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Reminiscence of John Muir by Mills, Gertrude H.

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Waitsfield, Vermont
Jan. 23, '23

My dear Dr. Badi,

A recent letter from Miss Anna Sawyer brought me the message from you, and I feel that I owe you an apology. I did receive a letter from you but I felt that I had really nothing of value to offer, and in a letter to Anna I asked her if she would not explain to you in person. She replied that she would.

I am much interested in your undertaking and should be glad to be of any possible assistance.

I believe that there has never been, in the annals of natural history, a master hand who was in such perfect accord with creation as John Merriam - himself just one of his "fellow mortals".

Burroughs, with whom he is most often compared seems like the curious observer rather than the nature-lover.

One can't conceive of John Merriam taking a gun and shooting the hermit thrush singing from a branch near his cabin, to see if its mate would come to the spot - or that the inside of its beak was yellow. And even W. H. Hudson whose writings I read with pleasure

killed upon occasion. Perhaps they
are the "scientists", and Min the
"naturalist".

Whether as a result of early teachings
or because I have lived in intimacy
with the things to which Mr. Min
was so closely attached, I cherish
both affection and admiration for
his most unusual personality.

A most treasured possession is
a copy of "Stickbeen" - sent me here, inscribed
"To Gertrude Hutchings Mills, with many
dear memories of 'little Cozey' in the
lang syne Yosemite days."

But my connecting links with those
"lang syne days" are a few scattered
bits - a small child's memories - of
a patient, gentle man holding my
sister or myself upon his knee while he
showed us the composite parts of flowers
calling attention to their beauty and
individuality of shape and coloring;
or of our trotting after him in the
meadows looking for friendly blossoms
and inspecting them for insect visitors
our attention called to the marvels on
every hand.

I can recall a series of bird pictures
in color, on cards which we had
for years, which Mr. Min had
given us that we should "know our
neighbors". I can still feel the
desolation and fascination of the stony

petrel - "so far away from home &
with nothing but water to sit on."

I have a dim recollection of the small saw-mill which my father had built near the foot of the Yosemite falls - Camp Yosemite is located near the spot, I believe - where Mr. Minn was for awhile the "sawyer" - of our proffered assistance in running it declined, with caution to keep away from the saw, and of our peeping down through cracks in the flooring into the great green water-storage tanks beneath.

A number of years later I remember Mr. Fishie relating the incident of his meeting Mr. Minn who twitted Wasee Fishie upon his never having taken a picture of his cabin. Mr. Fishie had not known of its existence but he guessed just about where it must be, made a secret search found it and sent Mr. Minn the photo of "The Lost Cabin" - with great satisfaction to himself.

Perhaps you will better understand why, after those first years of Mr. Minn's stay in the Valley, there was a long interval during which none of our family had intercourse with him if I explain that my father had a violent, unreasoning dislike for him - unwarranted

and most regrettable.

After I was grown I saw Mr. Miner several times in Yosemite neighborhoods. Once while I was teaching at Wawona he and Mrs. Miner passed on their way to the Valley. I had a pleasant visit with them that evening, during which he asked if I had a copy of "The Mountains of California". Since I hadn't he said that he would have the publishers send me one, which he promptly did. I have the copy here.

Later while on a camping trip with a party from Wawona we met him in company with Mr. Lubens of Pasadena, on the Tioga road just above Lake Tenaya - just "speaking each other in passing".

I did not see him afterward but frequently heard of him through Mr. Keith who greatly enjoyed visiting "Johnny Miner" and telling anecdotes of the visits. I remember his saying that when he went to see Johnny he was careful to provide himself with a lunch as he'd be apt to find only crackers and sardines in the cupboard - perhaps not that.

At another time he told of his enjoyment of little Helen Miner who "liked Keith because he let her be his

3
mamma"; that one day, having
fallen down the stairs with violence
but scrambled right-side-up at the
bottom she had asked her alarmed
parents - "Well, what would Heitor say?"

After Yosemite became "government
property" we made our home with
my grand-mother at her house on
Pine street between Franklin and Gough
in San Francisco. The building was
a characteristic frame finished on
the interior in yellow pine, and in
1880 (I think) it was destroyed by fire
with all that it contained - letters
papers, library, family portraits painted
by my grandmother's father Cephas Thompson
- furniture, etc. We had left just
the clothes we were wearing. Such
things as we had left stored in the
Valley had been ransacked.

I have a few copies of "Hutchings
California Magazine" which my father
published in San Francisco before
settling in Yosemite. These were given
to me since my marriage by an
original subscriber - John Ritchie - then
a store-keeper at the mining camp of
Nelson's Point near Quincy in Plumas
Co.

After my father's death in 1902 his
wife - Emily Edmunds H. - sent me a
box of his books (nothing of especial value), his

00980

anemoid (which had been used by Whitney during his survey in that part of the Sierras) his field glasses, and the huge old manganite arm-chair which he had made when we moved into our winter home in the old ^{log} cabin, and which has afforded a comfortable resting-place for many distinguished guests.

These things I have here. If there was in her possession correspondence of any value Mrs. Hutchings must have taken it with her to England.

I have been unable to find her there at her address sent from London, and doubt if she is still living.

Mother lost everything she possessed in the San Francisco fire, but had nothing of historic interest.

The name of "Lady Yelverton" was a familiar one in our household.

She lived with us at the hotel in the valley through one summer - I think it must have been the summer of 1870 - and she seems to have been an intelligent, lovable woman. Everyone spoke of her affectionately.

I remember my mother's telling of her having taken a great fancy to my

dark-eyed, black-haired spite of a 4
sister "Floy" who she wished to adopt —
the "Zanita" of her fantastic novel of
that name — whose wild, infant tales
of bear-killing, horse-breaking experiences
entertained her greatly. She essayed
making Floy a dress — not very
successfully, since she had never
used a needle in her life.

Lady Yelverton was at that time
travelling, in an effort to forget the
troubles following an unfortunate
marriage.

That fall when my father "went
below" — which meant to San Francisco —
to get our winter's stock of provisions,
she went with him under his escort,
planning to sail shortly for India.

While in San Francisco my father
one evening invited her to go with
him to the theatre — which she did.

Theatres were few so he selected the
best without knowledge of the performance
which, by a strange coincidence
happened to be one of Wilkie Collins
novels — "The Woman in White", I believe
but am not sure — and was the
story of Lady Yelverton's life.

My father was wholly ignorant of it,
but she recognized each detail, and
when it came to the culmination of

the tragedy - her husband's attempting to kill her by smothering her - she slid into the seat unconscious.

With promptly offered assistance she was "carried out", and later told her unsuspecting escort of the astounding facts.

This sounds extremely melodramatic but I have heard my father and others relate the incident many times, and feel quite sure that it is true.

I believe that Lady Gelerton returned to England - completing her trip around the world - living there in quiet a number of years, my family hearing from her occasionally through messages brought by friends, and by letter.

Miss Savoy's letter said that you like some information concerning my father and mother's lives, and I will write a brief outline of each, shortly, and send you. If there is anything otherwise I am glad to be of any possible assistance.

Regretting the scantiness of material in my possession, I am

Most sincerely -

Gertrude H. Mills