James Whitcomb Riley
By GEORGE C. HITT

When my acquaintance with James Whitcomb Riley began, in 1877, he had passed through ten years of struggle to make himself a poet; he had suffered from what Stevenson called "the green sickness of youth," had dreamed dreams and seen visions, had learned the dignity of labor by dabbling with the paint brushes and working on country newspapers, had settled on a vocation, and was cheerful withal over the outlook for the future. At the age of twenty-eight, he had been outside of Indiana but once, when an adventure with a patent-medicine vendor took him just over the border into Ohio; so that what he knew was acquired by association with his own people. He was "native here and to the manner born" in the fullest measure.

The brief time he had spent in school in the little country town of Greenfield, Indiana, honored as his birthplace, where for a while he had one sympathetic teacher, was the least part of his education. His comfortable home, his mother, his brothers and sisters, and a rather stern father, who failed to see anything but a wayward boy in the house, where he was harboring a genius; the playmates in the town, the neighbors, the country friends who visited with the household and whose visits were returned; the travelers who journeyed to and fro on the National Road; the books he devoured, selected as incongruously as only an eccentric boy who had no special guidance might choose them; the shoemaker's shop, the printing office, the Court House, where as a child and boy he often went with his lawyer father; the political and patriotic meet-

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1 This paper was first prepared in 1919 and read before the Indianapolis Literary Club on January 6 of that year. It was extensively revised and read before the same Club on February 3, 1936. Later in the present year, it was read before the resident members of the Indiana Historical Society in the William Henry Smith Memorial Library, Indianapolis, on May 28.
ings of war-time and after-the-war time; the church socials, the picnics, the county fair—all these were the sources of his education, and, in my opinion, they were far better for him than years spent in school and college.

Indianapolis, I think, has always felt that the poet Riley was grown in its garden. The fact is, he was a poet, well developed, when he came here. He had done before his coming some of the best work of his life, notably his "Fame," "Dot Leedle Boy," "An Old Sweetheart of Mine," "Squire Hawkins's Story," and "If I Knew What Poets Know." He had, too, made his entry into the portals of the histrionic temple, for he had, since a lad, showed his talent for acting, and had read his own verse from many a rural and small-town stage. In the city he had, it is true, a wider field, but the spark of genius both as reader and writer had kindled into a lively flame when he reached us, and it glowed later with increasing steadiness for all the years of his literary productiveness. He was like some flowering plants that yield more prolifically the more their bloom is plucked. It was one of his sayings that "one poem brings on another."

At twenty years of age, when his beloved mother died—his first great sorrow—he had finished a period in his life that furnished him with the largest part of the material for the work of his after years. The impressions made on his strangely sensitive mind, during his infancy, childhood and boyhood, were deep and lasting. It would seem that he never forgot anything that had come under his observation out of which poetry could be made. About birds, bees, animals, flowers and trees; about seedtime and harvest and the weather; about green fields and running brooks; about country and town ways of doing and saying things; about the social, church and school of the community—about all these things his information was minute and definite. From this great storehouse of fact and experience he drew copiously to the end of his career, garbing this homely knowledge with poetic garments, touching it with his imagination, and presenting it to us in verses

Made out o' truck 'at's jes' a-goin' to waste
'Cause smart folks thinks it's altogether too
Outrageous common . . . .
My first meeting with him was solely one of business, a thing he knew as little about as I did of writing poetry. He came into the private office of the business manager of the Indianapolis Journal, which place I then and for years after held, and shyly presented to me an order from the managing editor to pay him a sum of money (which I know now was much too small) for certain poems that had appeared in the paper over his name, early in 1877. He was dressed in a long Prince Albert coat that suggested a professional man, and he also wore a long, light-colored, drooping mustache that suggested a pirate. In after years he always humorously alluded to that growth of hair on his upper lip as "an ingrowing mustache."

Our interview was brief, but it served to make us acquainted. His connection with the paper was as a contributor and it was not for two years afterwards that he came to us as one of the staff, and even then he was master of his own time. But so often was he in the office, following that first call, that I made a place for him in my private room, provided him with a small black-walnut desk, and for many years after I had for an office mate a poet and a companionable friend. Never were two men more unlike. We were of widely different vocations, he a dreamer, I dealing with the practical things of life; he a bachelor and foot-free, I had given "hostages to fortune"; he driven by but one purpose, to write and interpret his writing, I engrossed in the variety of effort necessary in the management of a large daily newspaper—and yet we merged into a friendship that was ideal.

More important to him than our personal relations, however, was his fortunate introduction to the group of men in Indianapolis whom he afterwards knew so well and whose friendship he so highly prized—an introduction quite accidental but, to my mind, most momentous. The newspaper people, of course, were quick to discern his unusual qualities and it was not long until he attracted the attention of a few men who used to foregather almost daily for an hour's interchange of thought and humor and opinion, in my little back room of the Business Office of the Journal, where Fate had established this shy genius. Here he met intimately such men as—Judge E. B. Martindale, the newspaper's proprietor and his first patron here; Rev. Myron Reed and Oscar McCulloch, distinguished
preachers; and William P. Fishback—all of whom were frequent visitors. Others occasionally he saw, like General Harrison, afterwards President of the United States, who dropped in to tell a war story or leave a wise opinion. These sessions became an informal club, of which, alas! we kept no records, and its interesting proceedings have now vanished like a dream. Into this stimulating atmosphere, an entirely new one to him, the young poet came and was welcomed by personages who were prominent citizens, thoughtful professional men, politicians of note, and dabbler in the literary activities of the day. He profited much by the association and it widened greatly his views of life. The *Journal* office, he once told me, was the only college he ever attended, and it was always recognized by him as a helpful and happy sort of school. It continued to be his literary home for years; and there it was that I came to know him intimately, to enjoy his company, and to share in the advancement of his interests both as a reader and writer.

There it was that I saw many of his poems in the making and noted the author, who humorously called himself “the best durned little poet in Center Township,” write lines over and over and try out words and phrases, to the end that they might approach perfection in sound and sense. “It takes a lot of rubber to write a poem,” was one of his quaint observations, as he laboriously put an inspiration into the stanzas that finally pleased him and then read them aloud to me before he sent them to the printer. It was a great pleasure to me, and a corresponding pleasure to him, I think, to have him remark, “How do you like this little feller?” as he handed over for perusal a poem like “Nothin’ to Say” or “Old Fashioned Roses.” And it was positive joy to have him read it himself—a request I always made of him and generally had it granted.

The Indianapolis Literary Club, too, was another helpful element in his development. Within two years after it was organized, he was invited to give a reading at one of its meetings; and the next year, in 1880, he was elected a member. It was gratifying to him to have such a recognition from men who then counted for much in the community, who met him cordially and gave him generous encouragement. It was the first honor of consequence that had come to him in his native state and he highly appreciated it. In due course he appeared on the programs and contributed his share of work at the
meetings and banquets. Two notable papers, "The Old Man," partly prose and partly verse, and his unanswerable arguments concerning the worthiness of "Dialect in Literature," were here first presented, as well as his famous "Old Glory" poem, which he read as a try-out at the Club's annual banquet in 1898 before he sent it to the *Atlantic Monthly*, it and the "Sermon of the Rose" being his only contributions to that periodical.

From the newspaper coign of vantage, he slowly widened his field of activity until in Indiana, at least, he had many admirers, who read his constant flow of verse and prose and who were finally attracted to his entertainments. One winter, that of 1879-80, I managed for him a series of readings in the central part of the State, with the thought that he needed only the opportunity to appear before the people in order to convince them of his great worth. It was a strange adventure for both of us. We worked together over posters, we considered programs, we devised various schemes for advertising through the papers, and, though often disappointed in results, we ended the season satisfactorily. The secret of the success was, that Riley always gave an audience more pleasure than was anticipated.

The intimacy resulting from such a tour was delightful for me. I came to know every phase of character possessed by my comrade. I discovered and excused his few faults and failings, for, like all of us human beings, he had his share of them; but they did not obscure the array of fine attributes that were his, such as his friendly spirit, his tender heartedness, his sturdy honesty, his quaint humor, his singleness of purpose, his fine literary instinct, his industry, and, above all, his genuine love for things "Hoosier." Nicholson tells us that Riley once wrote to him of Indianapolis, calling it "high Heaven's sole and only understudy"; and in those lines of his,

Right here at home, boys, is the place, I guess
Fer you and me and plain old happiness

he voices that intense love for Indiana which was a part of his very nature.

From time to time, during the several years while he was contributing poetry, he wrote for the *Journal* a number of prose sketches, incorporated in which was some excellent verse, and they were most favorably received, because
of their unquestioned merit. They contain, one finds upon reading them again, the germs and often the very substance of much of his poetry. In “Tod,” which was written when he was about twenty-one and is clearly autobiographic, in “An Adjustable Lunatic,” “A Remarkable Man,” “An Old Settler’s Story,” “Where is Mary Alice Smith?,” one or two in the Dickens style, “The Boy from Zenny” and the “Tale of a Spider,” one discovers most surprisingly, the sources of his later work. It would seem as if he had written all these prose sketches and used them as a sort of treasure-house to draw from as he needed poetic material. They are wonderfully well done, showing a fine command of English, much invention, a spice of humor, a lively imagination and a true knowledge of the art of narrative. Enough of these had accumulated by 1882 to make a book. I was anxious that he should get them into print, but he evidenced no especial interest in the suggestion.

In 1878 he had published in the Indianapolis Herald “The Flying Islands of the Night,” a strange, fantastic drama, “a thynge of wytchencreft—an idle dreme,” he called it, quoting Chatterton. It was then and ever after his especial pride. Into it he had poured his weirdest imaginings, making it, as it were, the reservoir for many incomprehensible melodious rhymes that printed themselves on his mind and demanded utterance. This was what he wanted printed in a book; but I objected continuously, because I believed that the practical public would not accept that kind of poetry and that he would be painfully disappointed if he attempted its publication. Because he received no encouragement then from any of his friends, he temporarily abandoned the idea of issuing “The Flying Islands,” but with his usual persistency, thirteen years later, when he was well established, he induced his publishers to bring out a special edition of it, which was followed by others as late as 1913. He always loved this child of his brain which he worked with and revised and hoped to see staged, and he never could quite forgive me for not appreciating it as he did. Frankly, it did not and it does not appeal to me; why, I do not know; but I am very glad it was written because of the charming verses Riley penned afterwards, in defense of it and much other true poetry, called “For the Song’s Sake.”

As we were both Hoosiers, born and bred, and had heard
the same kinds of dialect, we drifted into the habit of using it with each other without thought or comment. Wherever we were, whether traveling, or in our office, or at my home, Riley, assuming the old farmer, or some other character, with me for a mere foil, would keep up long conversations, trying out new phrases and terms of speech, which afterwards would appear in his verse or prose. He was constantly studying and determining the values of the common-talk that we heard on trains or in towns or out in the open country; hence, there is nothing artificial in his dialect—he knew it at first hand. He loved it, used it reverently, and had the genius to make poetry with it.

In the summer and fall of 1882, he wrote the twelve Benj. F. Johnson poems for the *Journal* ("The Old Swimmin' Hole and Eleven More Poems"), assuming their authorship with the last one. They possessed so high a quality of merit that their preservation in book form seemed to me to be imperative. It was not until the next year, however, that they so appeared, Riley using some of them meanwhile in his readings and evincing almost indifference about the book. There was no real publishing house here then, and I therefore took the copy to Cincinnati and tried to induce the old and well-known publishers, Robert Clark & Company, to issue the volume. They courteously but firmly declined to put their imprint on it, but offered to make one thousand copies of the book as a piece of job work, and suggested that the name of George C. Hitt & Company be used as the publishers, Mr. Riley being the "Company." The order was given. The work was well done and the edition was quickly sold; whereupon, having accomplished my object, at their request, I turned the copyright over to the local book sellers, who had awakened to their opportunity, made a contract with them for Mr. Riley and retired from book publishing forever. New editions followed and, later, other books of his appeared, until Riley and his publishers became an Indianapolis institution. I have always been glad because of my early connection with his first book, and I speak of it now with a sense of pride, which I trust is not unbecoming, believing that it marked an epoch in Indiana's literary record, and knowing that it was timely help given to a friend.

At a later period in his life, when his fame had grown
until an English publisher was issuing a volume of his verse, and he was enjoying great prosperity, it was my good fortune to bring together him and Rudyard Kipling—the King, Riley always called him. A wave of politics had washed me temporarily into the service of our government as Vice Consul General of the United States at London, and Riley, having just published his *Rhymes of Childhood*, sent me there two autographed copies and asked me to present them in person, with his compliments, to Andrew Lang and Rudyard Kipling. It was a pleasant but rather difficult task, because of English conventionalities; but after some formal correspondence, I was able to deliver the books as directed, and incidentally to meet Kipling in his bachelor quarters, where he received me most cordially, laughed heartily at "The Raggedy Man," and expressed much pleasure over the gift from a fellow poet. Subsequently he wrote to Riley, acknowledging receipt of the gift and enclosing a poem of his own, commemorating the event, which remained one of Riley's treasures. Later they corresponded and finally met each other in America several times, each thoroughly appreciating the other in a very happy association.

While I was still in London, another event in Riley's rather uneventful life occurred. He fared forth and ventured far from home across the seas. The announcement to me of his coming was characteristic. In a letter, acknowledging mine telling him of the Kipling episode, and, after he had recounted the pleasures of a recent visit with Myron Reed in Denver, he says:

And right here, in confidence, I think you may look for the pair of us your way this summer. Will sail in June, as now agreed upon. Reed is going, sure [here he drops into farmer dialect], and I guess I jes' got to take and turn in and pack up and go too. But law me! I don't see how I can drap all now and leave the place go to rack—and stock and all—like times is now, you know—and go philanderin' off, from pillar to post, a-knockin' round amongst my betters and them 'at kin go—bein' *pervided*, and a'not a-keerin' fer the constant dreenage and expense 'at keeps the pore man with his nose aginst the grindstone all the days of his life, I Gosh! . . . . There's a thousand things I want to ask you about, and kindo' pirate your advice, as always in the past—so, guess I really will have to go over to you purty soon.
And so he came.

With him on this trip abroad were both of his friends and mine, Myron Reed and William P. Fishback. They visited together the Burns country in Scotland, the Shakespeare and Wordsworth localities in England, and then came on to London, where each of them, being of widely differing tastes, took his own way of enjoying the metropolis. Riley here met his friend Henry Irving, whose acquaintance he had made in this country, and the famous actor gave him a dinner on the stage of the Lyceum Theatre after one of his performances, at which were many distinguished persons, among them Irving's friend and fellow artist, the great Coquelin of Paris.

Riley was requested to recite and acquitted himself with high credit, drawing from all, and especially from Coquelin, the warmest praise for his ability both as a reader and actor. His London publishers provided him with entree to various clubs and he was given wide opportunity for a pleasant and profitable visit.

I was with Riley daily during his stay. We wasted much substance in riotous cabfares, as he humorously put it: chasing the elusive Kipling from place to place and just missing him as last at his father's residence; looking with western eyes upon buildings and places that were old and hoary, until antiquity became tiresome; visiting tombs of celebrities, art galleries, and the Houses of Parliament; and finally, winding up such journeys by going to his hotel and talking about the "home-folks" back here in Indiana, to get our bearings again. Westminster Abbey did not interest Riley, I think, save the Poets' Corner, where Dickens lies and the bust of Longfellow stands, both literary heroes to him. He was an interested observer of the Dickens places that are always pointed out in London, the Goldsmith grave in the rear of the Temple Church, and, especially, the graves of John Bunyan, Susanna Wesley, Isaac Watts and Daniel Defoe, found in the Bunhill Fields Burying Ground. As we stood there looking at the monument that marks the spot where the author of Robinson Crusoe lies, upon which is inscribed

**ERECTED BY THE BOYS AND GIRLS OF ENGLAND**

neither of us imagined that some day, out here in the little
Indiana town of Greenfield, there would stand, as there now stands, a bronze statue bearing the legend:

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY
ERECTED BY AMERICAN SCHOOL CHILDREN

Let me note here his retrospective characteristic—"thinkin' back" he called it. It grew almost into a habit that possessed him all through life. In his collected works, where the poems are arranged chronologically, the first title in the first volume is "A Backward Look." In this boyish effort, written before he was twenty, he has Memory, personified, slipping out in the street of "Auld Lang Syne," recalling the dreams of boyhood days, and wandering

. . . down through the woods to the swimming-hole,
Where the big, white, hollow old sycamore grows.
And we never cared when the water was cold,
And always "ducked" the boy that told
On the fellow that tied the clothes.
When life went so like a dreamy rhyme,
That it seems to me now that then
The world was having a jollier time
Than it ever will have again.

Many years later he wrote a dialect poem, entitled "Thinkin' Back," indicating this tendency to dwell on bygone days, a few lines of which I quote:

Thinkin' back's a thing 'at grows
On a feller, I suppose—
Older 'at he gits, i jack,
More he keeps a-thinkin' back!
Old as old men git to be,
Er as middle-aged as me,
Folks'll find us, eye and mind
Fixed on what we-ve left behind—
Rehabilitatin'-like
Them old times we used to hike
Out barefooted fer the crick,
'Long 'bout Aprile first—to pick
Out some "warmest" place to go
In a-swimmin' . . . .

So he went on through life, ever looking back, like Wordsworth's man, to the "cheerful yesterdays," saying but little about the "confident tomorrows," and singing praises to the end, of "The old days, the lost days, how lovely they were!" More than fifty of his poems are in this vein, showing how
happy his early life was and how clear and dear were his memories of it. In the evening of his days he sums it all up in a little one-stanza poem:

Long life's a lovely thing to know,
With lovely health and wealth, forsooth,
And lovely name and fame—but O
The loveliness of Youth!

The present generation does not know—it can not know—the greatness of Riley as a reader. He developed that genius as his genius grew in poetry, and for years before he found a public to buy and enjoy his books he had charmed multitudes with readings from his own work. In fact this outlet was for him a most natural one, because he was born an actor as well as a poet. His imagination drifted easily into dramatic channels, and what he saw and heard as a boy among the homely, wholesome people of Indiana he later transmuted into poetry, and unconsciously began to impersonate the characters that marshaled themselves in his fertile brain.

He began in the humblest way to read his own work at rural school entertainments, at school exhibitions, at Old Settlers' meetings, at Grand Army reunions, and at "The Literary." His vein of humor was delicious, and the smiles he evoked were near neighbors to the pathos that he knew always mingled with the various phases of life. His observation was of the keenest sort, and no peculiarity of speech or manner escaped him in the simple walks he trod. Many of his well known poems were offered to Indiana audiences long before they got into print in book-form, and nearly all of his humorous prose sketches were familiar to his friends here at home before they delighted audiences elsewhere. His best poems, first printed in newspapers, were widely copied; but he was even then strong on the platform as the interpreter of his own product. The lecture bureaus finally awoke to the fact that he was desirable, and for season after season he had for his field most of the United States.

In reading, his selections, both prose and verse, were always varied and required careful memorizing; but no pains were ever spared by him, exhausting as it often was, in presenting his thought and action to his hearers. His manners were pleasing, his gestures graceful, and his voice, though not strong, was so used and controlled as to reach clearly the utter-
most parts of the largest auditoriums. It was musical and agreeable, and was especially trained for the presentation of children's and varied dialect parts. In his serious work, there was no note he could not strike with it to awaken all the emotions. Although faultlessly dressed, one never thought of him other than in the character he represented. He was a plain old farmer, or the self-conscious pedagogue, discoursing on the peanut, or the natural child telling the bear story. His hearers forgot conventionalities and went with him to the fields, and streams, looked with him into the humble homes of country folk, and followed with him into the company of children, who were always dear to him. He couldn't help talking in character. In private life, among his intimates, he frequently dropped into homely dialect without apparent effort, and told stories to children in their own vernacular that were altogether delightful.

He had strong dramatic instincts, like Dickens, who was always a favorite author with him and had considerable influence, I think, on his career. The great Englishman read from his own books, and as a boy Riley had dreams that he too would follow that example. He read how the novelist exercised such wonderful power over audiences in the East during his memorable trip to this country in the late sixties—especially in Boston, where in Tremont Temple he delighted the most cultured people of the city. This inspiration haunted Riley; and when, in 1882, he too stood in Tremont Temple, Boston, on the very stage and spot where Dickens scored one of his greatest triumphs, and looked at the audience packed to the dome and ready to listen to him, it was a proud moment of realization of hope, and filled him with joyful emotion. Boston appreciated him then and afterward, and every other large city in the country was enthusiastic over his performances. So ran his career as a reader.

Today he must be enjoyed through his books; but alas, the pity of it, how much is missed! Sweet is the memory of him as he read in years gone by "An Old Sweetheart of Mine," "The Object Lesson," "The Tree-Toad," "Squire Hawkins's Story," "Nothin' to Say," "Old Glory," "Lines fer the Discouraged Farmer," "Out to Old Aunt Mary's," "Little Orphant Annie," "Good-Bye Jim," and many other poems the titles of which crowd the mind. To those who have sat under his spell
there comes a feeling of gratitude for the rare privilege of
having known him both as poet and reader; and this feeling
is followed by one regret that his voice is forever stilled
and his acting only a memory.

I have repeated here, perhaps at too great length, facts
and opinions that I have expressed elsewhere, and have often
reiterated by word of mouth about Riley's platform work, in
emphasis of my belief that his fame was achieved quite as
much by his genius as a reader as by his genius as a poet. It
was by the interpretation of his thought that his success was
first attained, and thus he introduced to a wide audience his
poetry, which would not have attracted the attention it de-
served if left to mere book publication. It was only after much
persuasion that I induced him to print his first small book,
The Old Swimmin' Hole and 'Leven More Poems. He had writ-
ten the poems in it to read and to have a greater variety for
his programs. He had, by the time they appeared, captured
an extensive audience of interested people and it was from the
platform that he expected to, and surely did, establish a name
as an apostle of the high art of being natural. The popularity
of his books, all issued after he had "arrived" as a reader,
was largely the result of that personal effort; and while it
goes without saying that upon his books will depend the con-
tinuation of his fame, it is also true that he made a place for
them in our generation, by his genius as a reader.

He was not a man who carried his heart on his sleeve; in
many ways he was singularly reticent. He would never tell,
for example, how old he was, and if he ever was in love it was
not revealed to me, as well as I knew him. His profound
respect for womankind was inborn and his love for children
was tender but not effusive. Yet, somehow he read the child-
ish mind and heart like an open book, and with childish speech
he was masterful, as his poems for and about children so
plainly disclose.

His interest in economic, political, industrial or kindred
subjects was very slight. "He would not paddle in the social
slush," as someone said of Thoreau, and Society, as it now
exists, struggled along without him. Friends he had, such as
he chose for himself, but he lived in serenity in a world of

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2 George C. Hitt, "Mr. Riley as a Public Reader," in Book News Monthly (March
1907), XXV, No. 7.
his own, occupied with his thoughts and adorning them with his imagination.

Mention only may be made here of his unusual chirography, his skill in drawing with pen or pencil, and his love for simple music.

The harmony of Tennyson's verse was a great delight to him. He loved the sound of the lines in "The Lady of Shalott," and often quoted those which describe the gallant Sir Lancelot, riding in sight of the mysterious lady, who sat weaving and looking in her mirror:

His broad clear brow in sunlight glowed,
On burnished hooves his war-horse trode;
From underneath his helmet flowed
His coal-black curls, as on he rode,
As he rode down to Camelot.

This is smooth and sonorous verse; it stirs the imagination; it pleases the ear, and it carries over the thought and emotion of the author to the reader, which is the true test of poetry. Tennyson had the gift; but so had Riley. In his poem called "Fame," written when he was only twenty-seven years old, where he described the ecstasy of the poet at his work, he penned these beautiful lines, which do not suffer by comparison with either Tennyson's or Longfellow's smooth measures:

I saw him, in my vision, filled
With rapture o'er a spray of bloom
The wind threw in his lonely room;
And of the sweet perfume it spilled
He drank to drunkenness, and flung
His long hair back, and laughed and sung
And clapped his hands as children do
At fairy tales they listen to,
While from his flying quill there dripped
Such music on his manuscript
That he who listens to the words
May close his eyes and dream the birds
Are twittering on every hand
A language he can understand.

He was especially endowed with imagination, humor, love of nature, keen observation, a remarkable memory, and a fine perception of human relationships. These were what Mrs. Humphrey Ward called "cradle gifts." They were all improved as he used them, but he did not have to acquire them. What he did acquire, and it is a marvel how well he accomplished
the task, was "a true command of the art of words." Somewhere he writes:

Words will not say what I yearn to say,
They will not walk as I want them to.

But he mastered them, God only knows how! and wove them into fabrics of song that are and ever will be beautiful.

How did he get his vocabulary? He never seemed to lack for words and yet he never seemed to be searching for them or studying them in books or dictionaries. When I first knew him he was not given to much reading, though in later years he browsed among books with great delight. He knew Longfellow and Shakespeare and Keats and Tennyson and Dickens well. He then had no library and I have always marveled, and do now, how he could use the English language in so masterly a manner. The fact is he was in many ways an anomaly. He never studied rhetoric, yet his similes and comparisons, his metaphors, allusions and allegories are numberless and striking in their beautiful accuracy. Prosody, as a science, was unknown to him, but there was no form of metrical composition that he did not use, and in most of them, especially the difficult sonnet, he was master. He never lived on a farm, and yet he knew the farmer and all his ways and works. He spent most of his time in the cities and towns, yet he knew the fields and woods and streams in all their variations. He never seemed to be busy, yet he was a tireless worker, by night more than by day. He fathomed all the depths of children's natures, and yet he never was continuously or closely associated with children. He loved childhood as well as children. He was not a "mixer" among men and yet he knew human nature. How did he do it? Ah, there comes in Genius, which was his by the gift of God.

His business sense was entirely undeveloped. Figures, unless they were figures of speech, were wholly useless to him. He once said that he "couldn't tell twice ten from twice eternity." His ideas of time, too, were largely at the mercy of the work he had in hand. If the work were finished, the appointment would be kept. He was likely to miss any train on which he was to travel, and his bump of orientation, or notion of direction, was a deep depression. He could get lost in a pasture lot.

His humor defies description. One of his friends said
of it: "No man with any sense of humor would try to define Mr. Riley's humor. When the last trumpet blows there will be two things still mocking the encyclopedists—the mystery of the eternal feminine and the mystery of the humor of the eternal Riley.

It may be said, in passing, that he toyed but little with "the eternal feminine," for he died a bachelor.

What Riley learned at his mother's knee about religion stayed with him through life. He was a mystic at times, reaching out after the unknowable, toy ing now and then with spiritualism, but ever answering honest doubt with a deep faith in God and a sure hope of immortality that grew finally into firm convictions. His writings are full of positive utterances that confirm these views and give assurance that he was at heart a deeply religious man. The broad hopefulness and optimistic tendency of his philosophy, coupled with this devout sentiment of religion, made him a safe and helpful teacher of men. His works glow with lines like these,

Dear Lord! Kind Lord!
Gracious Lord! I pray
Thou wilt look on all I love,
Tenderly to-day!
Weed their hearts of weariness
Scatter every care
Down a wake of angel-wings
Winnowing the air.

Bring unto the sorrowing
All release from pain;
Let the lips of laughter
Overflow again;
And with all the needy
O divide, I pray,
This vast treasure of content
That is mine to-day.

or these:

My religion is to jest
Do by all my level-best,
Feelin' God'll do the rest—
Facts is, fur as I can see,
The Good-Bein' makin' me,
'il make me what I ort to be.

Read the lines, "We Must Believe," on the immortality of the soul—too long to quote.
He was always looking for the good in people. In a single line, in one of his poems, he announced his belief “That the bad are as good, as the good are bad.” Once he expressed this trait of character in a single stanza, worthy to have place in the creed of all of us:

There's a space for good to bloom in
Every heart of man or woman,—
And however wild or human,
Or however brimmed with gall,
Never heart may beat without it;
And the darkest heart to doubt it
Has something good about it
After all.

Of all the poems of consolation and comfort that Riley wrote, the one called “Kissing the Rod” is to my mind fullest of beauty and cheer to tired and discouraged souls. It is brief, and always worthy of repetition. I quote the last stanza as a further example of his wondrous faculty of combining sound and sense and sentiment into a work of art:

For, we know, not every morrow
Can be sad;
So, forgetting all the sorrow
We have had,
Let us fold away our fears,
And put by our foolish tears,
And through all the coming years,
Just be glad.

For many years he lived a rather unsettled life here in Indiana and on the road, having no permanent abiding place and no ties that bound him to what might be called a home. Twenty-four years before he died, however, and after Fortune had smiled upon him and his fame was established, Fate and the kindest of friends guided his bachelor steps into a quiet and ideal habitation, and provided for him a home to the end of his life.

This house in “rhyme-haunted” Lockerbie Street was presided over by a beautiful, refined and lovely woman. As the years went on, out of that harmonious household, she suffered the loss of father and mother and her talented husband; and then she continued, in sickness and health, with unfailing devotion, to minister in the kindliest way to the comfort of the gifted poet, whose welfare she had assumed.
and who was largely dependent on her. It was a relationship wholly disinterested on her part, and one singularly fortunate for him, because of the partial paralysis that touched him during the few closing years of his life. Her home became a veritable shrine, where admiring friends from all parts of the country, as well as from abroad, visited him. Here the children came in joyous groups to greet him on his birthdays; here was a retired spot where he read and pondered and wrote; and here he died in the fullness of time, “the best-loved citizen of the Hoosier Commonwealth.”

He has been gone from us now for many years, and his life, seen in perspective, appears to us a very even one. Honors came to him in due time, without a struggle, plentifully and while he lived, but they did not spoil him. He accepted them gratefully and humbly; then he went on being himself. If he had enemies in the world, they were silent ones. He did not have to wait too long for Fame; it overtook and overwhelmed him. His roses came to him while he was alive. And what a heritage he left us! Books, beloved books, full of poetry and prose that appeal to the hearts of young and old, many of them veritable treasure-houses of the gems that sparkle in literature—too beautiful ever to lose their splendor.