Some Reminiscences of James Whitcomb Riley

BY GEORGE S. COTTMAN

The sincere and universal deference paid to James Whitcomb Riley at the time of his death and the extraordinary tributes extended to him while he still lived, are of passing wonder. It is a study in character, in moral effects and in the psychology of the masses. The spirit that distinguished Mr. Riley was exactly the reverse of that by which men seek prominence and popularity. The theoretical virtues of simple kindliness, hearty good will and avoidance of self-glory he put into practice, and mankind paid him in full, revealing that deep down in the human heart exists appreciation of those virtues.

A little incident, here published for the first time, illustrates notably one side of Mr. Riley's character. One day a good many years ago, prior to one of the meetings of the Western Association of Writers, which met annually at Winona Lake, and in which we were both interested, I chanced to meet the poet in the Bowen-Merrill book store, where he was wont to loiter. The conversation turned on sundry mutual friends who attended the literary meetings, among them Benjamin S. Parker, of Newcastle. Mr. Parker, a faithful servitor of the muse, whose talent for worldly success was nil, had confided to me that he would be unable to attend Winona that year on account of the expense. This I casually mentioned to Mr. Riley, and he at once evolved a happy plan. That was that I, as
an official of the organization, should invite Mr. Parker to be its guest, he (Mr. Riley) to pay through me, *sub rosa*, the railroad fare and the hotel bill for the week.

My memory of this is freshened by a letter of Mr. Riley's which, under date of June 19, 1898, reads:

Dear Friend Cottman—Your thoughtful favor regarding our dear old friend finds me yours to command, but you have overlooked informing me of amount needed for the transportation, or I would enclose same. Therefore, can't you arrange at once to meet me at Bowen-Merrill's, as I'll now be there every morning, or can be there any hour you would prefer and notify me by message in their care.

Gratefully and fraternally yours,

J. W. RILEY.

The scheme went through, but came near being amusingly embarrassing, as the recipient of the courtesy was grateful, the association knew nothing about it and I was enjoined from telling anybody. It was not until long after that Mr. Parker knew how he came to be invited to the literary love feast that year.

Mr. Riley's attitude toward the above literary association as contrasted with that of some critics whose views were more nice than broad, was also a revelation of the man. There is no gainsaying that at those gatherings much very crude verse and much equally crude prose was spilled out on the desert air in the name of letters. The review of Indiana literature that ranks highest does not deign to recognize the existence of the said Western Association of Writers; others did recognize it as a mutual admiration society; a professional space-filling humorist of Chicago dubbed it the Literary Gravel Pit Association, and made dollars out of it whenever it had a session, and one journalistic censor of local repute, after accepting a place on its program and entering into its fellowship with apparent relish one year, dished up a column of supercilious diatribe by way of rebuke to aspiring small potatoes.

Riley, who was a member of the association, seemingly did not share these critical feelings in the least. Had the membership been of poets and literati of his own caliber he could not have evinced a more hearty sympathy and fellowship. In a word, amid these literary crudities as amid the crudities of the life that he wrought into literature, he penetrated to
fundamentals and caught the spirit and meaning. The kindred souls who joyously flocked together in the name of literature represented a distinct movement away from sordid things and were the first to create in Indiana anything that could be called a literary atmosphere. As compared with this, I believe, the sometime painful limpings of the muse affected Mr. Riley not one whit. Here as elsewhere he was kindly and charitable.

Of course, Riley, when he attended these meetings, was always the center of attraction, not alone because of his fame, but because of his fascinating and unique personality and of his genius as an entertainer. He and John Clark Ridpath loved to hobnob and made an admirable pair.

One of these Winona gems was resurrected by Booth Tarkington in a fugitive article some years ago. Its incentive was the park barber, whose fair daughter was popular among the tonsorial artist’s customers. In a moment of inspiration, after a visit to the shop, Riley thus paraphrased Tennyson:

It is the barber’s daughter,
And she has grown so dear, so dear.
I worship e'en the lather
Her pa leaves in my ear.

One of the W. A. W. meetings was made especially memorable by the attendance of both Riley and Robert J. Burdette, the latter then in his full fame as a humorist. The contrast between the two men as mirth provokers was interesting to note. Burdette, genial as the sunlight, rollicked in fun with the abandon of a happy boy, and with as little regard for probability. On the other hand, back of all Riley’s whimsical conceits lay a semblance of verity that made the humor of them indescribably penetrating. If Burdette was a genuine humorist, bubbling over like a living spring, Riley was simply sui generis. The essential difference between them is, perhaps, well illustrated by this.

One day the two wags sat on a piazza of the hotel, the center, as usual, of an interested group, when the talk turned on the experiences of the entertainer as he barnstormed among the rural towns. It took the form of an impromptu narrative to which first one and then the other contributed as the story
gamboled along. The point to be made is that, while Burdette's contribution to this offhand collaboration was characteristically funny, I can not today remember a word of it. On the contrary, what Riley said and how he said it—his dry drollery and the pictures he called up before one—are indelibly impressed on my mind. He may or may not, before or since, have let his fancy run along the same groove; but, so far as I know, quite lost to literature is the moving tale of the visiting celebrity who is met at the railroad station by the leading citizen and carried off to his home. The relation of host and guest in the interim before the "show" is mutually embarrassing, the former being ill at ease in the presence of greatness and the latter being generally miserable with overtravel, loss of rest and cinders in the ears, besides the consciousness that he has only so long in which to feed, curry himself, get into a dress suit and look pleasant preparatory to the evening's performance.

The divine tact of woman comes to the fore. In the midst of the citizen's ponderous attempts at conversation the good wife thinks of the rehabilitation which even great men have to undergo, and at her suggestion the guest is shown into the "company" bedroom with its big porcelain bowl and pitcher—the latter empty, of course. He delicately hints for water and the host with cheerful alacrity, but embarrassed at his own oversight, brings in from the rain barrel a supply of last month's vintage well stocked with wiggle tails and with a smell all its own. The unhappy guest, not wishing to be intrusive, further suggests a towel. The towel is brought with apologies. Then some one thinks of soap—there is a fleeting glimpse in the dusk of the citizen scuttling groceryward, and in due time he takes the center of the scene again, having captured a cake of fancy soap of the door-knob variety—the kind that gets slicker and harder the more you rub it. One window of the room opens to the street so the passersby can look in and be friendly. The guest tries to draw the blind. It is one of these skyrocket blinds, and with an upward z-z-zipp, the whole thing mysteriously disappears. ("I never did understand what became of these curtains," commented Riley). The donning of the dress suit not being intended as part of the public enter-
tainment, the guest scrooges back into the corner that promises most privacy, but just as he is waving his arms aloft with the immaculate dress shirt over his head, a bunch outside take it for some sort of a playful signal and crowd up to the window for a better view, “Ah, ha. Come out o’ that—you needn’t try to hide—we see you”, carol sundry gay and friendly voices. They don’t know it’s “company” till the leading citizen goes round the house and explains.

Here the improvised reminiscences evaporated, the gist of the merit being the inimitable Riley flavor that went with the improvisation.

Mr. Riley had his little literary animosities that were sometimes ludicrous in their ferocity. He could not, for instance, tolerate Browning or Walt Whitman as poets, and on one occasion when these were defended he expressed his scorn of both with characteristic pith. Browning’s intellectual subtleties were, evidently, quite foreign to Riley’s mental processes. “To think,” he commented, “of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a real poet, living with that man year after year and having to listen to the things he wrote.”

On the other hand, if his critical judgment failed on certain sides it was broad and penetrating on others, as the following letter shows. The verses in question were a fugitive poem attributed to Tennyson, but not to be found in the great poet’s works. It was called “The Skylark,” and while it obviously took its cue from Shelley’s famous poem it showed the touch of a master hand and a truly Tennysonian warmth and imagery as if even he, in an idle moment, might have experimented with the theme. The first stanza ran:

How the blithe lark runs up the golden stair
    That leans through cloudy gates from heaven to earth,
And all alone in the empyreal air,
    Fills it with jubilant sweet sounds of mirth;
How far he seems, how far
    With the light upon his wings
Is it a bird or star
    That shines and sings?

This rather unusual poem is certainly not widely known.
I introduced Mr. Riley to it and received in return the following critique:

Dear Friend: "The Skylark" (signed Tennyson) is certainly a poem, but not one that Alfred Tennyson would write. But for Shelley's "Skylark," obviously, this one had not been written—which fact, singly clears the master poet—at least to my mind. It is a poem and a fine poem for precisely the same reasons first and originally found and established by Shelley's. Indeed it seems, to the subscriber, an almost avowed imitation, yet by a poet who recognizes its secondary worth as compared with the divine inspiration of Shelley's poem. Possibly the credit to Tennyson is a printer's error, or might it be the work of a Tennyson brother? In any event it is not Alfred's. Find poem herewith returned. With all thanks, your old fraternal

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

Riley was an ardent admirer of Richard Realf, the author of "Indirection" and a number of other remarkable poems not so famous. Before Richard J. Hinton published his Realf volume, I collected and printed in a little brochure a few of the best of the poems that were floating around, and it was to this booklet the following letter refers:

Dear Friend: Can you supply me with one more copy of your Realf poems? In spite of all my care and vigilance the last copy you gave me has utterly vanished as "the snows of yesteryear." . . . Herewith I hasten the Realf portrait to you . . . Can't you arrange with some good artist for a reproduction of it? I count it a privilege to meet all expenses of same. The picture is one our entire fraternity would rejoice in possessing copies of.

My first acquaintance with Mr. Riley was in 1879. At that time he was an amateur actor in the Greenfield Dramatic Club. I harbored the fond delusion that I was foreordained to be a writer of plays and the happy idea occurred to me that a combination might effect a short cut to fame for both of us. Therefore, I inflicted on him the manuscript of a comedy which, though it failed of its original purpose, paved the way to some very cordial letters which to the present day repose among my valued relics. At least one of these letters is so characteristic of the Riley of that day that I quote it in part. The sense of irksomeness, I think, was due to the fact that he had been trying to come into harness after the long Bohemian freedom of youth:
Not long ago my time was wholly mine; now it has passed like the
generality of blessed privileges. . . . In fact I'm growing stale and
sour, and feel sometimes—Ave Maria!—like shutting myself up like a
Chinese lantern, or a concertina, which is more poetical and "passing";
for at best I but jog through the world like poor Chispa, "half the
time on foot and the other half walking."

In this letter he is much distressed by the discovery that
part of the aforementioned play had been lost:

I have not written to you before because—because—and here I
shudder, but will confess the truth, the whole truth and nothing but
the truth. Mr. Black, to whom I told you I had given your Mss., dropped
in upon me night before last to leave a letter for you and to confer
the (here is inserted an awful zigzag line) intelligence that he had
lost the fourth act of your play—! If you occupy this blank I warn
you now that you will find it haunted with some very vicious ghosts.
Better take a clean page of your own and do it right! . . . I en-
close Mr. B.'s letter.

I haven't the heart to read it, for if he criticised you as heartlessly
as he does me, God help you. . . . On an average I am in the city
once a week and would have been out today but for the hanging [one of
those legal pleasantries had been scheduled in Indianapolis for that
day]. There is no demon in all hell's brotherhood that inspires in my
breast the fearful awe that seizes on me when I realize the fact that
the red-eyed law stalks through the world at large.

As I recall my first and my last personal impressions of Mr.
Riley I am struck by the contrast. Soon after the correspond-
ence above referred to he hunted me up at my place of work
in the old Sentinel printing office and we passed what was to
me a very pleasant half hour. He was then thirty years old
—an age at which most men know about what their status in
life is going to be, but his future was as indefinite to him as
though he were just emerging from boyhood, albeit he was
then receiving local recognition as a prodigy. He looked rural
to a degree, and the first impression was of the oddness of his
appearance, his prominent eyes set in the midst of the blondest
of complexions, a wine-colored overcoat rather the worse for
wear and faded about the lapels, a slouch felt hat of uncertain
fashion and accessories of like ilk, making a combination not
easily imagined by those who knew him only in his immaculate
after years, when his scrupulous taste in dress was notable.
In conversation his glance was all forward and the questions
of the present all bore upon the uncertainties of his future. His preferred theme was a personal one, but pursued with such youthful naivete that no one would think of calling it egotism in the ordinary sense of the term. On the contrary, it was so individual that it gave a piquant flavor to the discourse.

It seemed that good friends, with the best of intentions, no doubt, seeing in him a man of promise, had gratuitously assumed the role of literary sponsors. These freely told him what they thought was bad in his poetry, and he mildly resented the failure to recognize that he, too, was entitled to some judgment in the matter. I recall, also, something like scorn for the professional elocutionist and for those who thought he ought to improve his talent by taking lessons. To this day, when I am so unfortunate as to have to hear one of these professional readers do a Riley stunt in the cut and dried style, I feel a consuming desire to give him a glimpse of Riley's little think at the beginning of his phenomenal platform career.

All this was a little more than thirty-seven years ago. Just six days before the unexpected messenger came I spent a quiet evening with the poet in his pleasant Lockerbie street home. Thirty-seven years had wrought changes. At yon end was a raw genius just being welcomed by the world; at this the finished product after a kindly world had done its best. Having worked out his mission on his own chosen lines he was not only laden with honors and a universal respect such as fall to few men, but had abundantly reaped the substantial rewards of life. The room where he received his friends was a nest of culture with its laden bookcases lining the walls, its touches of art, its graceful tokens of friendship, and the center and culmination of this setting of elegance and taste was the poet himself, attired from head to foot with a scrupulous neatness that was in itself an art. The unique personality of old, with all of its flavor that can only be described as "Rileyesque," remained unimpaired, but in place of the hint of verdancy and the uncertainty of one with the nuts of life yet to crack, experience had wrought into him a poise, a large centrality, call it what you will, that seemed too perfect for any mundane thing to disturb.
His glance now was all backward and he preferred to browse discursively in the old fields, recalling this or that vanished figure that had left its impress on his past, particularly the local literati that haunted the sanctums of the long since defunct Indianapolis Herald and Journal. He spoke of his whim of coupling up certain of these characters, for some obscure reason, with his earlier literary idols. For example, George Harding, editor of the Herald, was Charles Lamb; Charles M. Walker, of the Journal, was Leigh Hunt, and so forth. He said that since his paralytic stroke of some years ago had left his right hand disabled he had virtually ceased literary production because it was temperamentally impossible for him to dictate or compose in the presence of another person. Before the paralysis his favorite time for composing was the late night hours after others had retired and there was no longer probability of disturbance. The composing process, as he described it, was exceedingly slow and painstaking. He would write and rewrite, destroying completely each unsatisfactory effort and beginning anew, and many times, he assured me, he was surprised by the gray dawn creeping in at the windows, with at most a few lines accomplished. His last words at the close of this visit, and the last I ever heard him utter, were a cheery “Come again, I'm obliged to you for a pleasant evening,” whereby, with characteristic grace and courtesy, he reversed the obligation.

The world was certainly good to James Whitcomb Riley—so good, indeed, by comparison with the lot of most men, that the gods seemed bent upon an amiable experiment to see how it would work. It worked well. It seemed to work automatically, for Riley appreciated and out of his genius repaid the world in kindness. The world appreciated and proved itself reciprocal to the heart that is filled with a universal kindliness. Riley, like the rest of us, had his repulsions, and at times these amounted to animosities, but they were at a minimum and they were not obvious. It seemed to be a settled habit with him to say very little about a man unless he could say something friendly and approving, and the number that came within this category were legion.