

When Riley Won the Palm

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In his own lifetime James Whitcomb Riley was held in affection and high respect in Indiana and through much of the rest of the nation as well.¹ Anyone privileged to hear him lecture or read his poems did not forget, and the number of the editions of his works bears witness to his general popularity. In 1887, however, Riley was relatively unknown in the eastern United States; his performance on a program headed by James Russell Lowell marked the end of that obscurity. Lowell at the time was considered one of the most distinguished American men of letters—editor, author, poet, professor, and diplomat—and it is interesting to note that on this occasion, by common consent, Riley outshone Lowell and a company of professional writers.²

In order to raise money for what Robert Underwood Johnson delicately called "spiritual lobbying"³ for international copyright laws, the American Authors' Copyright League sponsored a series of benefit readings. Perhaps the most memorable of many such programs were two given in New York at Chickering Hall on November 28 and 29, 1887.

Riley, who had not previously read in the East, was invited to appear on the program almost by happenstance. While Johnson, who seems to have been responsible for arrangements, was working on lists, Henry Cuyler Bunner told him, "Don't fail to get Riley."⁴ They assigned him the last place on the program for November 28, an undesirable spot because some commuters could be expected to slip out early to catch their trains. With Lowell presiding, Mark Twain, Edward Eggleston, Richard Henry Stoddard, Bunner, and George W. Cable read from their own work before Riley gave the closing readings of "When the Frost Is on the Punkin" and "The Educator." Train schedules forgotten, the audience gave Riley a standing ovation; for an encore, he recited "Goodbye, Jim." Men of established reputation—Lowell, Parke Godwin, George William Curtis among them—waited their turns to shake his hand. The audience, in no hurry to leave now, applauded when Lowell announced that Riley would appear on the next day's program.

On the second occasion Lowell, president of the league, again presided. He read from his own poems and was followed by Richard Malcolm

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¹ Arthur W. Shumaker, *A History of Indiana Literature* (Indianapolis, 1962), 203; see 202-19 for general information about Riley.

² Information which follows about the various readings is derived, unless otherwise noted, from Robert Underwood Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston, 1923), 261-64.

³ *Ibid.*, 265, 276n.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 263. See also William Lyon Phelps (ed.), *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley* (Indianapolis, 1930), 75-78.

Indianapolis. Ind. Nov. 21, 1887.

Dear Mr. Johnson:

In answer to your request of date 18th, I fear I will not be able to report two or three days in advance of 28th—as lecture engagements hold me from starting your way until, probably, morning of the 25th. Will reach New York by Saturday, when Mr. Nye will meet me, and we'll find you as soon thereafter as possible.

Glad you ask to have me bring the book along, as I certainly want you among the first to see it—My only regret is that you couldn't see it in initial proof, and help a fellow wholly destitute of a literary advisor.

In the matter of my readings I will try very hard not to disappoint you—for I feel as gravely conscientious as I am grateful to you for the opportunity do
Genuinely ~~grateful~~ ^{grateful} your sincere friend,
~~Wm. Riley~~ W. Riley

RILEY ACCEPTS THE INVITATION FOR HIS FIRST READING IN NEW YORK
ON NOVEMBER 28, 1887.

Johnston, Charles Dudley Warner, Thomas Nelson Page, William Dean Howells, Frank R. Stockton, George William Curtis, and Riley. Once again the audience came to its feet applauding. The two programs netted more than four thousand dollars, enough to subsidize "spiritual lobbying" for a long time.

In March the next year Page and Riley read together again when, in Johnson's words, "one or two Pullman cars containing visiting authors from the North"⁵ went to Washington for a program intended to help sway Congress. It was attended by President and Mrs. Grover Cleveland, who afterwards gave the visiting writers a brilliant reception.

At the first reading in November, 1887, Riley had made a memorable impression on Page⁶ who was already well known for his short stories and essays published in magazines; he was then writing a children's book, *Two Little Confederates*, which has proved a minor classic. Following the Washington program, over a period of months Riley exchanged books and a handful of cordial letters with Page.⁷ In the fall of 1888 Page returned from a business trip—he still earned his butter and his bread as an active member of the law firm of Page and Carter in Richmond, Virginia—and found an invitation for a reception for Riley that had already taken place. He promptly wrote to the "Gentlemen" who had issued the invitation not only an explanation of his absence but an enthusiastic evaluation of Riley as well.

Riley is one of the few geniuses it has ever been my fortune to know. On the two occasions when I have met him in public, he has easily won the palm against such men as Lowell, Clements [Clemens], Eggleston, and many others, who were the picked champions in the Literary field. But far better than this, I rank the qualities which through his native modesty have kept him sweet and unaffected whilst they dazzled and entranced all others. He has the very soul of a poet, and we are all proud of him. His books lie before me now, and are my constant friends, as in them I find the very flavor of the apple-blossoms, and find my youth embalmed.

I beg to testify that we love him down in this old State [Virginia], and I bespeak for him a glorious future.⁸

Page valued charm, and as a lawyer and a southerner he was interested also in oratory and all allied skills such as he had seen Riley use to sweep an audience to its feet. But perhaps after all the basis of Page's preference was what he stated more temperately in a letter to Riley early in 1890:

⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁶ Page's letters are in the Riley Papers in the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington; see especially that of June 4, 1888. See also letters among Page's letterpress books in the Page Collection of the Clifford Waller Barrett Library of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, especially his letters to R. C. Coldwell of the Southern Lyceum Bureau of Louisville, Kentucky.

⁷ *Ibid.* See also Riley's letters to Page in the Page Manuscript Collection, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. There is also at least one Riley letter in the Page family papers recently acquired and still being processed by the Barrett Library of the University of Virginia from the Page family.

⁸ Page to Elijah Walker Halford and others, October 29, 1888, Riley Papers.

I hold [you] in highest esteem as one of the few true poets of America. . . .

I assure you that I love your books, they have the two essential qualities for me[—]
 music and heart, real music & heart.⁹

These were qualities which endeared him to readers and listeners, for in tugging at the heartstrings, Riley used varied metrical skills. This basis for Page's judgment and for popular approval heaped upon Riley evidently held valid also for the men composing the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which elected Riley to membership in 1911,¹⁰ and for the National Institute of Arts and Letters, which in 1912 conferred upon him its first gold medal for poetry.¹¹

⁹ Page to Riley, January 11, 1890, *ibid.*

¹⁰ *In Memoriam: A Book of Record concerning former members of the American Academy of Arts and Letters* (New York, 1922), 215.

¹¹ Phelps, *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley*, 7, 316-18.