

# What a Real Poet is Really Like

Men who knew James Whitcomb Riley and his work intimately tell something about the great Hoosier who played upon the heartstrings of a nation with his songs of common folk and manners

Nowadays a poetic genius doesn't look like one. On the street, you might guess him to be a business man or a lawyer or a preacher or a photographer. Not since the time of Edgar Allan Poe have real poets worn their hair long—as in the comic pictures—or affected the soulful expression. Nowadays when a man wears his hair like Spanish moss on a Florida oak he is suspected of being hard up. And if he exhibits what is supposed to be his soul by certain shifting and staring of his eyes he is pitted as one whose mental gearing has sand in it.

Bliss Carman, former editor of the Independent and a poet of note, was one of James Whitcomb Riley's closest friends. After the Indiana songster's death on July 23, Carman told much about Riley to Mr. Joyce Kilmer of the New York Times Magazine and Mr. Kilmer in turn told to the public.

Some 30 years ago Carman was introduced to the already famous Hoosier. Riley's keen bird-like eyes surveyed the tall frame of the new and young acquaintance: "Gosh, you're a stalwart, ain't ye?" he remarked, grinning. "I guess your parents must have trained you on a trellis."

Then, as reported by Mr. Kilmer, Carman went on to say:

"The next time I saw Riley was in Philadelphia. I went to read before the Browning society, and I don't mind telling you that I was scared to death. When I got out all alone on the stage and saw a thousand people staring up at me I felt more like running away than doing anything else. But when I saw Riley down in the audience, looking at me in his quaint, friendly way, then I felt all right. I wasn't afraid to read my poetry to Riley."

"After the reading was over Riley tucked me under his arm and said: 'Now, let's get around to the hotel and we'll take off our shoes and get a chew of tobacco and be comfortable.'

"You know, such remarks as this were all the more piquant because Riley was so very punctilious and scrupulous in all his personal habits. He always was immaculately dressed. I never knew him even to make so much of a concession to comfort as to put on a smoking jacket or a lounge coat. But he liked to go to his room and stretch himself on his bed and talk. And he never talked about anything but literature, chiefly poetry."

"Riley had a great fund of knowledge of poetry and knew lots of out-of-the-way homely verse. He delighted particularly in ridiculously bad newspaper verse."

"Riley liked to read poetry aloud. When I went to his house of an evening, he generally was waiting for me with some favorite book, ready to read aloud."

"What sort of poetry did he prefer?"

"His tastes covered a wide range. Two poets to whom he was especially devoted were Longfellow and Swinburne."

"Riley liked Longfellow's directness and simplicity. The things that pleased him in Swinburne's work were the music and the deft craftsmanship."

"After Riley had received his degrees from some of the colleges, he seemed to feel that he ought to be known as a poet, rather than as a humorist and writer of dialect verse. He tried hard to live up to the name of poet, and wanted his nonsense rhymes of his vagabondage forgotten. Yet his vernacular verse, or, as he called it, his dialect verse, was his chief contribution to literature."

"Riley was just a poet. That was all he ever cared to be. He was not interested in anything but poetry. He knew nothing of politics—he had not voted for 30 years. And as for philosophy, he had nothing but contempt for the modern thinkers."

"There was something very pathetic and charming about Riley's tenacity in holding the serious poet pose. His nonsense was just one of his ways of writing which happened to prove popular; when he got a chance to write in another way how eagerly he seized it, and how persistently he clung to it!"

"His last years were the happiest of his life. I think. He had his own car and rode around Indianapolis and its suburbs every day, generally taking with him some friend. He was honored and loved, and I think he felt that life had been good to him."

"Riley's father was a lawyer. His grandfather came to Indiana from Pennsylvania. His grandmother on his mother's side was Pennsylvania Dutch. His father was Irish."

"Riley had many prejudices. He disliked Poe very much. He disliked Poe's character so much that he could hardly read his poetry. Of course, he must have liked Poe's music and splendid metrical effects."

"Of course, you know the story of Riley's famous imitation of Poe? He had taken a position on the staff of an Anderson, Ind., paper, and the editor of a rival paper kept ridiculing him. Riley



RILEY'S LAST PUBLIC APPEARANCE

wanted to get even with him, so he wrote his imitation of Poe, and had it published in a paper in another part of the state with an elaborate story about the discovery of the manuscript.

"At once it made a great sensation all over the country. It made so great a sensation that Riley was terrified, and feared that he would be accused of literary forgery. Meanwhile the editor of the rival paper wrote: 'No doubt our young friend Riley will belittle this poem and say it is not the work of Poe. But it is Poe, and Poe's best manner.' The sensation grew to such proportions that Riley had to confess that he had written the poem. And then the editor of the paper discharged Riley because he had not published it in his paper."

"Then the Indianapolis Journal gave him a job, which he held for years. He wrote reams of nonsense verse, and wrote up in verse the shops of the merchants who advertised in the Journal."

"Riley's first book was called 'The Old Swimmin' Hole and 'Leven More Poems.' He published it himself. It sold so well that it was soon taken over by a publisher, and passed through many editions."

"Riley's exquisite penmanship showed the care with which he wrote. Originally he wrote a careless and rather illegible script, but he had so much difficulty in getting the printers to read his writing, and printing his dialect verse correctly, that he took up the study of penmanship. He was careful always to get the dialect of one part of Indiana as distinct from the dialect of any other part."

"Any man's character," he said, "is best remembered, I suppose, by some of his habitual gestures and expressions." I remember Riley as very deliberate in his motions, especially in his last years. Smooth shaven, ruddy, well groomed, he looked like a benign old English bishop more than anything else."

Mr. Don Marquis of the New York Sun aptly considers Riley and his poetry from an entirely different angle.

"James Whitcomb Riley," says he, "was the companion of fairies in Arcady; for the Hoosier belongs to a race apart. And while some are captured and broken to trade, the gentle poet escaped and kept always the vision of hidden things."

With these prefatory remarks the writer goes on with his essay:

"There are two sorts of Indianan—the ordinary Indianan, who is not so very different from the Ohionan or the Illinoisan, and the Hoosier."

"The Hoosier belong not merely to a race apart, but to a separate species. He is human, but with a difference; he is aware of the kinship between humanity and the so-called lower animals (and even the plants and streams) on the one side, and on the other side of the kinship of humanity with the elves."

"When the moon turns the mists to silver and the owls wail and the frogs wake up along the creeks and lakes and the fairies saddle and bridle the fireflies and mount them and go whirring and flashing off in search of airy adventures the Hoosiers steal out of the farmhouses and hamlets and creep down to the bottom lands and dance and sing and cavort under the summer stars. They do so secretly, dodging the mere humans, for secrecy is the essence of their midnight, whimsical revels."

"In the daytime they pretend they are just ordinary Indianans; their own brothers and mothers may not realize that they are Hoosiers."

"But in Indiana, as elsewhere, there is business and the need to attend to it. There must have been even in Arcady—somebody owned the flocks and herds of Arcady and turned them into butcher's meat and leather, and the shepherds only piped on the sufferance of their commercial-

minded masters. These wild birds and prancing, long-legged lovers of the moon, are often captured and broken and tamed to trade and industry by the more sordid citizenry. They are yoked to the handle end of the plow, chained to the desk; by the hundreds and thousands they become clerks and salesmen and railroad presidents and novelists and business men of all sorts."

"James Whitcomb Riley was a Hoosier who happily escaped; he was never captured, never enslaved; the things hidden from the rest of us, or revealed only in flashes, remembered but vaguely from the days of our own happy Hoosierdom, he continued to see steadily; he lived among them familiarly to the end, and until the end was their interpreter to us."

"'Bud come here to your uncle a spell,' says Riley in effect, 'and I'll show you not only a fairy, but a fairy who has for the moment chosen to be just as much of a Hoosier as the Raggedy Man, or Orphan Annie, or Old Klugry, or the folks at Griggsby Station.'

"The critics and the learned doctors of literature are already debating as to whether Riley had imagination or only fancy. (It would be a terrible calamity to some of them if they said it was imagination and it was officially declared later to be merely fancy; that is the sort of mistake that damns a critic and makes the sons and grandsons of critics meek, hacked, apologetic young men.) And doubtless the point is exceedingly important. For if a poet has imagination they say his work is significant. And if he has only fancy his work is not significant."

"The chief merit of Riley's dialect verse—which is the most popular part of his production and the part with which the critics chiefly concern themselves—is its effectiveness as a medium for character portrayal. Whimsical, lovable, homely, racy, quaint, salty, pathetic, humorous, tender are his dialect poems; essentially, he has shown us life as a superior writer of prose sketches might do, adding the charm of his lyricism."

"But, personally, we never like him so well as when he is writing sheer moonlight and music. Probably no poet who ever wrote English—certainly no American poet—got more luscious language than Riley. A sweetness that is not so sugary that it cloy, having always a winy tang. For instance, from 'The Flying Islands of the Night':

... in lost hours of lute and song,  
When he was but a prince—I but a mouth  
For him to lift up piping and drain  
To his most ultimate of stammering sobs  
And maudlin wanderings of blinded breath...

"There is no better evidence of the genuineness of Riley's sentiment, particularly in the dialect poems, than the discretion with which he touches the pathetic chord when he touches it at all. One of the most popular poems he ever wrote was 'Old-Fashioned Roses,' and one word too much, one pressure the least bit too insistent would have made the thing as offensive as a vaudeville ballad. The taste which told him to be simple and the sincerity which begat the taste save the verses from the reproach."

"His verses for children and about children could only have been written by a man whose love and understanding of children was real, for children are quick to detect and repudiate anything of the sort that is 'pumped up' for effect, and they contributed enormously to the general feeling of affection for him. The regard of the children was in a way a testimonial to his persisting youthfulness of spirit; he was still their playmate; perhaps it is an earnest of immortality, if immortality can be. Certainly love endures longer than anything else, and this man with the childlike sweetness in his soul goes from us loved as few men have been."

## DISJOINTED SNAKE COLLECTS ITSELF

Head Whistles and Other Parts Come Back and Link Themselves.

Larned, Kan.—Enoch Chase had a peculiar experience while taking the logs out of the old dugout on Mel Hick's south eighty. He ran across a joint snake down between the logs and hit it with his spade. Of course every joint flew apart and started to wiggle off.

Enoch just for a joke, picked up one of the joints and put it in a bucket and then slipped behind the logs and waited to see what would happen. In about ten minutes he heard a sort of low whistle and then a rustling. The



Made a Peculiar Whistle.

head of the joint snake came out of the woods and looked around. It then made a peculiar whistle and another joint backed up and fastened on to the head.

The head whistled twice and joint No. 2 came out, and so on, so many whistles for each part, until it came time for the one Enoch had in the bucket. At its call the thing thrashed around in the bucket like all possessed, but couldn't get out. Of course, without the joint that fit, the snake couldn't get together.

Enoch said the last he saw of the head had taken charge of one-half and the tail the rest and had gone off in different directions to hunt up the missing joint. Enoch got almost home with his joint when an automobile tooted down the road. This either scared the joint or it was its coupling signal, for Enoch says it managed to flop out of the bucket and get away in the tall grass.

## YELLOWBACKS LIGHT CIGARS

Mysterious Individual in New York Hotel Excites Wonder of Bellhops.

New York.—"One of your best cigars," said an elderly man in a silk suit, gray silk gloves, gray socks and the same colored suede shoes.

The girl behind the cigar counter in an uptown hotel looked at this person and brought forth a cedar box with an aroma that reached for yards.

The symphony in gray selected a 50-cent perfecto, took out a pearl-handled knife from a gray suede case, cut off the end of the cigar and then placed it in his mouth. He then took out a roll of bills, handed the cigar counter girl one with a "V" on it, and then to her surprise plucked a yellowback from the roll and applied it to the gas lighter.

He was slow about lighting the cigar. His change was on the counter. However, he finally picked it up, threw the burned bill into a sand vase and walked away.

Four bellhops, who had watched the preceding, sprang to the vase. The paper still was burning and all that was left was the part marked with two X's.

"Sure," said one of the bellhops, "he does that all the time. Somebody told me that it's a moving picture actor, but anyway if this paper can be redeemed by Uncle Sam I'm for him."

## REAL BABES IN THE WOODS

Brother and Sister, Aged Nine and Eight, Lost Five Days in City Park.

Waterbury, Conn.—The fairy tale of "Babes in the Wood" has been duplicated in the woods near Lakewood park, by Andrew Yankauskas, nine years old, and his sister, Mary, aged eight. The children left home one morning to go fishing. Losing their way and becoming bewildered, they remained hidden in the woods five days, living on wild berries and sleeping under trees. Their parents had given up hope, believing the children had been drowned, but the pair finally were located by a policeman.

## Re-Wed After 33 Years.

New York.—Mrs. D. Butler, sixty-four years old, and Peter J. Dobbs, sixty-eight, who were divorced 33 years ago, have just re-wed. Both had taken other mates, who have since died.

**MAGIC WASHING STICK**  
SAVES ALL THE RUB  
Don't Wash the Old Way  
Ask your grocer for a 50c box of Magic Washing Stick—enough for 15 washings; slice one section of one stick with a bar of soap and boil in a gallon of water; add this to the clothes in a boiler of hot water; boil 20 minutes, stirring often; rinse and hang out to dry. Not a rub in the whole job is needed. Money refunded if it fails. Isn't that worth trying? Good grocers sell it.  
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## LOOK TO FOURTH GENERATION

Writer Sees Little to Praise in the First Three Generations of Modern Americans.

The North American child is too often merely the by-product of marriage. It serves as an outlet for that pride which its parents cannot always reasonably take in themselves. It is petted, spoiled, pampered, overdressed and underdisciplined, till there is evolved a strange pigmy for whom the world soon grows banal, who is destitute of the petitional appeal of childhood and who surveys an already anticipated and thoroughly analyzed future with the cold eyes of unnatural knowledge. Alan Sullivan writes in Harper's Magazine for August. The world is his football. It is smart beyond description. But there is in the forced garden of its life no sheltered bed where may bloom the flowers of graciousness or peace. Of such will be the new aristocracy, and its traditions will be of grandfathers who, by virtue of that fine native American longheadedness, delivered the goods of their period and were promptly and suitably rewarded. But there will be few traditions of courtliness, scant reminders that noblesse oblige, and but scattered memories of inherited responsibilities. The sempiternal dollar will still dominate. One generation was too busy collecting and the other will be too busy spending. The second generation offers no promise and the third but little. The fourth will probably open a new and finer cycle.

## Was His Humor Conscious?

A young woman in Pittsburgh was recently looking at material in one of that city's leading dry goods stores in an attempt to select what would make an attractive skirt for the seashore. The clerk rather strenuously suggested the availability of several patterns.

"But," said the young woman, "they are rather loud, don't you think?" Without a glimmer of a smile, and in a perfectly correct tone for a salesman to assume, he replied:

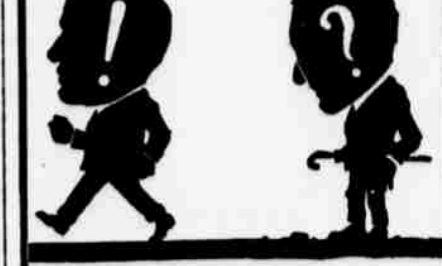
"Too loud for awnings—just right for skirts."

## The Difference.

"Politician, isn't he?"  
"Oh, no, he's a statesman."  
"Well, what's the difference?"  
"A statesman, my dear chap, is one who is in politics because he has money. A politician is one who has money because he is in politics."

## Do you earn a living you don't get— or do you get a living you don't earn?

The word dollar was first thaler.



## Two Fellows

are trying to get ahead.

It's easy to see who'll win.

If you have any doubt about coffee holding some people back—in fact many—leave the hesitating class, stop coffee ten days, and use

## POSTUM

This delicious pure food-drink, made of wheat, roasted with a bit of wholesome molasses, has a delightful, snappy flavor. It is free from the drugs in coffee and all harmful ingredients.

Postum is good for old and young, and makes for health and efficiency.

"There's a Reason"