hampton was inscribed these words from the prophet Daniel:

"But go thy way until the end be, for thou shalt rest and stand in thy lot at the end of the days."

³The Mennonites have recently sent missionaries to Palestine to open a mission there, believing Christ is soon to come again to Mount Zion.

Long is the vista reaching back from those graves to the day of the first mis-interpretation of the promise, "Behold I come quickly." May we not reasonably believe that the fanaticism called Millerism is the last of the great convulsions of Christianity born of Millennarianism? that "ancient hope of the Church," bursting out with more or less intensity from century to century, sometimes the tenet of a petty sect, sometimes the inspiration of a far-reaching movement? Millennarianism, according to eminent authorities, was the inevitable outcome of the unsophisticated stratum of primitive Christianity, and can exist only with unsophisticated faith; all of which was exemplified in the personal experiences of its eminent prophet, William Miller. The two wings of Millennarianism, the pre-millennial, and that of which he was a leader and able expounder, are as far apart to-day as ever, both destined, can we doubt, to wane and disappear in the fuller light of the fuller revelation?