JOAQUIN MILLER: HIS LIFE AND HIS ART:
BY HENRY MEADE BLAND

T IS high noon. A tall, straight, blue-eyed, long-white-haired man in cattle-man’s hat, with high leather boots, stands on the porch of a little chapel-shaped lodge. There are wild oats, poppies, roses, acacia, cypress around him in a garden which has been his special care for more than twenty years. A linnet is building in the leaves above his head. An apple spray swings down almost touching his face. A red nasturtium climbs the wall behind him. A grosbeak is whistling in the forest on the hill back of the lodge. There is a soft Pacific breeze blowing. With the silence of an Indian he stands fascinated by the panorama upon which he looks from his kingly height—a panorama of the City of San Francisco, its Bay and the Golden Gate. He drops to a seat on the rock steps and still gazes, dream-submerged. A schoolmaster is coming up by the stone wall along the trail to the Chapel. The musing of the tall, white-haired man is broken and he greets his guest: “Well, well! How goes the battle, my Son?”

The man of dreams is Joaquin Miller. Since daybreak he has been lying in bed braced with pillows, covered with his Arctic robes, with primitive goose-quill pen putting in the best part of the day writing. And now his work on the hills—nurturing trees—is about to begin.

This quiet, contemplative life has not always been the daily routine of Joaquin Miller. The curios, the pictures, the animal skins, the knives and pistols in the little room behind him tell of another day when the sun of adventure was full upon him. It is the autumn of the second cycle of his life now. The first began in an emigrant wagon “on the Wabash, Indiana, seventy years ago,” so he says. From the first, he seemed predestined for every sort of experience so that he might record every phase of emotion. In the emigrant wagon began the training of this poet, writer and philosopher. After clearing a farm in the wilderness of the Wabash, for four years the Miller family held their way behind an ox team, stopping, now here now there, to give Father Hulings Miller time to ply his work as teacher and missionary among the Indians, till at last in Oregon they came to the verge of the sun-down seas and could go no further. What an experience for the boy with the brain so sensitive that it imaged every detail of the long journey!

When thirteen years old there was no dream too wild for the boy to attempt to realize. There was gold for the picking up, so he
JOAQUIN MILLER, THE POET OF THE SIERRAS; FROM HIS LATEST PHOTOGRAPH.
A MONUMENT TO ROBERT BROWNING, ERECTED BY JOAQUIN MILLER ON THE HIGHEST POINT OF THE "HEIGHTS."

THE HOME OF JOAQUIN MILLER ON THE HILLS EAST OF SAN FRANCISCO BAY: FORMERLY A CHAPEL, "THE MECCA OF PACIFIC SLOPE TRAVELERS."

THE PYRAMID BELOW WAS ERECTED IN HONOR OF MOSES, WHOM JOAQUIN MILLER VENERATES ABOVE ALL MEN.

MONUMENT TO JOHN C. FREMONT, WHO NAMED THE SHINING STRAIT EXTENDING FROM SAN FRANCISCO BAY TO THE PACIFIC, "GOLDEN GATE." FREMONT IS ONE OF JOAQUIN MILLER'S HEROES.
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heard, at the foot of Mount Shasta. He must get some for father and mother; it was his time to help now.

So he is off to the mines. To him the new country is the realization of a dream-world. He is entranced by the snowy eternal whiteness of Shasta. The wild life of the bronco buster on the caravansary trail from Mexico and Arizona to the Shastan Gold Gulches captivates him. Now a real battle with the Indians finds him pierced with an arrow, falling even as one of his own heroes falls, at the side of old Gibs as the Modocs are driven from Castle Crags. At the age of fourteen it is with the Indian himself he lives, and in the deep silences of the Sierra he attunes himself to Indian lore and instinct, becoming as one of the red denizens of the forest. There he loves and marries an Indian princess, living in keenest sympathy with the romantic life of the nomad. In a skirmish with the whites—for the Modocs fought relentlessly for their hunting grounds—Death takes from him the Indian maiden, thus bringing about his return to his own people.

HE BECOMES a teacher in the mining camps, a student of law at home in Oregon; a wandering traveler in Central and South America, a mounted express messenger carrying mails and packages to the snow-beleaguered miners of Shasta. Later one finds him an editor, judge of the Superior Court in Oregon, and then at last, having all this time singing in his heart the unbodied song,—for he had already thought and studied carefully enough to know that he could speak in numbers,—with his first volume under his arm, he lands in San Francisco, his career as a poet begun. With the rainbow of glory ever before his eye he is off for London, where he finds many friends and admirers.

This age of adventure is not yet over. He treks on, with the wide world as his highway,—Paris, Rome, Florence, Athens, Egypt and the pyramids, Jerusalem, and the journey seems about to end, for there is a strange sigh for rest entering his soul. He has drunk to the lees the draught of experience, and yearns for a quiet nook in which to stay in peace.

The city of Florence is chosen and the building of the material kingdom is begun. Heretofore his life has been the hurry of the camp and the trail; now it is to be rest and contemplation under the vine and olive. But not yet! The little tract of land near the Dantean City is malarial. Juno, as she was wont with Latona, is still angry with his muse and will allow no rest. Malarial airs have him in their grasp, and again he moves on. This time it is for the home land, and for a while he abides by the marvel of sun-down
seas. Then we find him tree-planting on the isle of Yerba Buena (Goat Island) in San Francisco Bay; for he believes his countrymen should learn to plant forests, and he, a humble teacher, would give them a first lesson, would lead them in celebrating a first great arbor day. His trees are planted, and flourish for a brief spring month; but there is no water to tide them over the long dry summer, and autumn finds the saplings crisp and dry.

Finally the delectable mountains are found in the low, round, rich, flowery hills east of the Bay. The very spot is romantic; for John C. Fremont, even before the days of gold, has stood on its eminence and named the shining strait from the Bay to the Pacific Golden Gate. Here in the multitudinous varying glory he begins to build. He is at home at last.

Since eighteen hundred and eighty-seven, Joaquin Miller has lived on “The Heights.” The place has been peculiarly adapted to his nature. He desired most of all its loneliness for contemplation. He needed to go apart to “pray;” he desired to dream a social dream such as might transcend the Utopia of More or the Republic of Plato, and so he began the building of the City Beautiful, the City which is at once the City of his mind and the City of his leafy, flowery hills.

Joaquin Miller’s first aim was to make his home one of memories. As he worked he seemed ever to revolve in his mind, “Come, let us joy together, let us create a realm of beautiful associations.” The hills about his home were round and grassy, with here and there a projecting ledge. Selecting the roundest, grassiest, he planted cypress in form of a gigantic cross facing the broad stretches of the bay and hills of San Francisco. The cypress grew and those who look for the cross can see, from the cities below, this evergreen emblem of steadfastness. He built with his own hands, for he believes in work. “The best way,” he says, “to learn about the beauty and glory and magnificence of nature is to work with hands as well as with head. Help a rose, even a blade of grass, to grow more beautiful and you will be a partner with God."

The rocks of his hills he hewed and shaped into memorials of his heroes and friends. Being a steadfast admirer of the old Jewish Law he remembered the Hebrew law-maker Moses with a solid pyramid of granite; Fremont, who had once, too, gazed entranced from the heights, he honored with a solid block of masonry; while his poet-friend, Robert Browning, is recalled by the citadel erected on the highest point of the homestead. Year after year the tree planting has progressed till the smooth green hills have been hidden
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deep beneath a forest of cypress, pine, eucalyptus and acacia. Carefully are the younglings watered in summer, and carefully are they guarded from the hill-fires in autumn.

Twice, during the years he has lived on "The Heights," the poet’s old love for adventure has mastered him. The Chinese War with Japan drew him across the Pacific; the rush for gold to the Klondike woke the fever of old Shasta mining days, and he was off to Alaska; but the stay in either case was short and he was soon again in the peace of the hills.

When we turn to the art Joaquin Miller practices we find two qualities contrasting as singularly as his wild adventurous life of the early period contrasts with the serene, contemplative, mystic element of his second life period. In his style these elements continually recur; the robust spirit of Western adventure with the mysticism that would see beyond the stars.

In his early poems "The Arizonian," "The Tale of the Tall Alcalde," and "With Walker in Nicaragua," there is a reflection of his own wild romantic life in the Sierras. Even the rhythm of the stanzas is peculiar to him, having the swing suited to the ruggedness of the theme. Thus, in "The Arizonian:"

"One time in the night as the black wind shifted,
And a flash of lightning stretched over the stream,
I seemed to see her with brown hands lifted—
Only seemed to see as one sees in a dream."

Or in "The Tale:"

"The feast was full, and the guests afire,
The shaven priest, and the portly squire,
The solemn judge, and the smiling dandy,
The duke, and the don, and the commandante."

Every story is passionate, full of color, joy in nature; daring, tragic, with an atmosphere of the land he wrote in. It was the passion that made him seem to the English like Byron; but it was not this Byronic characteristic which made the English love Miller. In his verse they heard the sighing of western breezes, and saw the colors of flower and hill and smelled the balsam of pine and redwood, and so they lifted up their faces and looked and loved.

TO UNDERSTAND the fiber of Joaquin Miller’s art we must look to the adventure and romance of his life. One by one he has portrayed his experiences, varying the thought with every shade of poetic music. The ability to feel is a preëminent characteristic, for he has run the whole gamut of the passions. His life has been dominated by a desire for adequate expression. Even
in dress he has stood apart. The tall boots, the sombrero, the furred and colored coats all tell the same story. His poems reflect the rhythm of his being. They all mirror himself. His prose, too, mirrors his life or is symbolic of what he would have himself be. “I have a Byronic love of being the hero of all I write,” he says. His mountain home, “The Heights,” symbolizes what he would have the world be in philosophy, in reverence, in simplicity, in healthful life. Here is his art, his poetry, his love combined.

In education Joaquin Miller is a combination of the self-made, with the best that the pioneer College of Oregon, Columbia, could give. He was thoroughly taught by his father and mother, who never, even in the long pilgrimage from East to West, neglected the education of their little girl and the three boys. His mind was busy in the intense life of the gold camps, and on the mule drives from the south to Shasta, Mountain Ike, a queer combination of college graduate and cowboy, taught him the rudiments of Latin. He put the rude songs of the miners into music long before a line was published, and he caught the miners’ grim humor:

“Now Sampson he was a mighty man,
A mighty strong man was he;
But he lost his hair and he lost his eyes
And also his liber-tee!
For a woman she can do more with a man
Than a king and his whole arm-ee!”

So runs one of these rhymes written in the early years. Likewise he caught the miners’ strange solemnity. Thus, in “Forty-Nine,”

“We are wreck and stray,
We are cast away,
Poor battered hulks and spars,
But we hope and pray,
On the judgment day,
We shall strike it up in the Stars.”

BYRON and Burns were his poetic idols and it was the magnetism of their song that bred in him the desire to worship at their shrine. This was his motive in the early pilgrimage to England. As he passed on his way to London through San Francisco, he showed his work to the fastidious critic, Bret Harte, who saw no good in it; but the scathing review Bret Harte wrote of “Joaquin et al.” was at his own request destroyed by Ina Coolbrith when she remonstrated at the harshness of the criticism, and Miss Coolbrith wrote a favorable critique which was published in the
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Overland. It was doubtless an imperfect technique that Bret Harte objected to. In England, Joaquin Miller was lucky enough to win the kindly support of Sir Charles Dilke, Editor of the Athenæum, who aided the poet in weeding error in form from his lines. No doubt this aid was of inestimable value, for today Joaquin Miller is a careful worker, and shapes and prunes his verse with great thought.

There are, as may be expected, strong differences between Joaquin Miller’s later and earlier verse. The early poems were tragic stories; in the later verse, while the lyric strongly persists, a deep moral tone is found. Witness “For Those Who Fail,” “The Bravest Battle,” “Columbus,” “Lines to Byron,” “Lines to Tennyson,” “The Fortunate Isles.” It will be noted that his later verse is short. This is because the dramatic has ceased its appeal and in its place has come a reverence for the mystical, the philosophical, the beautiful. His instinct as a teacher has at last become dominant and he dedicates his muse to the expression of the moral lesson which he feels will uplift humanity.

It is also in this spirit that his greatest prose work, “The Building of the City Beautiful,” has been written.

The story is semi-autobiographical and begins by telling how the hero met in Jerusalem, a wonderfully beautiful woman who, also a dreamer, but at the same time practical, was collaborating with Sir Moses Montefiore in his attempts to rehabilitate the Jewish race in a new Jerusalem.

Common interests and thoughts draw the two, and they plan together. The poet loves the woman but his affection is slightly returned at first. When the two separate, each to chisel an ideal vision, the poet is given to understand that his love is returned.

The hero now drifts to the Golden Gate and there on the Mist Hills begins the building. The work is slow. He plants and waters; but results are meagre. His neighbors impose on him, considering him but an idler, and expecting, when his fancies shall have exhausted, to divide the spoils of his work among them. But the dreamer goes on, and like Tolstoi, uses the Sermon on the Mount as the foundation of his structure. This wonderful chain of wisdom and righteousness he interprets literally. When smitten on one cheek, he turns the other. He gives without resistance both coat and cloak to one who would forcibly take them.

IN THE midst of the building, his “New Arcadia” comes to him. Suffice to say it is a dream. In this city of vision all sects and parties have been fused; nature has been conquered; the desert made to blossom as the rose; there is music such as was never heard
on sea or land; there is love far surpassing the loves of this earth; there is “peace that passeth all understanding.”

In “The Building of the City Beautiful” we are reminded of the philosophic aspect of the poet’s mind, and see clearly the serious purpose that marks his latter-day work. He has never lost the instinct to teach, which showed itself in early mining days. In fact, the miscellaneous foot-notes to the poems in the complete volume of eighteen hundred and ninety-seven are a treasury of wisdom for the aspiring writer.

His lyre has echoed with every form of thought: wit, humor, scorn, satire, symbol. Where shall we go for more biting sarcasm than in the following from “Adios”?

“Grew once a rose within my room
Of perfect hue, of perfect health;
Of such perfection and perfume
It filled my poor house with its wealth.
Then came the pessimist who knew
Not good or grace, but overthrew
My rose, and in the broken pot
Nosed fast for slugs within the rot.
He found, found with exulting pride
Deep in the loam, a worm, a slug;
The while my rose-tree died.”

The world has not yet taken the full measure of Joaquin Miller, for human weakness has stood too much in the way to give Time clear vision. Yet it is not too much to prophesy that, as the years pass, he will be given a secure place among the poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who may be called great.