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Marietta Holley

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# Marietta Holley

Ellis Parker Butler †

In undertaking a series of brief biographies of some of the American humorists of a past day, of which this life of Marietta Holley is one, Cyril Clemens is performing a service of real value. It is inherent in the nature of most written humor that its greatest popularity should come during the years when it is written and that it should presently be almost or entirely neglected. Often a new generation can see nothing laughable in what convulsed readers when the humor was new. Thus the lives of humorists who were important in their day are forgotten. In this book Mr. Clemens has rescued one such from threatening oblivion.

Marietta Holley — “Josiah Allen’s Wife”—created for herself a place in American humor unlike that occupied by any writer of humor in America before or since. Literally hundreds of thousands enjoyed her writings who could see nothing funny in Bill Nye, or any of the other professional humorists, not even Mark Twain. Hundreds of thousands took her to their hearts because they felt she was basing her humor soundly on a belief in temperance, woman’s rights and the homely virtues, while other humorists were merely trying to be funny.

“Josiah Allen’s Wife” was never a literary man’s humorist, as Aldrich was and Mark Twain became in time. She was the common people’s writer and was loved by farm folks, those in small towns, and in general by those who delighted in church suppers and bazaars. Her “pieces” were recited or read on innumerable occasions, along with those of her one-time friend, Will Carleton. All these kindly and simple folk knew personally some Josiah Allen, some Samantha or some Sweet Cicely.

I do not think it can be doubted that Marietta Holley had—although she may

not have consciously known it—a keen sense of the practical application of humor to situation and of the use of the popular topics of the day to interest her readers. For her immense audience she was indebted, as were other writers of her day, to the prevalent system of selling books by agent. She wrote in the hey-day of book-agenting when thousands of men and women were going from house to house all over the country, almost forcing people to buy books. It was this system that created such great sales for General Grant’s Memoirs, Mark Twain’s books, and so on, and Miss Holley’s books were particularly good material. The agents spread her works over all the United States.

At present her books are seldom found except in collections of humor or in some homes where they are still preserved. Vast numbers of her books undoubtedly have been “pulped” for she wrote during the worst period of book-making, her chunky volumes flimsily stitched and soon read to pieces. A few selections from her works are found in anthologies. Mr. Clemens includes a few in this volume.

All in all Miss Holley must be recognized as a “popular American humorist,” for such she was and, as will be seen by reading Mr. Clemens’ book, she was a person worthy of our sincere respect—living sanely in a small up-state New York village, writing industriously for many years, never too impressed by her own importance, accumulating a competence, and always gentle and kind.

Admiralty House, Chatham.

22 September, 1937.

My dear President,

May I accept with pleasure the honorary membership of the International Mark Twain Society, which you have so kindly offered me in place of the late Admiral of the Fleet Earl Jellicoe.

I count this, not only as a personal tribute, but as one to my late leader, Captain R. F. Scott.

Sincerely, E. R. G. R. Evans.

† This essay by the late Ellis Parker Butler forms the preface to Cyril Clemens’ forthcoming biography of the humorist.