

12.25.1911
D267
R.F.
1911

RILEY, NYE & FIELD

PERSONAL NOTES AND RECOLLECTIONS



By
EUGENE V. DEBS
(IN NATIONAL MAGAZINE)



Late in the seventies a sketch of country life in quaint and homely phrase, copied in one of our local papers, attracted my attention. The writer seemed to have dipped his pen into the very heart of my own experience as a hoosier lad, and the picture he drew, so faithfully true to the days of my childhood, appealed with irresistible charm to my delighted imagination. Eagerly I sought the writer's name. His imperishable fame was already achieved, so far as I was concerned.

James Whitcomb Riley! Who could he be? The name was totally strange to me. And yet I felt that the world knew—must surely know—this wonderful magician whose art had so enchanted me.

I soon learned that James Whitcomb Riley was none other than "Benj. F. Johnson of Boone," whose dialect verses, contributed to the Indianapolis *Journal* about that time, were eagerly read and gave the writer his early local fame as the "Hoosier Poet." Among these poems, which have since become familiar wherever the English language is spoken, were "The Frost is on the Punkin," "The Old Swimmin' Hole," and others, a dozen in all, which the author was persuaded by his devotees to have done into a modest little volume entitled "The Old Swimmin' Hole and 'Leven More Poems."

The home of the "Hoosier Poet" then, as now, was at Indianapolis, the state capital, whither he had gone after leaving his native town of Greenfield; and he was dividing his time between newspaper and literary work, and giving readings from his studies in child-lore and country life to local audiences at surrounding points.

Impatient to see this native genius of the hoosier soil, whose keen poetic insight, sympathetic interpretation and charming

dialect had so appealed to my imagination, I boarded a train for Indianapolis, only to find on arrival, to my great disappointment and regret, that Mr. Riley was absent from the city. But I met George Hitt, of the *Morning Journal*, who was then Riley's manager and booking agent, and through him I arranged for an early date for the rising young poet and humorist at Terre Haute.

The first appearance of the "Hoosier Poet" in our city was anything but a shining success, although the poet gave a brilliant exhibition of his wonderful powers as a mimic and as a personator of the characters sketched in his poems and studies. The entertainment was given in the old Dowling Hall, and there was a painfully diminutive attendance.

Riley himself had more than measured up to expectations. He was, indeed, a delicious treat to those who could appreciate his quaint humor, his melting pathos, his poetic imagery and his flawlessly faithful impersonation. His hoosier farmer was fresh from the soil, a breathing, boasting, homespun reality. His dandified schoolmaster teaching a country class was the very perfection of mimic art, while his child-stories, told in their own simple, guileless fashion and accentuated with their own eager, impulsive gestures, were too marvelously true to nature to admit of even the faintest suspicion that, in heart and imagination, the poet had outgrown his own elysian childhood.

Surely, I argued to myself that night, this settles the question of Riley's genius, and never again will the God-gifted "Hoosier Poet" be humiliated by so paltry an audience in Terre Haute. On his next visit he will without doubt be greeted by an overflowing house and given a rapturous ovation.

But alas! the second audience was even smaller than the first. My surprise and mortification may be imagined. But I was

more than ever determined that the people of Terre Haute should *see* James Whitcomb Riley and realize that a poet had sprung up out of their own soil—a native wild flower at their very feet—whose fame would spread over all the land and beyond the seas to the most distant shores.

A third attempt resulted in another dismal failure. The people—except the few—refused to be interested in this native interpreter of the common life, this poet of childhood's fairy world, this sweet, homely singer of bees and honeysuckles, babbling brooks and laughing meadows, clover blossoms and tinkling bells, and the low-roofed cabin of content, half-hidden in its perfumed setting of hollyhocks and old-fashioned roses.

Repeated efforts to awaken them with the glad tidings that a new sun had risen in their hoosier skies all proved unavailing until some years later when Riley, having met Bill Nye in the meantime, whose fame as a humorous philosopher was then in the ascendant, was invited, at the instance of the latter, to appear before the assembled authors and their guests at their national entertainment in New York City.

It was on this occasion that Riley made the "hit" of his life. He fairly electrified the sedate authors and their friends, and the following morning the whole country was reading of his wonderful performance.

The entertainment was given at the Academy of Music, and it was crowded to the doors with authors, poets, writers and their friends. The leading lights in contemporaneous literature were there. Lowell, Twain, Howells, Cable and other celebrities were all on the program, and read selections from their works. Bill Nye had been invited to give a dash of humor to the occasion. At his request Riley attended him, and when Nye had given his number on the program he responded to an enthusiastic encore—with Riley.

Few in that amazed literary audience had ever seen Riley before, and not many had even heard of him. He was still in his boyhood, and now this untutored hoosier lad, like Burns at Edinburg, found himself in the presence of the assembled poets, artists and celebrities of his day.

To be sure, he had already received a letter from Longfellow, highly commending a poem which chanced to come under the eye of the elder poet, but his fame was chiefly confined to his native state and even there to limited circles.

But when he rendered his dialect masterpiece, "When the Frost is on the Punkin," in his own inimitable style, on the stage of the Academy of Music that memorable day, he thrilled with ecstasy the cold and critical literary audience which had been surfeited with dignified and prosaic discourse, and the house echoed and re-echoed with excited applause.

The strange young poet and actor had fairly lifted his listeners out of their seats and transported them to realms of homely poetic imagery hitherto unknown to them.

Astonishment and delight were equally blended in the faces of his applauding listeners. Riley was a revelation to the cultured and scholarly circles of the eastern metropolis. He was as refreshing to them as a breath from the prairies of his native state.

James Russell Lowell, his face aglow with eager interest, leaned over to William Dean Howells and asked:

"Who is that wonderful young man?"

"That," answered Howells, "is James Whitcomb Riley of Indiana."

"He's the greatest poet in America," was Lowell's remarkable and flattering tribute.

Riley's fame was achieved. At a single bound he had reached the summit. His name was on the lips of everyone, and the

account of his extraordinary conquest was flashed over all the land.

Mrs. Grover Cleveland, whose husband was then President, was in the audience. Her enthusiasm was boundless. Riley must visit the White House, Mrs. Cleveland urged, that the President and his friends might also enjoy his poetic charm and his marvelous art. The invitation was accepted, and at the national Capitol the poet added fresh lustre to his fame.

The whole country was now clamoring to see and hear Riley. Amos J. Walker, his booking agent, was deluged with applications for dates. Amos, a genial fellow and something of a wit himself, is still remembered at Indianapolis, where he made his home and headquarters. It was he, according to Riley, who originated the story instead of Nye, to whom it was generally credited, about the clever young chap who was a guest at a dinner and excused himself to the hostess for declining to carve the fowl on the ground that he "never could make the gravy match the wall paper."

Of course Indiana was proud of her blue-eyed son's meteoric rise to national fame. It was she who had given the "Hoosier Poet" to the world, and he in turn had loaded her with honors.

Tremendous ovations greeted Riley on his return. Terre Haute, like other hoosier cities, now knew him. They had not seen him, nor cared to see him, but now that he had been lionized by the elect in a distant state, his genius flashed upon them, and they yearned to do him honor.

When he next came to Terre Haute the auditorium was packed to the last inch of standing room, and hundreds were turned away. On his previous visits only a handful of people were willing to pay twenty-five cents to see and hear him. Now they eagerly gave up a dollar and many were denied at that.

The entrance to the auditorium that night was littered with

overshoes and articles of apparel as the result of the fierce struggle of the surging throng in the corridors to force its way through the doors to obtain even standing room.

From that time to this Riley's popularity has been at high tide with our people, and were he to return today there is not a house in the city that would hold the multitude that would pour out to see and applaud him.

On his several visits to our home we came to know how the people, especially the children, loved him. Long before he was awake in the morning the little folks had already gathered in the waiting room to greet him. One little miss of five was in tears when she told us how hard her father had tried to get her into the opera house to see Riley the night before and had failed. That was why she was first of the children at our house the following morning, and when we assured her that she should see Riley, her eyes fairly beamed with joy. A little later her cup was full. She had her dimpled arms about her idol's neck and was covering his face with kisses and telling him how she loved him.

Then Riley explained to her how lucky she was, after all, not to get to see him on the stage, for, said he, "Don't you see how much better looking I am when you are close to me?" Of course he was, and his delighted little lover clapped her hands in childish glee.

Another doting lassie, black-eyed and beautiful, declared her undying love for the children's poet. Oh, the sweet candor of the unpolluted child heart!

She wore a necklace with a clasped heart for a charm, and when he told her how pretty it was and added, "That's the kind I used to wear when I was a little girl," she regarded him with wonder for a moment and then burst into joyous laughter.

One morning when he and I were quite alone he gave Shake-

peare's "Seven Ages of Man." It was so startlingly realistic from the puling infant to the palsied old dotard that I exclaimed:

"If you'll do that on the stage it will make you a million dollars."

"I'd not do it on the stage for a million dollars," he quietly answered.

Sol Smith Russell used to declare that Riley had the most wonderful face he had ever seen. "If I only had Riley's face!" he would say to his friends. "Yes," answered Riley, "and if I only had Sol Smith Russell's legs! He has the most versatile and accomplished legs in the world."

Russell, in response to an encore in his "Poor Relation" at Terre Haute, gave "Nothin' to say, my daughter!" and rendered this bit of exquisite dialect pathos with most touching effect. The audience was moved to tears. "I beg your pardon," he modestly said in answer to the applause, "no one living can do justice to those tender and beautiful lines but James Whitcomb Riley."

How strange it seems that this wonderfully gifted actor never became reconciled to the stage! He had a vague dread of the footlights; an unconquerable aversion to the stage. Often I have heard him say that it was the refinement of torture to him to have to go through his public program.

When he retired at night he took an armful of books to his room and, propped up comfortably in his bed, he would read, oblivious of the passing hours, until almost daylight.

Riley always had a dread of railroad schedules and he certainly is the poorest kind of a traveler. "Something will happen sure before I get there," he is wont to say. Once at Indianapolis, waiting for a train at the station, I espied him in a coach on an outgoing train. Rushing in to have a word with

him before the train drew out, I found him ill at ease. He was traveling alone to fill an engagement in the East, but he wasn't sure he was on the right train, and he had some doubt as to his ticket. I assured him he was on the right train and asked him to let me see his ticket.

Sure enough! he had the wrong ticket. Fortunately, however, there was time enough to have the change made before the train was due to leave. But he was still haunted with vague misgivings as to what might happen before he reached his destination when I bade him goodbye.

I first met Bill Nye in the fall of 1886 when he and Riley were touring the country together and drawing crowded houses to their unique entertainment. They were a great team, and aside from their cordial professional relations they loved each other sincerely and their friendship ended only with Nye's death.

Years before I had been a reader of Nye's "Boomerang," the breezy weekly edited and published by him at Laramie, Wyoming, through which he became widely known as a humorist and writer of funny stories.

When I visited Laramie in the early nineties, I met "Bill" Root, Nye's old side partner, who was quite as full of wit and drollery as Nye himself, and he had a great stock of rich stories about their pioneer experiences in Wyoming. Their office was at one time in a mule barn, and I was shown one of the doors, which still bore traces of their wit. The legend inscribed upon it and which was still legible read: "Twist the mule's tail and take the elevator."

Bill Nye was a most lovable character, kindly, gentle and whole-hearted, and full of innocent fun. There was an incessant interchange of wit between him and Riley when they were

together. Their contact was mutually infectious and inspiring, and it was a real treat to have an hour with these two princes of the platform.

Bill Nye was something more than a mere humorist and funny story-teller. He was a philosopher. Beneath his flow of humor there was a sub-stratum of serious meditation. He was the master of pathos as well as the lord of laughter.

Amos J. Walker, already mentioned as the booking agent of Riley in his early days, was also the manager of the Nye-Riley combination. His letter-head read: "Sole Manager of Bill Nye and James Whitcomb Riley, America's Greatest Humorous Combination." They had a wonderfully "fetching" program. Poetry, prose sketches, stories and character delineations, all rich with wit, humor and pathos, flashed and sparkled from the opening to the close of the entertainment.

The houses were packed and the audiences delighted. Nye told of one exception. They were in a western camp, and a couple of cowboys drifted in. The program was about half finished and they had been doing their very best, when one of the cow punchers yawned aloud and said to his partner, "Say, Jack, when is this d—— show going to start?"

One day Nye appeared quite downcast. They were to appear in the first engagement of what was to be an extended tour.

"What's the matter?" anxiously inquired Riley. "I'm in a sad predicament," gravely answered Nye, and then after a pause, "I've brought the wrong set of gestures with me."

One of Nye's cleverest skits was his imitation of an over-trained high school girl reading her graduating essay. It never failed to convulse the audience with merriment. Here are two or three lines from the "essay":

“The autumn leaves are falling—falling pro and con.”

* * * * *

“The autumn leaves are falling—falling everywhere,
Some are in the atmosphere, and some are in the air.”

A wholesome contempt for the shoddy aristocracy was one of Nye's marked characteristics. The daughter of a certain newly-rich family was making desperate efforts to break into swell society. Nye observed that she was entitled to shine because her “father was the justly celebrated inventor of a fluent pill.”

To the keen and searching eye of Bill Nye there was a humorous side to everything. Humor was to him the essence of wisdom, the savor of life. He delighted in expressing himself and interpreting his friends in terms of kindly, genial, good-natured humor. If he was vexed for a moment, he found relief in seeking out the funny side of his vexation so that he might laugh it away.

On one of his visits to Terre Haute he lost a valuable umbrella which had been a gift to him. He was quite distressed about it, but somewhat relieved when I assured him that I thought it would be recovered. A few days later I received a letter from him asking, “Have you received any tidings of the beautiful umbrella I had the pleasure of losing at Terre Haute?” The lost umbrella was never recovered, but Nye's unflinching humor always was.

A late spring prompted Nye to quote the words, “Winter lingers in the lap of Spring,” and to this he added with characteristic wit, “Yes, and the neighbors are beginning to talk about it.”

Nye once complained to Riley that he had an “ecru” feeling and suspected that his “thorax” was out of plumb. Riley ven-

tured to suggest it might be his "sweetbread" that required attention.

In the last communication I received from Nye, shortly before his untimely death at his home on the French Broad in North Carolina he wrote: "I hope you can arrange business so that you can take Mrs. Debs by the hand and lead her down here into this curious and beautiful country. Cigars, apolinaris and such things, including cold watermelon and a warm welcome, are to be had here by giving the proper sign. Open day and night."

The many millions that Nye made joyous and care-free with the laughter his wit provoked will lovingly remember him as one of the real benefactors of mankind.

Eugene Field was by nature a prince of fine fellows. I never knew a more genial, generous companion; a more loyal, steadfast friend. I met him for the first time in the spring of 1893, on which occasion he presented me with several volumes of his poetry and prose writings inscribed, in his wonderfully small and exact hand, "With very much Love." He wrote like fine steel print and could crowd an essay onto a postal card.

Field was tall and spare, though not ungainly. As an entertainer he was at his best in the pathetic passages of his own character sketches. He rendered these with marvelous effect upon his hearers.

Like Riley, whom he resembled strongly in many ways, he was an intense lover of children, and if there were any little ones about he was very apt to forsake the grown folks. To the children he was himself in all the exuberance of his own buoyant childhood. To them he sang the songs they inspired in him, the soft, sweet lullabys; to them he told the wonder-stories drawn from their own fairyland imagination, and

with them he romped and played with all the zest and abandon of his carefree soul.

Field came to Terre Haute soon after I first met him. He was then on the lyceum platform with George W. Cable, the novelist, and they were giving public entertainments consisting of readings from their works. On this occasion they were greeted with a fine audience at the opera house. Field surpassed himself, and the program was greatly extended by the repeated encores to which he graciously responded.

That night we were the guests of a mutual friend, and while sitting in the drawing room Field, who had heard the voices of children in an adjoining room, quietly disappeared. Soon thereafter shouts of joy and peals of merriment rang through the house. Something unusually frolicsome had broken out among the children. What could it be? The door was opened, and there was Field, in his dress suit, minus his coat, down on all fours, in the center of a group of excited children, all screaming with delight. Such a picture!

Field was in his element among the children. He was one of them. He played and romped and rolled on the floor and kicked up his heels in all the reckless abandon of a boy just out of school. He made grimaces, sang funny songs, told funny stories and mocked funny people. From the depths of his great heart he loved the children. And how they loved him!

The year after I first met Field the Pullman strike occurred. Chicago was the storm center, and great excitement prevailed. There were troublous times ahead. One day when events threatened a serious crisis I found in my letter-box at the hotel a note in Field's hand which read: "You will soon need a friend; let me be that friend."

This was high proof of personal loyalty at a time when in-

tense bitterness prevailed, and when such an avowal meant ostracism and execration.

When Field was out West in his early years he was a prime favorite with the rough and ready element on what was then the frontier and about the primitive mining camps. He loved the rugged pioneers and prospectors of that day and they inspired some of his most rapturous verse:

“Oh, them days on Red Hoss Mountain, when the skies wuz
fair 'nd blue,
When the money flowed like likker, 'nd the folks wuz brave
'nd true!
When the nights wuz crisp 'nd balmy, 'nd the camp wuz all
astir,
With the joints all throwed wide open, 'nd no sheriff to de-
mur.”

He was at home among the common people and he was the life of the frontier settlement or mining camp in which he chanced to be located. As a practical joker he was without a rival. He was constantly plotting mischief of some kind to amuse the boys and they looked to him to relieve the monotony of the camp. In Denver, then a small and breezy city on the plains, he caused quite a stir by inserting a notice in the paper upon which he was employed, to the effect that Wolf Londoner, the leading provision merchant, had just received a carload of fine watermelons direct from Georgia, and that every colored man would be given one free that morning. Londoner wondered what had broken loose when a mob of excited colored folks, men, women and children, swooped down on his store, and he had no little difficulty in explaining that he had been made the victim of another of Gene Field's practical jokes.

Field was almost the only literary genius I have ever known who was entirely free from crotchets and eccentricities. He was at all times the same simple, guileless, unpretentious fellow; the same generous, free-hearted loving friend, and he was never so happy as when he was making others so. He did not stint in the use of his gifts to afford enjoyment to his friends. He did not need to be coaxed. It was enough for him that his readings and recitals gave joy to others. There might be few or many, and they had but to name their favorite sketch or poem. He did not weary in thus giving himself freely and without price. He used to say, "Tell me what you wish to hear and I will be glad to give it to you." And he would respond with all the naivete of a child to every request and with such evident heartiness as to enhance the charm of his personality and the delight of his entertainment.

The last message that came to me from Eugene Field was followed closely by his death, which came so suddenly that it caused a painful shock to his many friends. I was in Woodstock at the time. Field wrote:

"You are now settled in your summer quarters, and I'll soon be out to see you." A day or two later I picked up the morning paper to note with the profoundest sorrow the announcement of his death. He had not been ill. He was still in the rosy flush of his young manhood. He had retired as usual and "fell into that dreamless sleep that kisses down his eyelids still."

Eugene Field, like James Whitcomb Riley, was the poet of the common life. He dignified the homely virtues and idealized the everyday things that make up the sum of earthly existence.

As poets, wits and humorists, Riley, Nye and Field are distinctively American types. Nye and Field have passed to the realms of rest. Riley remains the spared monument. All of them have written their names in fadeless letters in the annals of mankind.

