

THE LIFE

Bea B. Warfield

Sept 1899.

OF

from Judge Samuel Miller Breckinridge

SAMUEL MILLER, D.D., LL.D.,

SECOND PROFESSOR

IN THE

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

AT PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY.

BY

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of August, 1818, says, "Dr. Miller made a communication to me in regard to the state of the College which alarmed and affected me much."¹ Dr. Green also mentions, without fixing any date, that "there was an agreement with the professors and students of the Seminary to pray daily, at eight o'clock in the evening, not only for * * a revival with us, but for a similar one in all the colleges of our country."²

5. REMINISCENCES.

The Rev. William B. Sprague, D.D., so long pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Albany, kindly prepared, after Dr. Miller's death, the following reminiscences. One of the earlier students of the Seminary, having been matriculated in 1816, he was upon terms of particular intimacy with the professors; Dr. Miller followed him in his subsequent settlements and labors with affectionate interest; with very few of the alumni did he keep up so frequent a correspondence as with him; and certainly none of them manifested a kinder appreciation of Dr. Miller than he—did more to honor him while he lived, or has done more to honor him since his death.

'My dear Sir,

Albany, March 1, 1853.

'I could scarcely have been asked to perform a service in which I should have engaged with more alacrity, than in writing out my recollections of the lamented Dr. Miller. Not that these recollections are more extended than those of many of his other pupils, or that I had better opportunities than many others for observing his character; but I am sure that I yield to no one of them in affectionate reverence for him, or in the desire to honour his memory. From the first interview I had with him to the last hour of his life, I always felt that he was my friend; and I came, at length, to regard him as a friend whose head and heart I could trust with as little reserve as I ever felt in respect to any human being.

Dr. Miller must, I think, have taken rank, at a very early period, among the most distinguished clergymen of his denomination, or indeed of any other, in this country.

¹ Life of Dr. Green, 418.

² Life, 431.

Though I was brought up in a retired village in the heart of Connecticut, where, in my childhood, I used to know little that was passing beyond our own neighborhood, yet I scarcely remember the time, when Dr. Miller's name was not familiar to me, or when I was not accustomed to associate with it everything good and venerable. I distinctly recollect that when Dr. Griffin was to be installed in Park street church, Boston, in 1811, it was currently reported that Dr. Miller was to preach the sermon—a circumstance which was expected to give great additional interest to the occasion; and there was a general disappointment felt, when it was ascertained that he could not be there. The first time I saw him was in the pulpit of Wall street church, a few weeks before he resigned his charge to go to Princeton. I was then a member of the Sophomore class in Yale College, and had gone down to New York, with a view, specially, to pass the Sabbath, and listen to some of the distinguished preachers of the city. Having heard Dr. Mason in the morning, I went to hear Dr. Miller at three in the afternoon; and the moment I saw him, he struck me as quite a model of a man in his external appearance. When he began to speak there was something so calm and dignified, so bland, and gentle, and persuasive in his whole manner, that I was quite charmed with him; and the service throughout was of such a character as not only to justify, but greatly to confirm, my first impressions. It was a beautiful sermon that he preached—perhaps I may say, one of his most striking sermons; for I well remember that when I heard him preach the same several years after in the church at Princeton, it had lost none of its interest with me from the repetition.

‘The greater part of the year that succeeded my graduation in 1815, I spent in the neighborhood of Alexandria, Virginia, where I became intimately acquainted with that venerable old model of Christian simplicity and goodness, Dr. Muir.¹ He knew Dr. Miller intimately, and no man seemed to stand higher than he in his regards; and when I was about to return to New England, as I expected to pass through Princeton, Dr. Muir gave me a letter which was designed to procure for me the privilege of Dr. Miller's

¹ Sprague's Annals, 516.

acquaintance. It turned out that I was unable to stop at Princeton, and, of course, did not then deliver my letter; but I had another letter to Dr. Romeyn of New York, which I did deliver, and which was instrumental of determining me to return to Princeton, to prosecute my theological studies. It was at the close of the fall vacation in 1816, that I joined the Seminary, and that my acquaintance with Dr. Miller commenced. On the morning of the first day of the session, I called at his study to deliver my introductory letters, (for I had one from Dr. Romeyn as well as from Dr. Muir,) and I can never forget the courteous and yet winning and affectionate manner with which he received me. He was evidently very much pressed with engagements, but he laid aside everything and sat down and conversed with me, as if he had nothing else to do; and so much was I impressed by his urbanity and the interest which he manifested in my welfare, that I left the room congratulating myself more than ever, that the question, at what seminary I should pursue my theological studies, had been decided in favor of Princeton.

‘As my acquaintance with Dr. Miller increased, my respect and affection for him increased also. The first point at which he came in contact with us officially was in the recitation room. As the Seminary was then in its infancy, I think my class did not consist originally of more than ten or twelve; and when he came to hear our recitations, he seemed like a father sitting in the midst of his family. As his instructions at that time were somewhat elementary, our recitations cost him no more effort than the reading of the Bible in his family devotions would have done; and yet he always seemed to have everything at hand that would illustrate, in any degree, the subject before us; and we all felt that we were in no danger of meeting with difficulties which he was not abundantly able to solve. His questions were always put with great directness and clearness, and were generally such as we *ought* to have been able to answer; but when, as sometimes happened, there was, on the part of the student, hesitation or perhaps absolute ignorance, the Doctor would always manifest the most considerate regard for his feelings, by giving the question a different turn, or perhaps asking another, or else by making some

explanation that would suggest the appropriate answer. It happened to our class, as I suppose to most others, that we were not all equally bright; and it was pretty clear that Dr. Miller was himself bright enough to make this discovery; for I think he generally took care to put the heaviest burdens on those who were best able to bear them.

‘A large part of the instruction which Dr. Miller communicated to us was, of course, by lectures. And here I always considered him admirable. I cannot say, that he had any great vivacity of manner, or that he was given to saying brilliant and startling things, which would be remembered and talked about afterwards; but his lectures were remarkable for exhibiting a full, clear and perfectly logical view of his subject. He had none of that miserable affectation of originality, which prefers a doubtful path to a beaten one, and which is never satisfied unless it is following some *ignis fatuus*, or gazing at a sky rocket. There was such perfect continuity of thought in his lectures, whether he read them or delivered them extemporaneously, and withal, his utterance was so distinct and deliberate, that it required nothing more than an ordinary memory, especially if assisted by brief notes, to retain a large part of what it would take him an hour to deliver.

‘I have already intimated that my first impressions were greatly in favor of Dr. Miller as a preacher; and I never liked him less after his preaching became familiar to me. He used, in my day, to preach every third morning in the College Hall; and then he generally, though not uniformly, had his discourse lying before him. He preached alternately with Dr. Alexander, on Sabbath evening, in the village church; when he either extemporized or preached memoriter, or, as I should rather think, more commonly united the two modes. I believe we generally listened to him with more pleasure when he read his sermon; for the style was always a little more perfect; and he read so admirably, that if one’s eyes had been turned away from him, he would hardly have suspected that he had been reading at all. His voice was not powerful, nor susceptible of very varied intonations; but it was exceedingly bland and agreeable; his gesture was not abundant, but it was always correct and sometimes highly impressive; his attitudes were

manly and dignified; and there was a devout and reverential air pervading his whole manner, that was altogether befitting the solemnities of religious worship. There was nothing that could be called specially imposing in his general style of delivery; and yet I have heard him utter single sentences with as much effect as almost any other man. I remember, for instance, in a New Year's sermon on the text, "How old art thou?" he related the anecdote of the Roman Emperor, reckoning with himself every evening in regard to the manner in which he had spent the preceding day; and who, when on one occasion he found that the day had very much gone to waste, cried out with bitter regret, "Oh, I have lost a day!" That exclamation, as he uttered it, vibrates upon my ear to this hour. I doubt whether Kean could have pronounced it more effectively.

'It is not necessary that I should say much of the general character of Dr. Miller's sermons, as so many of them have been published, that multitudes, who have never heard him preach, have still had the opportunity of judging of his mode of sermonizing. It always seemed to me, that he was one of the safest and best models in this respect that I have known. His sermons, like his lectures, were thoroughly methodical; they had a beginning, a middle, and an end; and the attentive hearer, after listening to one of them, would find that the substance of it was lodged in his memory, as material, if he were disposed thus to appropriate it, for devout meditation. I think there was no great originality in his sermons, especially those which were written out and read; they had not generally the appearance of being greatly elaborated; much less was there anything in them that approached to philosophical abstraction; but they were sober, practical, well considered exhibitions of divine truth; they were evidently the productions of a workman that needed not to be ashamed. A few of his discourses, however, made a much stronger impression upon me than the rest, particularly one on the doctrine of the Resurrection. I thought at the time, and still think, that I never heard that glorious subject treated in a more edifying and eloquent manner, than it was treated in that discourse. I recollect, some time after I left the Seminary, falling in with Governor Robinson of Vermont, and he mentioned

that he once heard Dr. Miller preach that sermon before Congress, and that it was listened to by the members with great attention and admiration.

‘One of the most noticeable things in this venerable man, pertaining to his connection with the Seminary, was the affectionate and paternal solicitude which he evinced for the welfare of the students. At the Sabbath afternoon conference which was held in the oratory, he was very regular and punctual in his attendance; and it was there especially that he met us with a father’s counsels, and brought out to us the ample treasures of his own Christian experience. He was accustomed also to converse much with the students in private in regard to their spiritual interests, and especially when there were any difficulties to be removed, or any wounded spirits to be administered to. In a case of dangerous illness, he would visit the room of the invalid with almost as much apparent interest, as if he had been visiting, in similar circumstances, the chamber of his own son. An instance of his very kind and considerate regard, of which I was myself the subject, now occurs to me. I had been quite ill for several weeks, and, by advice of the Professors, had determined to pay a visit to my friends in New England. Just as I was on the eve of commencing my journey, Dr. Miller sent me a bottle of very old wine, accompanied with a kind note, in which he expressed great concern for my health, and a wish that the wine might strengthen me to endure the fatigue of travelling. I do not know, whether, with the more stringent views of temperance which he subsequently held, he would have sent me *wine*; but I am quite sure that he would not have been unmindful of me, and that he would have sent me anything within his reach, which he had supposed would minister to my comfort.

‘I always thought that Dr. Miller’s social qualities were of the highest order. He talked a good deal; but nobody, I imagine, ever felt that he talked too much. His extensive and varied information, his large fund of amusing anecdote, his easy and flowing style of speaking, and his perfectly urbane and courteous manner, could not but render him a favorite in every circle into which he was thrown. He would not hesitate to reprove one for his faults; but

he did it with such manifest Christian sincerity and gentleness, that the reproof could scarcely fail to endear him to the offender. He had sometimes an inimitable way of hitting off the character of an individual in a few words, each word indicating a distinct characteristic. I remember, for instance, when I was about to leave the Seminary, to preach as a candidate for settlement at West Springfield, I asked him what sort of a man Dr. Lathrop was—then the aged pastor of the West Springfield church. He gave me his character in about six words; and as it subsequently opened upon me from an acquaintance with him, I found him to be precisely as Dr. Miller had represented. Dr. Miller had passed a few days with the old gentleman a number of years before, and had left a most agreeable impression upon him; which I found was not altogether without its advantage to *me*, as I carried Dr. Lathrop a letter from Dr. Miller, which he highly appreciated, and was fully disposed to honour.

‘I cannot forbear here to add, that I have had evidence that Dr. Miller was one of the most forgiving of mortals. I have heard him, more than once, talk about people who I knew had manifested towards him a most unreasonable hostility, and, in one or two instances, I believe, had sought to injure his character and usefulness; and I have sometimes watched to see, whether any expression of ill will, or even impatience, concerning them, would escape him; but never did I hear a word. On the contrary, I recollect one instance in which, after he had spoken in high terms of a certain individual, I said to him, “But I am surprised to hear you say that, Sir, for I thought he had treated you with great unkindness.” “Yes,” said the Doctor, “he did; but he was a highly respectable man, and I doubt not a truly pious man, notwithstanding.”

‘On leaving the Seminary I had no right to expect that my acquaintance with Dr. Miller would be continued in any other than the most general manner; but it turned out otherwise—it was my privilege to share largely in his offices of good will as long as he lived. Whenever I visited Princeton, his house was my home. Whenever I needed advice in respect to any matter of difficulty, he allowed me to consult him with the utmost freedom; and he never failed to throw

much light on the subject of my inquiries. Whenever he knew that I was in affliction, he was sure to communicate to me in some way the expression of his sympathy. Whenever I had any service, as I had in several instances, which it was particularly desirable that he should perform for me, I had only to communicate the request to him, to have it complied with. When I came from West Springfield to my present charge, he readily consented to preach my installation sermon; and did preach it greatly to the delight of a very large audience. In a work in which I have been engaged for some years past, commemorative of the more prominent deceased clergymen of this country, he manifested a deep interest; and continued, from time to time, to furnish me his recollections of his ancient friends, until very near the day when he himself became a subject for biography. Others, I know, have had a similar experience in respect to him. His large heart disposed him to serve his friends to the utmost—to do good to all as he had opportunity and ability.'

The brief remainder of Dr. Sprague's reminiscences, referring to Dr. Miller's last days, will appear on a subsequent page. The Rev. Francis McFarland, D.D., matriculated in 1817, in a letter of condolence to Mrs. Miller, just after her husband's death, said,

'There were three men towards whom I felt as towards no others on earth. The first was the Rev. Elisha Macurdy, who died a few years ago in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania; who was my spiritual father, and to whose advice and influence I owe it that I am in the ministry. The other two were Dr. Miller and Dr. Alexander. I regard it as a dispensation of divine Providence, for which I can never be sufficiently grateful, that I was led to prosecute my studies under the direction of those men. They were the only professors in the Seminary when I was a student. The students were then comparatively few, and we had more free intercourse with the professors than could be enjoyed when they became more numerous. I was probably the oldest student in the Seminary at the time; and whether it was on that account, or some other, I know not; but I often received from you and Dr. Miller distinguishing marks of kindness and confidence. More than once, when

“There are many scenes in the life of Dr. Miller that memory frequently recalls—scenes in the class-room, in the General Assembly, in the Synod of New Jersey, in the pulpit, in the social party—scenes which occurred during the conflicts of parties, and in the frank and unrestrained intercourse of social life. In them all Dr. Miller was pre-eminently like himself. But the scene by which I most love to recall him, and which memory most frequently recalls, is that parting scene in his study. Oh, may that parting prayer be answered !”

Dr. James W. Alexander was elected Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government, by the General Assembly of 1849, but was not inaugurated until the 20th of November following. On the 14th of that month, he wrote to his friend, Dr. Hall,

“This morning Dr. Miller sent for me, and for the first time in his life did not rise when I entered. He then formally made over to me the charge of the instruction, and said, *inter alia* : “No, sir, my time is come. I must go to the grave; no skill of man can do me any good.” He no longer drives out. Every expression connects itself with his departure. In all my life I never saw a gentler decline, or a more serene, collected, looking into eternity.”¹

Dr. Miller was too feeble to be present at his successor’s inauguration, who, in the opening of his discourse remarked,

“I should meet you with less of sadness, were it not for the absence of that venerable man, whose induction to this chair I distinctly remember six-and-thirty years ago, whose paternal guidance many of us have since enjoyed, and whose useful and eminent discharge of this function might well cause trembling in his successor. Let us therefore, hasten to look away from men, even the best, to the Great Head of the Church, who will bless both his aged servant and this school to which his life has been devoted.”²

The following are the closing paragraphs of the reminiscences kindly furnished by Dr. Sprague, the other portion of which has been given on previous pages.

“My last interview with him impressed itself upon my inmost soul. It was at the time of the inauguration of Dr. James W. Alexander, as his successor in the Professorship. It was understood that he was extremely feeble, and the current of life was fast ebbing away. I called at his house, uncertain

¹ 2 Familiar Letters, 108, 109.

² P. 69.

whether he would be able to see me, but wishing at least to learn the particulars of his situation from his own family. I was glad to find that I could be admitted once more to see my venerable friend. He was in his study, where I had met him a hundred times in the vigor of health. He sat in a large arm chair, breathing with so much difficulty, that I should scarcely have been surprised if his breath had left him at any moment. He extended his hand to me with the same genial warmth of feeling as when he was in health. He told me that his course was nearly finished, and that he was just going to that blessed Master whom he had served so imperfectly, but who had loved and blessed *him* so much. He occupied nearly every moment that I was with him in talking, and scarcely spoke of anything but the preciousness of his Redeemer. I never witnessed an instance of more triumphant faith. It really seemed as if the chariot was making ready, to bear him away on his upward journey. I shook hands with him for the last time; and though I heard afterwards that he was still lingering in triumph, it was not long before the tidings came that both his suffering and his triumph on earth had given place to the immortal triumph of heaven.

‘It did not occur to me, when I undertook to write a letter of personal recollections,¹ how prominently I should be obliged to exhibit myself; but as I could not very well write *such* a letter, keeping myself entirely in the back ground, I hope to escape the imputation of egotism, where, under other circumstances, I feel that I should be justly liable to it.

‘I am, my dear Sir,

‘Faithfully yours,

‘W. B. Sprague.’

A passage may be added, without much repetition, from Dr. Sprague’s Commemorative Discourse.²

“His whole appearance was a compound of the deep solemnity that becomes the dying man, and the joyful tranquility that becomes the dying Christian. He had no breath to waste on mere worldly matters, but began immediately to talk of the goodness of the Master whom he had served; of the great imperfection of the service he had rendered; and of the glorious eternal home, which, through grace, he was about to enter. It is my sober conviction, that I never heard such words from the lips of mortal man; and yet his spirit seemed struggling with thoughts and feelings which he had no words to express. When I intimated a wish that, if it were God’s will, he might be

¹ For the former part of this letter, see pp. 29–36.

² Pp. 37, 38.