

"MR. WALTER WHITMAN"

by Sculley Bradley

THAT's where Mr. Walter Whitman used to keep his pet crickets," said Mr. Rowan. The wiry patriarch heaved a stick of cord-wood from the wagon and pointed at a venerable maple at the corner of the old house. Mr. Reilly stared up at the old man in astonishment.

"Do you mean Walt Whitman, the poet?" he asked.

"Seems to me I did hear he was a poet," said Mr. Rowan. "Anyway, he was a writer, and he used to come down and stay in this house with the Staffords, summers, years ago, when I was a young man workin' as a hand on the place."

It was in this manner that the present owner of the old Stafford house, at Laurel Springs, New Jersey, first learned that he had purchased the house in which Walt Whitman spent his summers from 1876 until 1882, while he was recovering partially from the paralytic attack which had caused fears for his life. Camden, New Jersey, had found a place on the literary map of the United States in 1875 when Walt Whitman was sent there, a hopeless invalid, to the home of his brother. Passers-by on Stevens Street began to ask each other about the impressive figure of a man who sat by the window in George Whitman's house, with the beard and hair of a Hebrew prophet and the countenance of a benign and stricken god. His friends had given him up, but the old poet of life was destined still to live a score of years and write much of his best poetry and all of his best

prose. Almost helpless, he was taken by his brother in the spring of 1876 to a farm on Timber Creek, where the town of Laurel Springs now stands, about twelve miles below Camden. There, during several successive summers, he was nursed back to life by the kindly Staffords and regained partial use of his limbs. He wrestled with trees; he took mud baths and sun baths in a day when New Jersey was inhabited by a simple race who could only regard such exposure as a scandalous and foolhardy eccentricity; he subjected his spirit to the healing of nature and became blood-brother to the birds and bees and flowers for which he had yearned ever since he had left his native countryside in early youth.

There is no need for anyone to describe Walt Whitman's life at the farm on Timber Creek. The best of it he recorded in those nature sketches in his *Specimen Days* which for veracity and sensitiveness vie with the writings of his friend John Burroughs, who admired them so highly. But as a lover of these sketches and an admirer of *Leaves of Grass* I had long desired to see this spot, although I feared it might turn out to be as disappointing as Walden Pond. No biographer of Whitman has located it precisely. Several have said it was "on Timber Creek" and let it go at that. But Timber Creek is a sprawling stream with meandering tributaries which dawdles through southeastern New Jersey and comes at last into the Delaware River below Gloucester by what seems

a sheer inadvertence. Another author casually places it "near Camden". Thus inspired, I set off to find the place, and succeeded. I also found Mr. John A. Rowan, who knew "Mr. Walter Whitman" and told me some things about him that I had not learned in books.

To reach Laurel Springs and the Stafford House, starting from Philadelphia, you cross the bridge to Camden and follow the signs and the ten thousand automobiles that indicate the route to Atlantic City. After about two miles you pass the entrance to Harleigh Cemetery, where the poet lies buried in his massive rock. If your inclination runs as little to tombs as this writer's, you will press on to the White Horse Pike. Twelve miles from the Camden toll-house you reach an unimpressive side road marked "Broadway" for no good reason that you can perceive. It is especially distinguished at present by a faded blue sign with gilt letters announcing to an unfeeling world that Post Number Fifty-six of the American Legion invites you to turn here and visit Laurel Springs. You turn right here to the end of the road at its junction with Linden Avenue, where you "jog left" about one hundred yards to the next street, Maple Avenue. As you turn right into this street you will see the Stafford house, the second house on your left. It would arrest your attention even if you were not seeking it. It is obviously the oldest structure in the neighbourhood, and is the kind of house that rests the eyes. Its builder had the unerring instinct for proportions that marked the homely architects of his period. It is a white frame house, slightly weatherbeaten, shaded by three enormous and luxuriant maples in the front yard. Across the front of the lawn is a hedge of lilac bushes, placed there in Whitman's time, because, as John Rowan tells me, "Mr. Walter Whitman was fond of lilacs".

Its date has not been ascertained, for the early records of the township were destroyed by fire, but it was an old house at the time of the first recorded conveyance in 1812.

The present owner is charmingly patient with the intrusions of scribblers and enthusiasts. He not only has shown me all over the old house and its grounds, with its maples and lilacs, but he helped me to determine the location of the "old farm-lane" of *Specimen Days*, which now is a mere path leading from the Stafford enclosure at the edge of the town down over what were originally Stafford fields to the creek and the lake. Time has not eradicated the landmarks loved of the poet, although the half-century has wrought many changes. It is a satisfaction and a pleasure to be able to locate the very trees, the lake, the spring and marl-pit mentioned in *Specimen Days*. But this is another story. For of course I went on at my first opportunity to see Mr. Rowan. I found him in the next town, a few miles away, and I was amply repaid, for I not only gained the friendship of a most lovable person, but also I derived a picture of Walt Whitman from one who had known him simply as a man and not at all as a poet.

At the age of eighty-two John Rowan still carries on, at Clementon, New Jersey, the wood and charcoal business which he has pursued successfully for a half-century at that place. His charcoal mill he built with his own hands, and the original paddle-wheel still operates the special machinery which he invented and made for the manufacture of a product so fine that he has been able for forty years to supply most of the charcoal used in refining by the United States Mint at Philadelphia. He will show you with justifiable pride an article in a recent issue of a scientific magazine dealing with him, his mill, and his fine charcoal. He is one of the

last few survivors of a sturdy race of vanished Americans. His face is like a late autumn apple, his nature as wholesome; and his gigantic, wiry frame is unbowed by his burden of years and toil. He "never met another man like Mr. Walter Whitman", he says, and he will talk of this idol of his youth as long as you will listen. His speech is marked by a racy dignity, and I shall try to reproduce as accurately as I can a conversation which I held with him recently. After a long chat on a variety of topics, I got to the heart of my quest. "Mr. Rowan," I said, "Mr. Reilly tells me that he first learned that he had purchased the Walt Whitman house when you told him the story of Whitman's pet crickets in the old maple tree."

JOHN ROWAN: Well now I reckon I was the one that told him that Mr. Walter Whitman used to come there, o' summers, when I was a young man workin' as hand on the place, but I don't seem to recollect the crickets.

B.: Perhaps it was someone else who told him. He thinks it happened while you were delivering a load of wood, when you suddenly pointed to the maple tree and said that was where Whitman used to keep his pet crickets.

J. R.: I don't seem to recall the crickets. But that was an old maple tree even then, and Mr. Walter Whitman used to sit there in his easy chair fer hours, studyin' to himself, and writin', and mebbe just lookin' around.

B.: Did he used to talk to you a good bit?

J. R.: Well, at fust I sort of kep' clear; I was busy on the place, and his eyes had a sort of far-off look. Then, one day as I passed, he reached his hand out an' touched my arm, an' smiled at me. You never forgot Mr. Walter Whitman's smile, an' I came to look for it after that. "Son," says he, "what is your name?"

"John Rowan," says I.

"And are you kin," says he, "to Buster Rowan?"

"Well," I says, "he is my older brother, only his name is not Buster, but James K. Rowan. Buster is the name they gave him when he was a boy, because he *was* a buster!"

"Well," says he, "I kin see you're one as thinks into things, and I allus want to talk to you." Then he says, "Do you know Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Sally Morgan, over to Watsontown?" I told him I did. Uncle Jimmy had been a fine smart farmer, but he'd took to drink and was gettin' quite shaky, an' Aunt Sally was havin' her own troubles to keep them in food and clothes.

"Well," says Mr. Whitman, reachin' in his pocket slow-like, and holdin' up a silver dollar, "will you please give Uncle Jimmy this with my best respects, and tell him I hope he's a doin' better?"

"Indeed I will," says I. And then he took another silver dollar out of his pocket, an' says he, "Will you please give this to Aunt Sally, too, an' tell her I send her my love?" And when I took it to them, and told them it was from Mr. Walter Whitman, I can remember yet how proud they were.

B.: Had he known them long?

J. R.: No, jest met 'em around som'ers and knowed they needed help. I remember how glad he was when Uncle Jimmy gin himself to the Lord, an' quit drinkin'. He was always doin' somethin' like that, an' most of the folks all loved him, spite of the stories as used to go around sometimes.

B.: What stories, Mr. Rowan?

J. R.: Well, it really wasn't anything much. You know they did say he had lost his place with the gov'ment, down in Washington, because some book he'd wrote wasn't proper, but no one that knowed him could see how he could write anything very bad. But you

know he was a very sick man, and the Doctor had told him to get in the sun's much as possible, and to take mud-baths. There was a spring an' a fine marl-pit down by the creek on the Stafford place, and Mr. Walter Whitman would take off his clothes and lie in the sun there, then smear himself with mud, and wash in the spring water. Some folks must 'a seen him—anyway the older heads began to talk. It warn't nothin' though.

B.: That spring is nearly dried up—although there is still plenty of mud.

J. R.: Is it now? That was a fine sweet spring, with a sight of water and a three-foot fall, an' many's the fine drink of water I've had there. The blackberries was thick and good there, too.

B.: Yes, Whitman mentioned the blackberries and the spring in the book he wrote about the place.

J. R.: Now *did* he write a book about it!

B.: Yes, *Specimen Days*; didn't you ever read it?

J. R.: No, I never heard tell of it.

B.: Well, he speaks of the old Stafford lane to the creek, and the flowers, and the birds, and the creek and the pond.

J. R.: Well, it's all true, I expect. He was the most learnt man I ever *did* see about birds and flowers and critters, and farmin' and such. I used to love talkin' to him about 'em.

B.: Do you think he learned all that after he came down here to visit?

J. R.: No, he must have known all about 'em all his life, from the way he talked. I knowed right smart myself, and I could see he'd been brought up on a farm som'ers. Mr. Walter Whitman was a *learnt* man, too—out of books, I mean. He used to talk to me about everything, and I aint never seen his ekal since. I often sit and think, "I wish now, I could meet another man like Mr. Walter Whitman to talk to".

B.: Did he tell you much about the stars? I think he knew a great deal about them.

J. R.: Well, I remember he used to talk about plantin' things by the stars, and the like of that.

B.: Did he never talk to you about the meaning of the signs in the heavens—telling the future by the stars, and so on?

J. R.: No, I don't recollect that. But we did talk about perdictin' the future, though. You don't hear tell much of phrenology in these days, but everybody knew about it then. A man as knew about sech things had written out for me about myself. He was mostly right, too. I remember he told me I was the kind of a man that would never get rich, but that I would never be in want. I told that to Mr. Whitman, and I recollect he laughed and said that was the best way to be. He had been to a phrenologist himself, years before, an' he said that what he had been told all come to pass.

B.: Whitman apparently seemed a very good man to you. Did he talk to you about religion?

J. R.: Mr. Walter Whitman *was* a good man, an' no mistake. You could jest *see* it to look at him. But he warn't a hand to be talkin' religion. Kind of shy about it. Of course, if you started the subject, he'd join in a bit. But I allus thought he was more interested in livin' good than talkin' about it.

B.: That old Stafford place is a fine house. Does it look about the same as it did in '76?

J. R.: Well, of course, there's a new wing out back, but it seems to look jest about the same. Same three old maples across the front, too.

B.: How about that fine hedge of lilacs. When were they planted?

J. R.: That was soon after Mr. Walter Whitman started coming down. Seems like I can recall he was 'specially fond of lilacs. Maybe he even planted some on 'em.

B.: He *was*, you know. He wrote a poem about Lincoln's death, called *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed*. Maybe you've read it?

J. R.: No, I never read a thing he wrote. But I used to talk to him about Lincoln. He used to say that Lincoln was the greatest American ever lived. I think so too, fer that matter. I sort of remember that Mr. Whitman knew Lincoln, or something, down in Washington, during the War.

B.: I don't believe he knew him personally, but he admired him, and had many opportunities to see him.

J. R.: Must 'a studied him right close, all he knew about him!

B.: Was Whitman as friendly to all the children as he was to you, Mr. Rowan?

J. R.: Well, I wasn't a child. I must 'a been about twenty-five or -six when he began to come down here. But he *was* fond of children, I can tell you. The young Staffords seemed to worship him, the two girls, an' Ed an' Harry. I can still remember how angry Mr. Whitman was when I told him about the floggin' Harry got in school!

B.: How was that, Mr. Rowan?

J. R.: Well, you see, we had a district school, and the schoolmaster this perticular year was a Mr. —, a powerful man with a very high temper. Well, one day Harry done something, I fergit what, but anyway the teacher wanted to flog him fer it. He told him to take off his coat, but Harry wouldn't. At last the teacher started to take it off *fer* 'im, but every time he took off one sleeve, Harry'd stick his arm back in the other. That made the teacher so mad he threw the boy on the floor, and put his knee on his back, and tuk off his coat. Then he hauled him up and flogged him on-merciful. The Staffords weren't very well off, you know, and Harry hadn't much on underneath that coat. When he started home he

couldn't straighten up. My brother told me he saw him in the swimmin' hole next summer, and his back was still scarred.

B.: That is interesting. Did you know that in his youth Whitman wrote a story about a similar instance in which a boy was flogged to death?

J. R.: No! Well anyway he was very angry when he heard of this, and thought some of us bigger ones should 'a interferred. But none of us would 'a been a handful to that teacher. But Mr. Walter Whitman was allus interested in all the young people, and knowed when they got married, and such.

B.: Did he ever say anything about his own love affairs?

J. R.: No, but I can remember he was interested in my courting, and used to cheer me up sometimes.

B.: In what way, Mr. Rowan?

J. R.: Well, you see, I'd been callin' on Emmy steady for well nigh onto two years, an' they was snortin' cold winters, I tell you. Still, somehow, I could never git up me courage to say anything *direct* to her, and Mr. Walter Whitman he used to tease me about it sometimes, and tell me to keep tryin'. At last one night somethin' got into me, and I says to her, sudden-like, says I, "Emma, either we git married, or I quit".

"Well," says she, "why didn't you say so sooner?" I remember how Mr. Whitman laughed when I told him about it. He wasn't one to laugh much either; mostly a summat serious man.

B.: Didn't he have many visitors?

J. R.: Oh, they was allus a sight of folk comin' down to see him—fine lookin' and well dressed folks from Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Some of 'em was even fur-riners, I guessed from seein' 'em, but I never knew who any of 'em were, or learned their names.

Although Mr. Rowan seemed willing to continue the conversation indefinitely, I felt sure that it must be past his bed-time and reluctantly parted from the stalwart and gentle patriarch. He is only one of several kind friends who have given me their memories of Whitman; especially Mr. Wesley Stafford, a nephew of the elder Staffords, who proudly shows you an autographed copy of *Memo-randa during the War*, a rare bound copy, presented to his wife by the poet; and Mrs. Browning, the younger of the two Stafford daughters, who still treasures a collection of girlish articles brought to her by Whitman

on his successive visits. Others substantially agree with Mr. Rowan in the testimony which he, more fully than any other, has given concerning the impression made by the great poet upon a simple people when he lived and moved among them. They did not know his poems, but the "amplitude of time" in which he trusted has brought him readers enough and fame enough as a literary man. Perhaps a greater tribute than all of this is to have survived for a half-century so vividly and so sweetly in the memories of plain people who knew him only as a man and scarcely realized that he was a poet at all.

“THE BREAST OF THE NYMPH”

by Branch Cabell

You have written out for me, O most enviable fool, a list of questions which you desire me to answer as a guide for your future, so that you may “become a writer”. Each question has a ring so familiar that I may not guess how often, how very, very often, I have received your pathetically brisk, and forthright, and business-like letter before I received it, yet again, today.

You are, you inform me (and indeed you almost always are) one of the editors of your college magazine. You are “majoring in English”, and besides your pursuit of “other English courses for necessary backgrounds”, you are, you tell me, the member of “a creative writing class”. You have set every commended trap, in brief, to capture the straying muse in order that you may domesticate her out-of-hand as your helpmate in letters.

“Am I”, you continue, in somewhat the pouncing manner of a lawyer who discredits a witness, “on the right track? Should I imitate the style of so-called model authors in my writing? If so, whom would you suggest? Should I get a few years’ experience on a newspaper? I have an idea that it is well to become steeped in classicism. I am working conscientiously to that end. Is it advisable to continue? Or should I study present-day literature more?”

And yet other question upon question do you put to me, about such unrelated matters as art and Mr. Ludwig Lewisohn and magazine-editors and the best book of synonyms, out of an engaging belief that I, who have no

least interest in your welfare, will be willing to devote a day or so to answering all these questions one after the other.

Still, it is not difficult to answer your questions. The reply is that I do not know. It is my private opinion that whether you do the things about which you inquire will not matter a straw’s weight in your possible evolution as an author. It is also my absolute conviction that whether or not you do eventually “become a writer” is an affair in which I have not the tiniest interest. In brief, I can see no logical reason why I should not drop your letter into the waste-paper basket, and so have done with both your infernal briskness and you.

Instead, I fall a-wondering why you should want—or at least should temporarily imagine that you want—“to become a writer”. The term, to begin with, is staggeringly vague. People write all manner of oddments, such as verse, and society columns, and sermons, and advertising copy. Yet I believe your term is apt enough. I look back, across some seven lustres, to the time when I too was the editor of a college magazine, and when I too debated most of the questions you raise, and when I too meant “to become a writer”. For there was never any doubt in my mind, after my sixteenth year or thereabouts, that I would “become a writer”. And yet there was never any definite notion, I am sure, what form this writing was to take. There was certainly no delusion that writers were rewarded with affluence or high station.