

Letters of Riley and Bill Nye

Arranged with Comment by EDMUND H. EITEL



RILEY was pre-eminent-ly a story-teller—not a mere teller of stories, but, in the full artistic and dramatic meaning of the term, a story-teller. What interested him most in life was the way in which the common character acted and talked. That is what he tried to be in telling his stories, either on the platform or in private. And just as his knowledge of common character made his poems in dialect, art, so it made his story-telling a high art likewise.

An important association of Riley's life is connected with his story-telling. His friendship with the humorist "Bill" Nye was part and parcel with it. On their reading-tours about the country—and the fame of Nye-Riley tours is still a tradition of the early lecturing period—the two men let nothing queer or comical escape them unnoticed. Their travels were a continual exchange of stories and observations, and Riley's best story grew directly out of an experience during their journeys.

This was "The Old Soldier's Story," which, "as Riley told it," said Mark Twain, was "the funniest thing I have ever listened to." It came into being in this manner. At each town where they gave their readings Riley and Nye were met at the railway station by an "entertainment" committee which drove them about to see the sights, from the county jail to the graveyard, all the while regaling them with second-hand anecdotes. The local story-teller, with fine faith in his mission to entertain genius, was always with this committee. Entirely oblivious of the fact that he was harrowing the feelings of the best two

story-tellers of the time, the man retold the old chestnuts and, as Riley said, "told them all exactly wrong."

"He was so good-natured," said Riley, "so blithe and so obliging! We couldn't tell him we had listened to his story a thousand times before. We sat and listened until the beads stood out on our foreheads and we grew old and gray and bald-headed and toothless. One day I revolted. 'Nye,' I said, 'I'm not going to have my vitals wiredrawn all afternoon. Let's stay in our rooms and rest for the evening performance.' 'Why, you can't do that!' said Nye. 'You'll offend the committee.' Nevertheless, I stayed in my room, and Nye, who was of an easier nature, was led forth. When he returned, wan and distraught from the long ordeal, I was refreshed and in high spirits to guy him. So I began to tell him the most brazenly old, bald, tottering story that I could recall. I had heard it as a boy from a circus clown, and the first eternity only knows how ancient it must have been before a circus clown would have been allowed to use it. I dragged the thing out, putting in needless details and springing the point too soon, then going back and maundering helplessly around, just as the elate funny man of the town would mistell it."

As Riley proceeded Nye began to chuckle, then to laugh, and finally, from the violence of his laughing, to hold his sides. When Riley finished Nye said:

"Jamesie, that's the funniest thing you ever did. Tell it to the audience just that way to-night."

It was some days before Riley in his careful and cautious way was ready to try the story, but when he gave it to the audience the story became one of his most notable readings. Mark Twain, speaking of the perfection with which Riley simulated the old Hoosier's "simplicity and innocence and sincerity and unconsciousness," said, "This is art—and fine and beautiful, and only a master

[Mr. Eitel, James Whitcomb Riley's nephew and literary executor, has been in active service in the United States Navy for the past year as Engineering Ensign in Aviation. This has necessitated a delay in the publication of the series of Riley letters until this time.—EDITH.]

can compass it." The same was true of Riley's equally famous reading, "The Peanut Story," or "Object Lesson," and it was true of the anecdotes Riley told when off the platform. The man was an artist, whether writing a poem or writing a letter or telling a story.

His art as a story-teller lay in his fidelity to character. And yet, as he came upon the platform to read, a slight, graceful figure in conventional evening clothes, he was everything which the types he was to impersonate were not. With a distinguished gesture he lifted the black-rimmed glasses from his nose and murmured a few diffident words of introduction, which the audience grew hushed to catch. Then suddenly he became transformed in attitude, voice, and manner. A wistful child now seemed to stand before you, nervously twisting a foot as children do, lisping with dimpled mouth. That admirable dress suit, with the conspicuous shirt-front, was forgotten. It was as though they had vanished, so strong was the spell of the little Hoosier youngster who was telling in a half-awed manner about "Orphant Annie" and the "gobble-uns." Again Riley appeared to read, now in the character of a blithe and sunny old farmer with the squint which the weather had taught him in his honest eyes, and the reticence of the Hoosier in the set of his mouth, all so true to the life that surely one of nature's old noblemen was talking. You could have fancied he wore gum boots, a hickory shirt, and blue jeans, even imagined a straw in his mouth. And deep out of the old farmer's throat was issuing the music of the Hoosier tongue caught by the delicate ear of a poet. Magic was at work—what wonder his hearers laughed or cried as he chose?

Riley's famous tours were in the late 'eighties, during the days of his readings with "Bill" Nye. The mantle of Artemus Ward and Josh Billings had just then fallen upon Nye, and he was one of the best-known humorists of the day, even better known than Riley. The two men in their great differences made a happy combination. Nye, perhaps, made you laugh more, though he never made you weep except from excess of laughing. Upon his appearance he reminded one of the cartoons of his lank,

bald-headed self appearing with his weekly letters to the press. Very likely one recalled his story of the barber of whom Nye inquired, in his hurry, whether he could cut his hair with his collar on. The barber had replied, "La, Mr. Nye, I could cut *your* hair with your hat on." God, it seems, had, "in His providence," said Nye, given his "beauty to Mrs. James Brown Potter and his hair to the Sutherland sisters." Nye's humor lay in surprises, in freaks of the imagination, not, as with Riley, in impersonations. He addressed his audience in terms of tenderest confidence, and when his hearers howled at some absurdity he stepped back as though his feelings had been hurt. Nye's story-telling differed from Riley's in that he was not so interested to make it true and human as to make it as ridiculous, absurd, and outlandish as possible. "I am endeavoring in my poor way," wrote Nye in his characteristic manner, "to make folly appear foolish and to make men better by speaking disrespectfully of their errors."

The Nye-Riley entertainment was not formal, but furnished with many impromptu observations. Once Nye said to the audience: "The entertainment, ladies and gentlemen, is of a dual nature. First I come out and talk until *I* get tired. Then Mr. Riley comes out and he talks until *you* get tired."

The letters which passed between Riley and Nye are characteristic of the funny things which the two men introduced extemporaneously into their public readings. They give no little insight into the humorous manner of the two story-tellers.

The papers mentioned by Nye in the following letter to Riley were stacks of the New York *World* containing a Nye-Riley article which Amos Walker, the manager, planned to distribute in advertising the entertainment:

HUDSON, WIS.,
Ap. 5, 1886.

MY DEAR JAMES,—Your illiterate and obscure note of late date, in which you said that Harry New had run between a dog and broke its legs, was duly received. Little did I ever think that a boy of mine would write such a letter.

I would give a good deal to know why Harry New ran between a dog and if so

how much. Your letter such as it is, gave me great pleasure in some respects but it is too abstruse. You did not say where you would go from there.

I got the N. Y. *World* last eve and have been reading it in a low gurgling tone ever since. The *World* is a very good paper. When I stop to think that I only have 100 of them and how similar they are and what a striking family resemblance there is between them, I wonder how Amos feels with only 400 of them to his name.

People who come in and see my little shipment of *Worlds* in the parlor say "Oh sir! you are indeed a great reader, are you not?"

I have nearly completed the *Introduction* for our R. R. guide [Nye and Riley's *Railway Guide*] and have been working hard at other business in the literary line since I got home. I have drad off two pieces for a paper and it pleased the editor a good deal. I think he will print them. There are several merry thoughts and two large red bon mots in them. They are disguised however, also assumed.

We are all well and my family send you their kind regards. They are very anxious to see you also for I have told them what a queer looking cuss you are and how you have won your way up till you are known from Castoria, Ohio, to Trombone, Indiana.

Of course it's none of my business but I would honestly like to know where you go to from here. Remember me to Amos and write again soon.

YOUR UNCLE BILL.

One of Nye's best Riley stories was an account of the poet writing a poem. Nye himself could "dash off" his funny letters to the press any place, any time, even in a crowded and rattling railway car. Riley must seek the privacy of his chamber at dead o' night. Here, said Nye, he wrote with a pad placed on his knee, using the rubber end of his pencil chiefly, but ever and anon imprinting a line with the point, and bearing down so laboriously and painstakingly as he did so, that for a week afterward you could

plainly read the poem on his knee. Riley, who loved to impersonate the patronizing "high brows," once wrote Nye a letter parodying his own labored style of composition. Riley began the letter with the accompanying drawing of himself, beneath which he pasted a



A CARTOON OF RILEY DRAWN BY HIMSELF

newspaper clipping with some lines of verse quoted from a poem he had by no means "dashed off":

An exchange says: "James Whitcomb Riley, unlike Mr. Nye, is a steady, rapid writer and composer. It was raining when our correspondent asked him to write a stanza as a souvenir of the occasion, and he quickly wrote the following on the back of an envelope:

"In this existence, dry and wet
Will overtake the best of men—
Some little skift o' clouds 'll shet
The sun off now and then;

"And mebbly while you're wonderin' who
You've fool-like lent your umbrell' to,
And want it—out 'll pop the sun,
And you'll be glad you hain't got none!"

RILEY TO NYE

[April, 1886.]

DEAR YOUNG FRIEND,—Although my time is greatly taken with press of literary engagements, I trust, as now, I shall always have a cheery word and a kind smile for the timid, though deserving, novice in letters that you prove yourself. My first duty, as I count it, is to warn you not to be discouraged in your literary work simply because you find it irksome to compose and cannot at once dash over countless pages with the grace and ease of the skimming swallow. This faculty cannot be acquired in a day, as I myself recall, in the far-off youth of my own fame, how sometimes in the turning of the simplest epic I have wasted whole hours. Do not you, therefore, hope for the fadeless laurel in lieu of the $6\frac{5}{8}$ hat which for years yet must grace your broad and oasisless brow. Think you that either Cicero or Potts "got there" the first dash out of the box? Ah, no! a thousand noes! They panted, and they blowed, and sweat till you could see their suspenders through the back of their vest, and even then, as Aristotle tells us, "their copy was little less than most villainously damnable and vile."

But to business: Walker is effecting some guarantees that are simply exquisite. Day after day he tears himself from my side and goes forth into the busy marts of men and lumps us in for the lowest possible rate. So we have already cut out for us some very pleasant work. But the ruling passion is still strong with him, for only yesterday he came in to say, with ill-concealed and feverish delight, that he has sold us to another Ohio town, and immediately immersed himself in his Railroad Guide, coming to the surface occasionally to knead his whiskers, and stare off into limitless chaos. I doubt very seriously if you will know him next time you meet. He has grown so gray! so gray!

As ever, yours faithfully,

J. W. RILEY.

NYE TO RILEY, IN REPLY

HUDSON, WIS., Apr. 18, '86.

DEAR RILEY,—Your noble words of encouragement were rec'd on my return here last evening. You can never know how it makes my poor heart beat again with hope to receive such kind words from one who is able to compose rapidly. Oh sir, could you

know how a new found joy, one that has heretofore been a stranger to this luxuriant home, has sprung up in my soul like a tiny little sprig of jimson weed near the woodshed of an Emperor, as a result of your hopeful letter.

Ah if I could only compose rapidly! But alas, I cannot do it. I must struggle on and on writing a word, erasing it, writing it yet again, and at last, with my life work only half performed, roll up my pantaloons and wade across the mysterious river! I tell you it is tough, James, mighty tough.

Little can you realize what it is to struggle with a thought, grapple with it, spit on it and grapple yet again. But you give me hope. You bid me despair not. Oh sir, a thousand oh sirs for your kind words and gentle, patronizing ways, which I have tried in my poor weak way to illustrate.

But how are you, James? I want to see you and our genial manager, to whom I will write tomorrow. To-day I'm going to rest a little after this letter. I've been dodging around the country till I'm a total wreck. Your letter was great. I shall preserve it.

Adieu, kind sir Adieu,
BILL NYE.



A DRAWING OF THE BUST OF
BILL NYE BY RILEY

Riley's first reading with Nye was at an entertainment in Indianapolis, in February, 1886, in which Riley, Eugene Field, and Nye appeared together. A photographic record of the meeting reproduced in a previous article shows Field turning the watch, which, to the delight of the audience, wound as eloquently as an old family alarm-clock. Nye introduced Field that evening with the remark that he wished to state for the benefit of the management that Field had requested the audience not to use their opera-glasses when he, Field, appeared. "For," said Nye, "Mr. Field is naturally diffident, and since, unlike many of us, he is painfully bald, it will be appreciated as a delicate compliment if the audience will appear not to notice it."

Nye invariably saw the funny side of any adversity, if there was one. Riley called this "the Nye side." In the fall

of 1886, when their second reading tour was planned, Nye was taken ill and compelled to spend the winter South in a lonely little town in a lonely, fireless room in which, as Riley pictured it, the wind billowed the carpet. From here, flat on his back, Nye wrote a chirrupy letter to his old comrade, when, as Riley said, he knew "the fellow's heart's just bustin' through his vest with *suppressed* and *depressed* blues."

ASHEVILLE, N. C.,
Nov, 26, 1886.

MY DEAR RILEY,
—Yours of 22nd inst came in due time as letters are prone to do even under a Democratic Administration. I rallied and read it as I sat up in bed and held your gentle missive in my little, wan hand.

Oh, sir, it is indeed trying to be ill while others may gambol in the glad sunlight and run and hop and be gay. Is it not sad to find by the papers that one is gradually getting no better day by day? Is it not pathetic to watch a man as he struggles for strength, only to be baffled by the press?

I also received the *Anarchist* containing a cruel criticism on my poetry. I shall never write another poem! People will have to go elsewhere for their poetry hereafter. My parents are wealthy and they have told me over and over again that any time I wanted to quit writing poetry, I could find a home with them.

I have refused point blank to appear here and elsewhere in the South on the grounds that a man ought to try to live up to his health bulletins as they appear in the papers from day to day. Next season I hope to have perfected a system of signals to be controlled by the signal service or weather what not, showing at a glance anywhere in the United States just what my condition is. This will be cheaper than employing several typewriters with the perspiration standing out on their brows and their tongues hanging out as they tell Tom, Dick, and Harry that I am not so ill as I was.

My little band of youngsters send you their love as also does Catalpa [Nye's name for his wife]. Your little orphan Annie panel picture stands on the mantel over our parlor grate. Keep on writing and I will do so also. Keep on also drawing off pieces for the papers and also improve your penmanship. You should have seen the miserable hand I wrote when I began drawing off pieces for

the papers at your age. All my improvement in penmanship I owe to this. Had I not written between meals and on an empty stomach, I could not now write so fluently on other substances.

I am gaining I think, though slowly, and I hope that when the daffodils bloom again in the springtime I may witness them from the upper side.

Meantime I continue to remain as my dear fiancée Lydia E. P. used to say,

Yours for health,
BILL NYE.

Upon recovering his health Nye made a profitable engagement with the *New York World* to furnish the weekly letters which are still remembered among the unique achievements of newspaper humorists. He moved to New York City, where he wrote to Riley, commenting on "the effete East," and saying, "God grant that in pitching my tent in this growing town I may not become effete than I now am and that my clothes will always continue to be large enough for me."

In the mean time Riley's thoughts were on Nye. As he and Amos Walker were strolling about town one day they wandered into a kind of old curiosity-shop. "There," said Riley, "we saw a diminutive table resembling one of those old-fashioned stands they set by the speaker in a country church or town hall. It was made of walnut, you know, and had a drawer in it. It was very short and slender, and somehow we thought how comical Nye would look



A SKETCH OF AMOS WALKER, THE MANAGER
OF THE NYE-RILEY READING TOURS

Drawn by Riley

lecturing beside it. So we bought the stand, boxed it up with an old white pitcher and cup, and shipped it to the *World* office. With it we sent directions and a pile of testimonials explaining and endorsing it as 'the little mammoth lecture stand.'" Riley's letter has been lost, but Nye's reply preserves the humor of the incident perfectly:

NEW YORK, June 18, 1887.

MESSRS. STRAWNS &
WALKER,
Patentees and Providers
of "Little Mammoth
Lecture Stand."

GENTLEMEN OR SIRS,
—I take pleasure in acknowledging your stand which arrived per U. S. Express at this office Friday, and beg to enclose you herewith the Godspeed referred to in yours of May 24th. I would send it to you if I had to get along all next week without a god-speed, so proud and tickled am I with my little stand.

I agree with Mr. Undergraff the well known Phrenologist of Argentine, Mo., that it is far more preferable to the one Night-Stand which has had such a run in the West. At the *World* office it was regarded as a boon, and as I took the burlap pants off its little legs, there was a hush in the great office such as one runs up against in the boudoir of a timid old maid.

I can truly say, gentlemen, that you have appealed to a chord in my heart which has up to this time been born to blush unseen, as a man writes me from Crank's Landing, this state.

I recognize also your thoughtfulness in enclosing pitcher and antique drinking-cup, for you must have known that I could not get one here or elsewhere. Nothing is more annoying to me, while in the midst of a lecture and striving to think of a hard word, than to have to pause and send out to Moline, Ill., for the crock which I have so long been accustomed to drinking from.

Oh, sir, you have indeed aroused my whole being and inspired thoughts which I did not think that I could think. I will now write a lecture that shall be in harmony with your pleasant little stand and wherever I go people

will follow me and endorse the stand I have taken.

In closing let me state that you are perfectly free to use my name in whatever co-operation you may choose to carry out in regards of having it printed and circulated to and fro.

If my picture on your circulars as a user and disciple of the bold stand you have inaugurated, will assist you in its promulgation or add aught to life's alluring charms, you may use it even among the poorer classes. I am not afraid to endorse a good thing when I see it and you are certainly on the eve of a great era, an era of unexampled prosperity, advancement and marked progress for the people and for a horizon of strength and to purify the advancement of a moral atmosphere of resources that has long been kept in the background for political purposes and are yet looking toward that goal with friendship for all and malice toward none who agree with this great

fundamental principle as I may truly say to you both even if I were to add no more at present and I beg leave to subscribe myself
Yours With Respect,
BILL NYE.

One of Nye's most characteristic letters was written to a committee on the occasion of a dinner in honor of Riley:

NEW YORK, Oct. 18, 1888.

MRS. M. L. ANDREWS,
Indianapolis, Ind.

DEAR FRIEND,—Your kind note of invitation of the 30th ult. is at hand. Looking over a lifetime speckled here and there with regret, I do not know of anything that overshadows just now the regret that I cannot be in Indianapolis to-night. The time is past when anybody can attract attention by admiring James Whitcomb Riley. It is getting too general everywhere. But the wild and woolly Westerns who began to set a heap by him when he had not yet caught the eye of the speaker, now that no geographical or isothermal lines—I use the word isothermal because it is euphonious and can certainly do no harm at this time when we are all acquainted—I say now that no geographical



RILEY

A photograph taken at the time of
the Nye-Riley reading tours

or isothermal lines pretend to bound his just fame, we who knew him early may be seen at this moment to swell with pardonable pride.

Looking over the career of James Whitcomb Riley, and carefully examining the difficult and dangerous route through which he has passed, I am amazed that a man who knows so little about how to get anywhere on earth should have got there so early. I cannot fully understand it yet. Certainly Mr. Riley moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. But perhaps the most refreshing feature of the whole picture is the unswerving loyalty of a Hoosier to a Hoosier poet. There is an affection existing between the people of Indiana and James Whitcomb Riley which might make a President feel good to participate in—a cordial, earnest delight in his success, which would make a prosperous Emperor gladly swap his bomb-infested throne for just what Mr. Riley has left, over and above what he really needs. I have always said a good deal about Mr. Riley, pro and con, but I am not yet weary. Much as we have seen of the world together, the years only solidify my regard for him. Often, as I have steered him to and from trains and hotels, or counted out his linen for the laundry, or tucked him into his little bed at night and heard him say his prayers, I still welcome him and rejoice at his coming to my home with ever-increasing joy. If I were to get a telegram to-morrow stating that he was coming on to New York, and asking me to meet him at Buffalo, I would try to do it. I need not add that many other things besides my failure to meet Mr. Riley add to my regret to-night. The association which honors him at this time is one with almost every member of which I am acquainted.

Sincerely yours,
EDGAR WILSON NYE.

Something should be said of the scope of the Nye-Riley tours. They made two long tours in the seasons of 1888-89 and 1889-90. On the first they attempted to make some hundred dates in the East and South and then travel to the Pacific coast. It ended unfinished when



BILL NYE

A photograph taken at the time of
the Nye-Riley reading tours

Nye received a telegram at Kansas City informing him that all his three children had been taken ill with scarlet fever. The second tour was largely in the North and Middle West. The schedule sometimes included six "one-night stands" a week. By protest, what the humorists

called "sacred concerts" on Sundays were entirely omitted. They succeeded in completing about three-fourths of their dates when Riley broke down. Riley talked very earnestly about the hoodoo which seemed to pursue them on their journeys. They got into towns of the same name in adjoining states, their trunks went north when they went south, and more serious things threatened.

Riley interestingly described Nye as a traveling companion:

The quaintness and whimsicality of Mr. Nye's humor was the notable thing about him. It was unaccountable upon any particular theory. It just seemed natural for his mind to work at that gait. He recognized the matter-of-fact view others took of the general proposition of life, and sympathized with it, but he did so with a native tendency to surprise and astound that ordinary state of mind and vision. He could say a ridiculous thing or perpetuate a ridiculous act with a face like a Sphinx, knowing full well that those who saw or heard would look to his face for some confirmation of their suspicion that it was time to laugh. They had to make up their minds about it unaided by him, however, for they never found any trace of levity in his countenance. As he would say, he did his laughing "elsewhere."

One day in winter the train stopped at a way station in the West, and we had five minutes to wait. Mr. Nye's roving eye had discovered that the plush-leather pillows of the sofa in the smoking compartment of the car we were riding in were unattached. Without a word he picked up the leather cylinders and placed one under each arm, with the tassels to the front. He was an invalid in looks as well as strength, and when

he appeared upon the platform thus equipped the astounded natives watched him with silent, sympathetic curiosity as he strode up and down, apparently seizing the opportunity for a little much-needed exercise. The rest of us had to hide to keep from exploding, but he was utterly oblivious to the stares and comments until he returned to the car. No

and tallow—also ice-cream, golden syrup, and feathers." The passengers across the aisle would perk their ears, then rise and come, craning their necks, to find the words he was reading from the bill-board, or finally some old fellow would come up to the seat and declare that he could not find where it said that. In a quiet way this would tickle Nye

beyond measure—away down in the depths of his sad-pathetic spirit.

His conferences with the train boys have often nearly given me convulsions. When the boy handed him a book Nye would ask with great interest what it was about and listen patiently to all the boy knew of its contents. "Let's see it," and he would open the book and read aloud, in a monotonous singsong, a lot of purest nonsense, drawn from his imagination. It was done so seriously that the boy's eyes would begin to hang out as the reading went on. Finally Nye would shut the book up with a snap, losing the place, and hand it back to the boy with a puzzled air, as if he did not understand why the young man had lied so about its contents. We could find that boy for an hour afterwards searching diligently the pages of that book to find where that stuff was printed.

One of Nye's best stories was of an actual incident:

Once on the state fair-grounds at Indianapolis an elderly Hoosier came up to our manager and said:

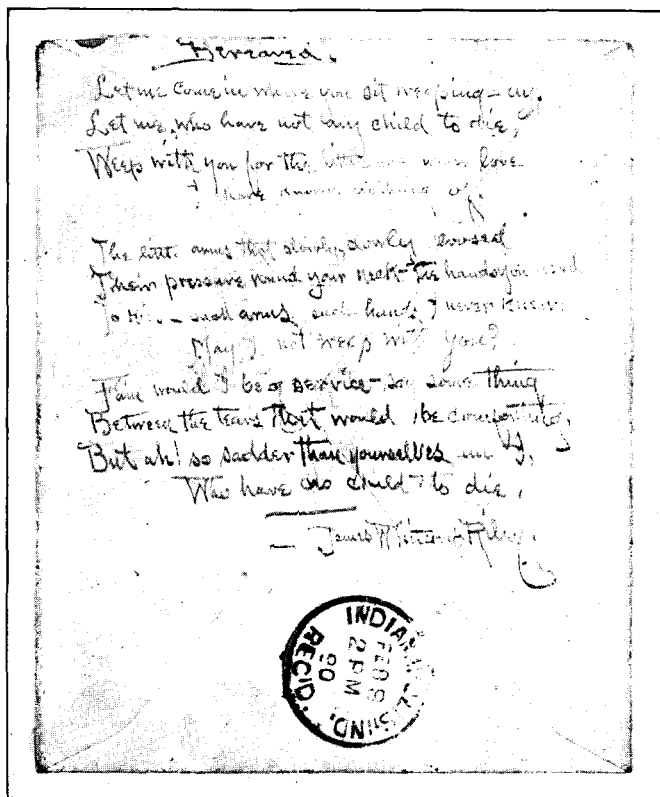
"Excuse me, but ain't that little bench-leg feller over there the Hoosier poet?"

"Yes," says Mr. Walker, "but he can't hear much of anything in one ear, and the other is plumb gone. On that side he hasn't heard his own loudest thoughts for years. If you speak to him, you must let out your voice."

So the man with the copperas hair and solferino whiskers stole up to him and in a wild bleat shot this remark into Riley's ear:

"Is this Mr. Riley?"

The poet offered him the other ear, at the



FACSIMILE OF "BEREAVED," THE POEM RILEY WROTE TO NYE ON THE DEATH OF HIS CHILD

explanation was vouchsafed, and the primitive inhabitants of that town are probably still wondering what horrible malady compelled that invalid to wear those outlandish cushions.

A favorite amusement with him was the reading of imaginary signs at the stations, when we were traveling. When the train would stop and that hush would come over the car, with half the people wondering who their fellow-passengers were and the other half viewing the little grocery on the one side, or the station, restaurant, or bill-board on the other, Mr. Nye would break forth and begin to read the bill-board aloud: "Soda-water, crackers—highest prices paid for hides

same time looking at him with large, blue, wondering, childlike eyes. People stepped back out of range to give the man with the voice a chance, and he repeated the query in a way that shook the blue ribbon of the large iron-gray Rosa Bonheur stallion across the plaza.

"Is this Mr. Riley?"

The poet said softly, as he squirmed up a little closer, "I can't hear what ye say."

About three hundred people were now around there, waiting to see what would happen, and the man with the pounding machine for telling how much a blow a poor tired farmer can strike while resting at a fair, hadn't taken in ten cents for over half an hour.

Finally the Hoosier managed to break through Riley's profound solitude and make him hear and admit who he was. Then the surprised and delighted man shot into Riley's stunned and aching ear:

"I new yer father!"

"Yes, yes," said Riley, "so did I," and walked away.

Much of Riley's discourse with Nye was quimsically carried on in dialect. A characteristic letter follows:

INDIANAPOLIS, Feb. 7, 1888.

DEAR NYE,—*Hustlin'* is hardly the name for what I've been doin' since I last wrote you, back in the dark-complected ages. "Often and again," as a dear old teacher in my halcyon &c youth would put it, were he not long since deceased,—"*Often and again I am reminded how Tempus fuge it*"—which, by the way, again reminds me how *fuge*t there like *Tempus* does! For a long time, now, dates have been keepin' the flies off of "Yours Truly," as I heard a comical feller say out in Illinois the other day—at Paxton, I think it was—no, not Paxton, either—it was at Quarga—yes, there's where it was: Quarga, Quarga, Illinois,—and I just thought die I would! Same fellow, School Superintendent told me afterward, that used to get off such funny items for the papers, in his correspondence from there, called "Nuggets From Quarga,"—got up such whoppers on the boys, you know—and the girls, too! Dog-gonest fellow! He didn't care much whose corns he stepped on! Reckoned ef the coat fit 'em, they could wear it! Got up that sorty on old Bently, you know, and—o' course, while he didn't give no name, he'd ring in, once in a while, about his hero bein' "a dicipole of Isaac Walton," you know—and ever'body 'course knowed he was a-drivin' at old Bently—er "Old Tent-times," as the fellers mostly called him. And that big *Snake Story*, you know:—Snake, you know, he claimed they ketched swallerin' a

a yearlin' calf—Called it "*His Snakeship*," you know, in his yarn—and—Well!—no use to try to tell er describe *anything* like him. It tuck *him* to do that! Only wisht we could git him started onc't! He'd be a character fer *you* to jest *study* sometime and then set down and write up—jest set down and write up, like you could. Ameriky, pass the pruens to Professor Whitcomb,—brother Whitcomb, have some fruit, and he'p him to some more dried beef—and p'serves—and corn—and float—and dump that other fried egg in his plate there. Reckon the man can put up, for *one* meal, with what we have to live on all the time!" . . . I'll never be perpetually happy till you're in constant sight—that's what! I need you every *our*, and so want to merge personalities for all time. Your work's all good—and grows steadily. Sure. Best regards and all gratitude to you and yours.

JAMESIE.

One of the notable dates of the Nye-Riley combinations was in Boston. Mark Twain came from New York City to hear these "twins of genius." Major Pond, manager of the two big tours, met him in the lobby of the Parker House, not long before the entertainment, and persuaded him to introduce Nye and Riley that evening. When Mark Twain, all unexpectedly, conducted Nye and Riley to the platform, the demonstration took on more the form of a Western political convention than a Boston lecture. The audience rose to its feet in a body, men and women shouted, handkerchiefs fluttered, and the organist opened every forte key in the organ. For minutes the ovation lasted, and when silence was at last restored, it was as impressive, Mark Twain observed afterward, as the preceding noise had been. He presented the Nye-Riley pair as the Siamese Twins. "I saw these orphans a great many years ago," he said, "when Mr. Barnum had them and they were just fresh from Siam. The ligature was their best hold then, but literature became their best hold later, when one of them committed an indiscretion and they had to cut the old bond to accommodate the sheriff." He continued this whimsy into its various ramifications at the expense of Nye and Riley, who stood trying to face the audience, as Nye said later, "with a cold, forbidding look such as Napoleon wore at St. Helena." With the observation

that "as he is a little lame, I am going to ask you to allow him to speak in a low voice," Mark Twain introduced Nye, who rejoined:

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—I am allowed now to speak in a low, familiar tone of voice under the arrangement just made. I cannot do so, however, without saying that, although I have been introduced by this venerable fraud, I fully appreciate the fact that I, though very young and tender, have been introduced by the oldest and the toughest and the best and spiciest of American humorists, a man whose name is not only a household word in America, but also in the Old World, and I forgive him for all of the mean things which he has said, because I know that he is not really so mean as he appears to be. The more you know Mark Twain, the more you associate with him, the more you are compelled to like him, because he really intends to do right; and some day when his hair is all gone there will be under that shock of gray a large two dollar halo, I think. He is really a better man than he looks to be, better than he appears; and both Mr. Riley and I appreciate fully his kindness in coming to Boston and breaking the ice for us to-night, though he has done it in rather an awkward and contemptible way.

And so the entertainment ran, sparkling with the wit of Nye and Mark Twain, and glorified by the mirth and pathos of Riley's verse. There never was such a combination upon the platform. When the audience had laughed itself weary over Nye's drollery, Riley led it into a reminiscent or serious mood and stirred it to impressions and emotions never to be forgotten when he read "The Old Man and Jim" and "Little Orphant Annie" and "That Old Sweetheart of Mine."

The lecture tours resulted in an unusual friendship between Nye and Riley. In the following anecdotes and letters something of the heart of the man known to the poet is revealed. Riley often told the story of Nye's ill-fated wedding-journey:

A perverse fate had denied him and his wife that one pleasure which married people usually enjoy if they have nothing else—a wedding-journey. It had not been possible at first in the days at Laramie because of his poverty, and as time went on one cause or another deferred the event so long that they came to refer to it as to be taken upon the marriage of their eldest child, when the two

couples would take the journey together. At last the opportunity presented itself auspiciously. Nye was not well and California had been prescribed, with the result that he made a list of engagements westward. The three children were placed in care of a niece, a very reliable young woman, and Mrs. Nye was to meet her husband in Kansas City following a lecture tour. When his wife was on the way the calamity came. It was announced in a telegram from the niece that all of the children had been stricken with scarlet fever and the house quarantined. With heroic patience in those hours of suspense and apprehension and suffering prior to Mrs. Nye's arrival, Nye busied himself in canceling Western dates and in making preparations for a speedy return. When she arrived he broke the painful news to her and they took the next train east, not knowing whether their little ones would be alive to greet them upon their return. And when they did reach the end of that journey of suffering, they found the children so ill that the arrival of the parents could not be announced to them. With his heart in suffering and suspense, Nye wrote long letters to the children of the happy and comical times he and his wife were supposedly enjoying in the land of sun and flowers.

The heroic spirit which Riley admired in Nye shows in this letter which Nye wrote during the same illness that postponed the proposed tour in 1886:

ASHVILLE, N. C., Feb. 1, '87.

MY DEAR RILEY,—The rumor to which you referred was too sadly and sorrowfully true. I need not tell you how your letter was the first streak of day after a long black night, for I have been physically miserable for some time and could not with safety have made the journey north even had I known in time how near my father was to his end.

It has seemed all at once to make an old man of me, for in his presence I was always a boy. When I went home, the hour was never too late for a welcome from him, not a wordy welcome, for he said little, but I would walk and have walked ten miles mainly to see the welcome that came alone from the heart, a welcome that I will sadly miss till we meet again.

Frank was with him through the brief illness and wrote me as best he could in the gray morning that stole in on the heels of death.

For forty years my father and mother had buffeted the billows of poverty or reveled in the brief sunshine of prosperity, and now one is taken and the other left. You can faintly picture to yourself, in your sympathetic poetic heart, how the tall tree lies prone in

the solemn hush of the forest while the wind-tossed tendrils of the ivy reach out blindly for the rugged boughs that for nearly half a century supported it. I can, even in my own misery, see that it is not like hers. Another home has grown about me and little voices and little hands break that awful hush that hangs about the old home to-day. I can now look forward to the trying time in my own life when one by one the children have gone, and then in the unnatural stillness my wife or I will fall and the other, whichever it may be, will stand mute and terrified, alone on the lonely site of what was once our home.

I cannot thank you enough for your letter. I have had a good deal to make me anything but gay this winter. I've been in fact sick for about two months and now, though better, I am not well by a long way. I get the *Journal* lately and though it is not addressed by you, I feel as I might if you had told Harry New or George Hitt that I would like to see it and they had sent it.

Goodbye my dear partner. May your life be as full of joy as it deserves and you will have all you can attend to in that line.

We will send our love and hope to hear from you soon. Yours always and ever.

BILL NYE.

As the years passed, Riley's friendship for Nye grew steadily deeper. At the times when he visited Nye's home he was a delight to the children. They called him "Uncle Sidney," and he put them in his poems. Upon Riley's return home after one of these visits Nye wrote in his most ridiculous manner to tell Riley how much he was missed by all:

Oh sir, the house seems very still now, and the bright and cheery tones of the grammatical and erect relative addressing the happy-voiced children no more echo to and fro with their merry cackle. The glorious Yuletide now coming on apace seems to murmur, "Where in thunder is Uncle Sidney?" The dying Year turns painfully on its couch and resting its "gooms" on the foot-board of the bed seems mutely to wonder what is keeping Uncle Sidney. Everywhere there is a general demand for you.

Nye's friendship for Riley is reflected in this droll letter written to comfort the poet, ill in a lonely hotel:

N. Y., Sept. 21, 1887.

MY DEAR JAMESIE,—And so you have been sick all this time while I was mildly cussing you under my breath for not writing to me!

I wish you knew how many friends you have in this young and growing town. It would make you well. I went into a Broadway office the other day and heard a publisher recite "The Hare Lip." I had never heard it and I was pained to hear anybody recite one of your poems in the "O-Mother-may-I-go-to-school-with-brother-Charles-to-day-the-air-is-very-soft-and-cool-do-Mother-say-I-may" style, but his admiration was mighty sincere and you could see that you had reached his large dark-red heart. I wish that you and I might give a little show here together this winter under favorable auspices.

I have just come back from Mr. Coney's celebrated Island, where youth and pleasure meet and try to forget about the old man. I went as a guest of the Brighton and am free to say it was a great success.

The Brighton is as good a hotel as I ever was to. The cooking is done by hired help and the front yard extends to Liverpool. I went down to the beach several times to watch the girls in the embrace of the billows. If nature had not designed me more especially for a litterateur I would have been glad if I had been a billow.

Still even a billow does not have it all its own way, for they had to embrace some people down there that must have made the ocean heave.

When I started this letter, Jamesie, I thought I would write one that you would put in your autograph-album and point to with pride, but I see now that it is not that kind of a letter. It is low and coarse in its tone, and when I have been garnered in at last and sit on the right hand of the Throne, scared half to death for fear that the Almighty will introduce me to the audience and ask me to make a few remarks, I hope, Jamesie, that you will not produce this letter and humiliate me.

I feel the deepest sympathy for you in your sickness, for the Lord knows I've been through it and looked the ceiling out of countenance for months at a time, till I got so thin that my etruscan legs looked like the legs of a camera, but I was sick at home and to be sick at home is not really a calamity compared with being sick "at Lodgings" as we say in Piccadilly. I do not advise you to marry, because I don't know that it would be congenial to your tastes, but if you're going to be sick much I would do so without delay. A kind wife with a cool, soft hand and a tender, velvet voice and the odor of violets about her, and a weak attempt at authority, and a gentle apology for her severity and above all a deep and undying loyalty that defies and disarms death itself, will do more to make the king of Terrors ashamed of himself than all else besides.

Goodbye my dear Jamesie with the best wishes and the assurance that I will always use my influence for you at the throne of Grace.

Yours ever,

BILL.

Among the many comical stories Riley told of his experiences with Nye was the history of a book called *Nye and Riley's Railway Guide*, which gave them a broad personal and legal experience with publishers. From their first tour in 1886 their fancy ran riot with the idea of a comic railway guide for just such poor, ill-fated travelers as they themselves proved to be, for the man, as they wrote in the introduction, "who erroneously gets into a car which is side-tracked and swept out and scrubbed by people who take in cars to scrub and laundry."

"Nye and I," Riley used to say, "thought a little book made from our readings might perhaps stanch a long-felt public want. In fact, we grew enthusiastic as our eyes swept the prospect. Nye, indeed, thought there was money in it. I remember that, in his optimism, he wrote: 'Let us make some money, be Gosh, and put it in our inside pocket. It feels bully.'" Riley always chuckled reminiscently at this point in the story.

"Well, we went to *Chicago* to look for a publisher, and there we found one Ketchem & Skinem, who had a sign on the door, 'Drop MSS. here.' We dropped ours and went away feeling pretty good."

Riley then told of a long wait during which they wondered whether the manuscript would be accepted; then how glad they were to find the book on sale at the news-stands, and finally how they paid a visit to the publishers to inquire, timidly, into the matter of royalties. The door was locked. Some months later, in response to their letters, came an invitation to a banquet given by the publishers in their honor. Hopefully they presented themselves. "As we filed in to dinner Nye whispered to me, 'Think they'll hand us checks with the cigars?' Well, when the cigars were passed at length, the publisher at the head of the table pushed back his chair, put his finger-tips on the cloth, beamed on us and said:

"Gentlemen and publishers, we have met to do honor to our two illustrious humorists to-night in an unusual way. We appreciate their humor, especially that which has made our book so successful. And in token of our appreciation we now present to them one hundred shares apiece in our great company. Ahem!—I believe that is all!"

"It was all. Nye and I hoped at first for the best, but neither of us secretly could find any market for our shares, and the company never paid any dividends before it went out of business."

After the tours, though they were no longer together, their friendship continued vital. One of the strange experiences of Riley's life illustrates this poetically.

It was at night; he could not sleep, and he arose with a feeling that he must write—that he must express, in some way, the sympathy he felt for he knew not whom. In this spirit Riley wrote the poem, "Bereaved." As was very unusual, he set it down quite rapidly, the entire composition requiring less than half an hour. A few days afterward came the news that a child of Nye's was dead. Riley at once addressed the poem to the bereaved parents, feeling that he understood what had prompted him to write it:

Fain would I be of service—say something
Between the tears, that would be comforting,
But ah! so sadder than yourselves am I,
Who have no child to die.

Nye's death came in 1896. The loss was a blow to Riley, felt as deeply as the severance of any friendship of his life. At the time he wrote for the press:

Truly we shall not look on his like again,—
though there lingers no memory of him but
is most cheering and inspiring—no grieving
or regretting but is wholly selfish.

There was one thing Riley still could do for his friend. Nye's *Guest at the Ludlow*, a book as good as his comic histories, was in the hands of the publisher. Riley toiled over the proofs day by day with an ever-increasing sense of his loss. Then came a sonnet from his pen containing these words:

Such silence—after such glad merriment!

“Contact”

BY WILBUR DANIEL STEELE



WHEN the question of the “ruthless submarine campaign” was put to the world by Germany in the opening months of 1917 there was at first no answer, and the Black Weeks followed. By and by the weeks grew not so black, because the world was beginning to find answers. And as the months moved on, more and more answers were found—answers flung down to the U-boats from the whirling skies and up from the broken waters; answers dragged from the sterns of old salt-crusted trawlers; answers dropped in round black cans from the taffrails of scouts and chasers and patrols and destroyers sweeping like a cloud round the coasts of Europe; answers carried into the teeth of a wind of steel at Zeebrugge and Ostend.

But of all the answers given to the pirate, the convoy was the compelling and authoritative answer. And the heart and meat of the convoy is “contact.”

I have stood by at the making of more than a few contacts, and they are not moments one is apt to forget. From the deck of a crowded troopship I have seen the destroyers wheeling out of nowhere, swiftly, silently, dropping down from every quarter of an iron sky-line like small gray snowbirds, to swoop along the cheering flanks. Or standing on the bridge of one of those same destroyers, I have seen the foodships coming over the horizon in the dawn, a wide-flung line of ships like an army advancing upon us under a red banner of smoke. I have seen ships growing like ghosts in the midnight, lines and columns of mysterious, great steel ships towering against the stars beyond our rails where a moment ago no ships were.

And I remember another, a most impossible contact, made with a most impatient man, on a morning full of snow-white rainbows.

It was a brilliant day, as brilliant as a morning on the tablelands of Colorado, and we were coming out of France. Yesterday we had arrived there, destroyers from the American flotilla, herding home the queerest, the raggedest, and the slowest merchant convoy that the world of water (perhaps) has ever seen. And to-day we were steaming out of the harbor’s gullet again, or rather pouring out of it at any number of revolutions per minute, to have dealings with this most impatient man.

“Twenty-three hours ahead of schedule—” the tale of him ran.

And still he was not content.

One could picture him out there in the bald immensity of the sea, Something Somebody, D. S. O., R. N. R., shaking his head and putting his shoulders down, “driving her home” through the last five hundred of the long thousands of miles out of Sydney and Calcutta and the China coast. One had a vision of the stokers sweating in the bellies of the big steamers; one seemed to hear the things they had to say in their dungeons about that self-willed, headlong old fellow tramping the top-side of the flagship along the line.

“Thirty - one hours ahead of schedule—”

By day and by night the tale of his impetuous career filtered through the electric network of the sky, through admiralities and lesser admiralities, commanders-in-chief and lesser commanders, all the way down to us, resting over for a bit of breath and oil and potatoes at somebody else’s port.

“Thirty - three hours ahead of schedule—”

The Executive began to do things! The Navigator said, “He’s got the smell of the beach in his nose, that ‘Limey’ sailor-man,” and retired into the chart-house with a pencil. The Owner got up and put on his old pants and his wind-proof shirt, and, climbing to the bridge,