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REAL CONVERSATIONS.—IV.

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY AND HAMLIN GARLAND.

RECORDED BY MR. GARLAND.



RILEY'S country, like most of the State of Indiana, has been won from the original forest by incredible toil. Three generations of men have laid their bones beneath the soil that now blooms into gold and lavender harvests of wheat and corn.

The traveller to-day can read this record of struggle in the fringes of mighty elms and oaks and sycamores which form the grim background of every pleasant stretch of stubble or corn land.

Greenfield, lying twenty miles east of Indianapolis, is to-day an agricultural town, but in the days when Whitcomb Riley lived here it was only a half-remove from the farm and the wood-lot; and the fact that he was brought up so near to the farm, and yet not deadened and soured by its toil, accounts, in great measure at least, for his work.

But Greenfield as it stands to-day, modernized and refined somewhat, is apparently the most unpromising field for literature, especially for poetry. It has no hills, and no river nor lake. Nothing but vast and radiant sky, and

blue vistas of fields between noble trees.

It has the customary main street with stores fronting upon it; the usual small shops, and also its bar-rooms, swarming with loungers. It has its courthouse in the square, half-hid by great trees—a grim and bare building, with its portal defaced and grimy. The people, as they pass you in the street, speak in the soft, high-keyed nasal drawl which is the basis of the Hoosier dialect. It looks to be, as it is, half-way between the New England village and the Western town.

The life, like that of all small towns in America, is apparently slow-moving, purposeless, and uninteresting; and yet from this town, and other similar towns, has Whitcomb Riley drawn the sweetest honey of poesy—honey with a native delicious tang, as of buckwheat and basswood bloom, with hints of the mullein and the thistle of dry pastures.

I found Mr. Riley sitting on the porch of the old homestead, which has been in alien hands for a long time, but which he has lately bought back. In this house his childhood was passed, at a time when the street was hardly more than a lane in the woods. He bought it because of old-time associations.

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"I am living here," he wrote me, "with two married sisters keeping house for me during the summer ; that is to say, I ply spasmodically between here and Indianapolis."

I was determined to see the poet here, in the midst of his native surroundings, rather than at a hotel at Indianapolis. I was very glad to find him at home, for it gave me opportunity to study both the poet and his material.

It is an unpretentious house of the usual village sort, with a large garden ; and his two charming sisters with their families (summering here) give him something more of a home atmosphere than he has had since he entered the lecturer's profession. Two or three children—nephews and nieces—companion him also.

After a few minutes' chat Riley said, with a comical side glance at me: "Come up into my library." I knew what sort of a library to expect. It was a pleasant little upper room, with a bed and a small table in it, and about a dozen books.

Mr. Riley threw out his hand in a comprehensive gesture, and said: "This is as sumptuous a room as I ever get. I live most o' my time in a Pullman car or a hotel, and you know how blamed luxurious an ordinary hotel room is."

I refused to be drawn off into side discussions, and called for writing paper. Riley took an easy position on the bed, while I sharpened pencils, and studied him closely, with a view to let readers of McClure's know how he looks.

He is a short man, with square shoulders and a large head. He has a very dignified manner—at times. His face is smoothly shaven, and, though he is not bald, the light color of his hair makes him seem so. His eyes are gray and round, and generally solemn, and sometimes stern. His face is the face of a great actor—in rest, grim and inscrutable ; in action, full of the most elusive expressions, capable of humor and pathos. Like most humorists, he is sad in repose. His language, when he chooses to have it so, is wonderfully concise and penetrating and beautiful. He drops often into dialect,

but always with a look on his face which shows he is aware of what he is doing. In other words, he is master of both forms of speech. His mouth is his wonderful feature: wide, flexible, clean-cut. His lips are capable of the grimmest and the merriest lines. When he reads they pout like a child's, or draw down into a straight, grim line like a New England deacon's, or close at one side, and uncover his white and even teeth at the other, in the sly smile of "Benjamin F. Johnson," the humble humorist and philosopher. In his own proper person he is full of quaint and beautiful philosophy. He is wise rather than learned—wise with the quality that is in proverbs, almost always touched with humor.

His eyes are near-sighted and his nose prominent. His head is of the "tack-hammer" variety, as he calls it. The public insists that there is an element of resemblance between Mr. Riley, Eugene Field and Bill Nye. He is about forty years of age and a bachelor—presumably from choice. He is a man of marked neatness of dress and delicacy of manner. I began business by asking if he remembered where we met last.

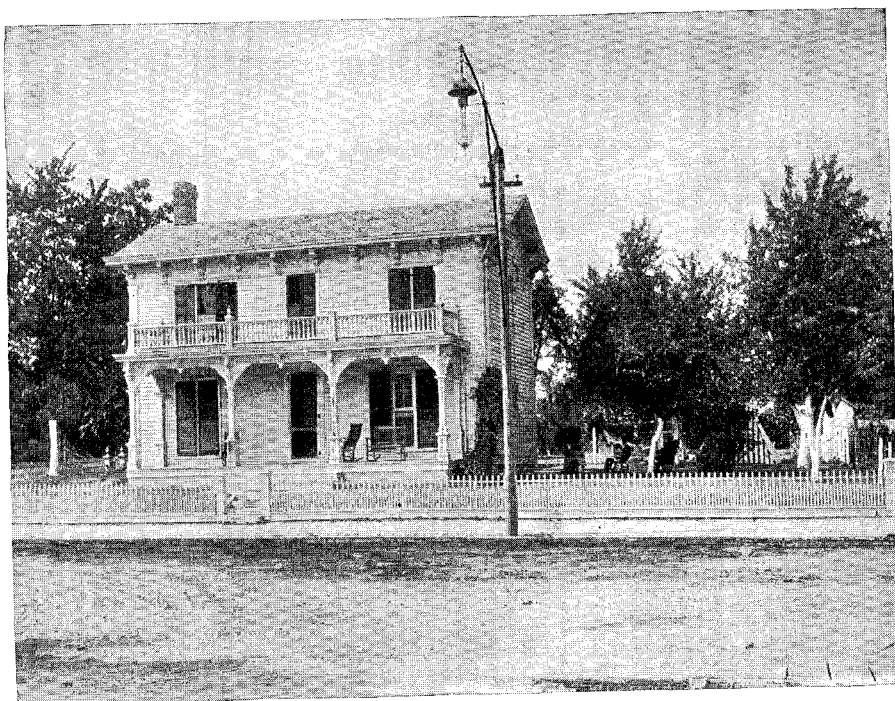
"Certainly—Kipling's. Great storyteller, Kipling. I like to hear him tell about animals. Remember his story of the two elephants that lambasted the one that went 'must'?"

"I guess I do. I have a suspicion, however, that Kipling was drawing a long bow for our benefit, especially in that story of the elephant that chewed a stalk of cane into a swab to wind in the clothing of his keeper, in order to get him within reach. That struck me as bearing down pretty hard on a couple of simple Western boys like us."

"Waive the difference for genius. He made it a good story, anyway ; and, aside from his great gifts, I consider Kipling a lovely fellow. I like him because he's natively interested in the common man."

I nodded my assent, and Riley went on :

"Kipling had the good fortune to get started early, and he's kept busy right along. A man who is great has



"GRIGGSBY'S STATION."—THE OLD RILEY HOUSE AND PRESENT SUMMER RESIDENCE, GREENFIELD, IND.

"Le's go a-visitin' back to Griggsby's Station—
Back where the latch-string's a-hangin' from the door,
And ever' neighbor round the place is dear as a relation—
Back where we ust to be so happy and so pore!"

no time for anything else," he added, in that peculiarity of phrase and solemnity of utterance which made me despair of ever dramatizing him.

"He's going to do better," I replied. "The best story in that book is 'His Private Honor.' That's as good as anybody does. What makes Kipling great is his fidelity to his own convictions and to his own conditions, his writing what he knows about. And, by the way, the Norwegians and Swedes at the World's Fair have read us a good lesson on that score. They've put certain phases of their life and landscape before us with immense vim and truth, while our American artists have mainly gone hunting for themes—Breton peasants and Japanese dancing-girls."

Riley sternly roused up to interrupt: "And ignoring the best material in the world. Material just out o' God's hand, lying around thick"—then quick

as light he was Old Man Johnson again:

"'Thick as clods in the fields and lanes
Er these-ere little hop-toads when it rains!'"

"American artists and poets have always known too much," I went on. "We've been so afraid the world would find us lacking in scholarship, that we've allowed it to find us lacking in creative work. We've been so very correct, that we've imitated. Now, if you'd had four or five years of Latin, Riley, you'd be writing Latin odes or translations."

Riley looked grave. "I don't know but you're right. Still, you can't tell. Sometimes I feel that I am handicapped by ignorance of history and rhetoric and languages."

"Well, of course, I ought not to discuss a thing like this in your presence, but I think the whole thing has worked

out beautifully for the glory of Indiana and Western literature."

There came a comical light into his eyes, and his lips twisted up in a sly grin at the side, as he dropped into dialect: "I don't take no credit for my ignorance. Jest born thataway," and he added, a moment later, with a characteristic swift change to deep earnestness: "My work did itself."

As he lay, with that introspective look in his eyes, I took refuge in one of the questions I had noted down: "Did you ever actually live on a farm?"

"No. All I got of farm life I picked up right from this distance—this town—this old homestead. Of course, Greenfield was nothing but a farmer town then, and besides, father had a farm just on the edge of town, and in corn-plantin' times he used to press us boys into service, and we went very loathfully, at least I did. I got hold of farm life some way—all ways, in fact. I might not have made use of it if I had been closer to it than this."

"Yes, there's something in that. You would have failed, probably, in your perspective. The actual work on a farm doesn't make poets. Work is a good thing in the retrospect, or when you can regulate the amount of it. Yes, I guess you had just the kind of a life to give you a hold on the salient facts of farm life. Anyhow, you've done it, that's settled."

Riley was thinking about something which amused him, and he roused up to dramatize a little scene. "Sometimes some real country boy gives me the round turn on some farm points. For instance, here comes one stepping up to me: 'You never lived on a farm,' he says. 'Why not?' says I. 'Well,' he says, 'a turkey-cock gobbles, but he don't ky-ouck as your poetry says.' He had me right there. It's the turkey-hen that ky-oucks. 'Well, you'll never hear another turkey-cock of mine ky-ouckin',' says I."

While I laughed, Riley became serious again. "But generally I hit on the right symbols. I get the frost on the pumpkin and the fodder in the shock; and I see the frost on the old axe they split the pumpkins with for feed, and I get the smell of the fodder

and the cattle, so that it brings up the right picture in the mind of the reader. I don't know how I do it. It ain't me."

His voice took on a deeper note, and his face shone with a strange sort of mysticism which often comes out in his earnest moments. He put his fingers to his lips in a descriptive gesture, as if he held a trumpet. "I'm only the 'willer' through which the whistle comes."

"The basis of all art is spontaneous observation," I said, referring back a little. "If a man is to work out an individual utterance with the subtlety and suggestion of life, he can't go diggin' around among the bones of buried prophets. I take it you didn't go to school much."

"No, and when I did I was a failure in everything—except reading, maybe. I liked to read. We had McGuffey's Series, you know, and there was some good stuff there. There was Irving and Bryant and Cooper and Dickens—"

"And 'Lochiel's Warning'—"

He accepted the interruption. "And 'The Battle of Waterloo,' and 'The Death of Little Nell'—"

I rubbed my knees with glee as I again interrupted: "And there was 'Marco Bozzaris,' you know, and 'Rienzi.' You recollect that speech of Rienzi's—'I come not here to talk,' etc.? I used to count the class to see if 'Rouse, ye Slaves,' would come to me. It was capitalized, you remember. It always scared me nearly to death to read those capitalized passages."

Riley mused. "Pathos seems to be the worst with me. I used to run away when we were to read 'Little Nell.' I knew I couldn't read it without crying, and I knew they'd all laugh at me and make the whole thing ridiculous. I couldn't stand that. My teacher, Lee O. Harris, was a friend to me and helped me in many ways. He got to understand me beautifully! He knew I couldn't learn arithmetic. There wasn't any gray matter in that part of my head. Perfectly empty! But I can't remember when I wasn't a declaimer. I always took natively to

anything theatrical. History I took a dislike to, as a thing without juice, and so I'm not particularly well stocked in dates and events of the past."

"Well, that's a good thing, too, I guess," I said, pushing my point again. "It has thrown you upon the present, and kept you dealing with your own people. Of course, I don't mean to argue that perfect ignorance is a thing to be desired, but there is no distinc-

"The sign-painting. I was a boy in my teens when I took up sign-painting."

"Did you serve a regular apprenticeship?"

"Yes, learned my trade of an old Dutchman here, by the name of Keefer, who was an artist in his way. I had a natural faculty for drawing. I suppose I could have illustrated my books if I had given time to it. It's rather



"MILROY'S GROVE" AND OLD NATIONAL ROAD BRIDGE, BRANDYWINE.

"Where the dusky turtle lies basking on the gravel
Of the sunny sand-bar in the middle tide,
And the ghostly dragonfly pauses in his travel
To rest like a blossom where the water-lily died."

—*Babyhood.*

tion in the historical poem or novel, to my mind. Everybody's done that."

Riley continued: "Harris, in addition to being a scholar and a teacher, was, and is, a poet. He was also a playwright, and made me a success in a comedy part which he wrote for me, in our home theatricals."

"Well, now, that makes me think. It was your power to recite that carried you into the patent-medicine cart, wasn't it? And how about that sign-painting? Which came first?"

curious, but I hadn't been with the old fellow much more than a week before I went to him and asked him why he didn't make his own letters. I couldn't see why he copied from the same old forms all the time. I hated to copy anything."

"Well, now, I want to know about that patent-medicine peddling."

Something in my tone made him reply quickly:

"That has been distorted. It was really a very simple matter, and fol-

lowed the sign-painting naturally. After the 'trade' episode I had tried to read law with my father, but I didn't seem to get anywhere. Forgot as diligently as I read. So far as school equipment was concerned, I was an advertised idiot; so what was the use? I had a trade, but it was hardly what I wanted to do always, and my health was bad—very bad—bad as *I* was!

"A doctor here in Greenfield advised me to travel. But how in the world was I to travel without money? It was just at this time that the patent-medicine man came along. He needed a man, and I argued this way: 'This man is a doctor, and if I must travel, better travel with a doctor.' He had a fine team, and a nice-looking lot of fellows with him; so I plucked up courage to ask if I couldn't go along and paint his advertisements for him."

Riley smiled with retrospective amusement. "I rode out of town behind those horses without saying good-by to any one. And though my patron wasn't a diploma'd doctor, as I found out, he was a mighty fine man, and kind to his horses, which was a recommendation. He was a man of good habits, and the whole company was made up of good straight boys."

"How long were you with him?"

"About a year. Went home with him, and was made same as one of his own lovely family. He lived at Lima, Ohio. My experience with him put an idea in my head—a business idea, for a wonder—and the next year I went down to Anderson and went into partnership with a young fellow to travel, organizing a scheme of advertising with paint, which we called 'The Graphic Company.' We had five or six young fellows, all musicians as well as handy painters, and we used to capture the towns with our music. One fellow could whistle like a nightingale, another sang like an angel, and another played the banjo. I scuffled with the violin and guitar."

"I thought so, from that poem on 'The Fiddle' in 'The Old Swimmin' Hole.'"

"Our only dissipation was clothes.

We dressed loud. You could hear our clothes an incalculable distance. We had an idea it helped business. Our plan was to take one firm of each business in a town, painting its advertisements on every road leading into the town: 'Go to Mooney's,' and things like that, you understand. We made a good thing at it."

"How long did you do business?"

"Three or four years, and we had more fun than anybody." He turned another comical look on me over his pinch-nose eyeglasses. "You've heard this story about my travelling all over the State as a blind sign-painter? Well, that started this way. One day we were in a small town somewhere, and a great crowd watching us in breathless wonder and curiosity; and one of our party said: 'Riley, let me introduce you as a blind sign-painter.' So just for mischief I put on a crazy look in the eyes and pretended to be blind. They led me carefully to the ladder, and handed me my brush and paints. It was great fun. I'd hear them saying as I worked, 'That feller ain't blind.' 'Yes, he is, see his eyes.' 'No, he ain't, I tell you, he's playin' off.' 'I tell you he *is* blind. Didn't you see him fall over a box there and spill all his paints?'"

Riley rose here and laughingly re-enacted the scene, and I don't wonder that the villagers were deceived, so perfect was his assumption of the patient, weary look of a blind person.

I laughed at the joke. It was like the tricks boys play at college.

Riley went on. "Now, that's all there was to it. I was a blind sign-painter one day, and forgot it the next. We were all boys, and jokers, naturally enough, but not lawless. All were good fellows. All had nice homes and good people."

"Were you writing any at this time?"

"Oh, yes, I was always writing for purposes of recitation. I couldn't find printed poetry that was natural enough to speak. From a child I had always flinched at false rhymes and inversions. I liked John G. Saxe because he had a jaunty trick of rhyming artlessly;



"THE OLD SWIMMIN'-HOLE" AS IT NOW APPEARS (AUGUST 10, 1893).

"Childish voices, further on,
Where the truant stream has gone,
Vex the echoes of the wood
Till no word is understood—
Save that we are well aware
Happiness is hiding there :—
There, in leafy coverts, nude
Little bodies poise and leap,
Spattering the solitude.

And the silence everywhere—
Mimic monsters of the deep !—
Wallowing in sandy shoals—
Plunging headlong out of sight,
And, with spurtings of delight,
Clutching hands and slippery soles,
Climbing up the treacherous steep
Over which the spring-board spurns
Each again as he returns."

—In *Swimming-Time*.

made the *sense* demand the rhyme—like

'Young Peter Pyramus—I call him Peter,
Not for the sake of the rhyme or the metre,
But merely to make the name completer.'

I liked those classic travesties, too—he poked fun at the tedious old themes, and that always pleased me." Riley's voice grew stern, as he said: "I'm against the fellows who celebrate the old to the neglect of our own kith and kin. So I was always trying to write of the kind of people I *knew*, and especially to write verse that I could read just as if it were being spoken for the first time."

"I saw in a newspaper the other day that you began your journalistic work in Anderson."

"That's right. When I got back from my last trip with 'The Graphic Company,' young Will M. Croan offered me a place on a paper he was just connecting himself with. He had heard that I could write, and took it for granted I would be a valuable man in the local and advertising departments. I was. I inaugurated at once a feature of free doggerel advertising, for our regular advertisers. I wrote reams and miles of stuff like this:

" 'O Yawcob Stein,
Dot frent of mine,
He got dot Cloding down so fine
Dot effer'body bin a-buyin'
Fon got old Yawcob Stein.' "

"I'd like to see some of those old papers. I suppose they're all down there on file."

"I'm afraid they are. It's all there. Whole hemorrhages of it."

"Did you go from there to Indianapolis?"

He nodded.

"How did you come to go? Did you go on the venture?"

"No, it came about in this way. I had a lot of real stuff, as I fancied, quite different from the doggerel I've just quoted; and when I found something pleased the people, as I'd hold 'em up and *read* it to 'em, I'd send it off to a magazine, and it would come back quite promptly by return mail. Still I believed in it. I had a friend on

the opposition paper who was always laughing at my pretensions as a poet, and I was anxious to show him I could write poetry just as good as that which he praised of other writers: and it was for his benefit I concocted that scheme of imitating Poe. You've heard of that?"

"Not from any reliable source."

"Well, it was just this way. I determined to write a poem in imitation of some well-known poet, to see if I couldn't trap my hypercritical friend. I had no idea of doing anything more than that. So I coined and wrote and sent 'Leonainie' to a paper in a neighboring county, in order that I might attack it myself in my own paper and so throw my friend completely off the track. The whole thing was a boy's fool trick. I didn't suppose it would go out of the State exchanges. I was appalled at the result. The whole country took it up, and pitched into me unjustifiably."

"Couldn't you explain?"

"They wouldn't *let* me explain. I lost my position on the paper, because I had let a rival paper have 'the discovery!' Everybody insisted I was trying to attract attention, but that wasn't true. I simply wanted to make my critic acknowledge, by the ruse, that I *could* write *perfect* verse, so far as *his* critical (?) judgment comprehended. The whole matter began as a thoughtless joke, and ended in being one of the most unpleasant experiences of my life."

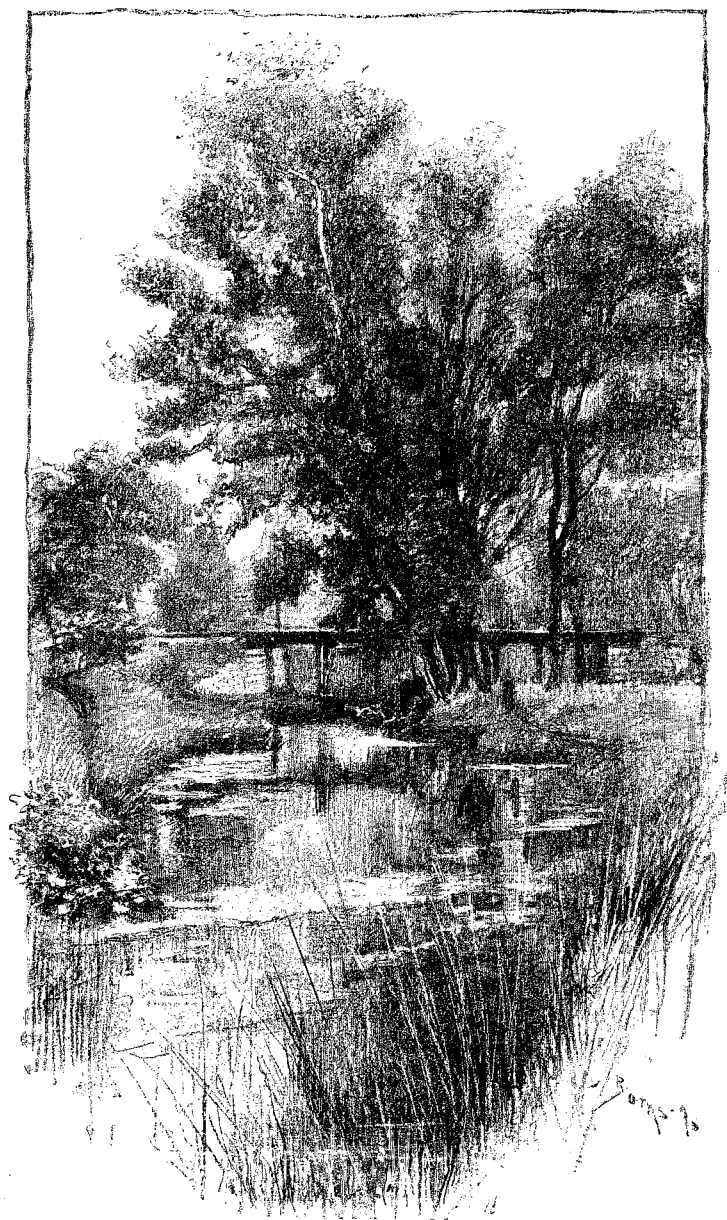
"Well, you carried your point, anyway. There's a melancholy sort of pleasure in doing that."

Riley didn't seem to take even that pleasure in it.

"In this dark time, just when I didn't know which way to turn—friends all dropping away—I got a letter from Judge Martindale of the 'Indianapolis Journal,' saying, 'Come over and take a regular place on the "Journal," and get pay for your work.' "

"That was a timely piece of kindness on his part."

"It put me really on my feet. And just about this time, too, I got a letter from Longfellow, concerning some verses that I had had the 'nerve' to ask



RAILROAD BRIDGE, BRANDYWINE.

“Through the viny, shady-shiny
Interspaces, shot with tiny
Flying motes that fleck the winy
Wave-engraven sycamores.”
—*A Dream of Autumn.*

him to examine, in which he said the verses showed 'the true poetic faculty and insight.' This was high praise to me then, and I went on writing with more confidence and ambition ever after."

"What did you send to him?"

"I don't remember exactly—some of my serious work. Yes, one of the things was 'The Iron Horse.'" He quoted this:

"No song is mine of Arab steed—
My courser is of nobler blood
And cleaner limb and fleetier speed
And greater strength and hardihood
Than ever cantered wild and free
Across the plains of Araby."

"How did Judge Martindale come to make that generous offer? Had you been contributing to the 'Journal'?"

"Oh, yes, for quite a while. One of the things I had just sent him was the Christmas story, 'The Boss Girl,' a newsboy's story. He didn't know, of course, that I was in trouble when he made the offer, but he stood by me afterwards, and all came right."

"What did you do on the 'Journal'?"

"I was a sort o' free-lance—could do anything I wanted to. Just about this time I began a series of 'Benjamin F. Johnson' poems. They all appeared with editorial comment, as if they came from an old Hoosier farmer of Boone County. They were so well received that I gathered them together in a little parchment volume, which I called 'The Old Swimmin' Hole and 'Leven More Poems,' my first book."

"I suppose you put forth that volume with great timidity?"

"Well, I argued it couldn't break me, so I printed a thousand copies—hired 'em done, of course, at my own expense."

"Did you sell 'em?"

"They sold themselves. I had the ten-bushel box of 'em down in the 'Journal' office, and it bothered me nearly to death to attend to the mailing of them. So when Bowen & Merrill agreed to take the book off my hands, I gladly consented, and that's the way I began with them."

"It was that little book that first made me acquainted with your name," I said. "My friend and your friend, Charles E. Hurd, of the 'Boston Transcript,' one day read me the poem 'William Leachman,' which he liked exceedingly, and ended by giving me a copy of the book. I saw at once you had taken up the rural life, and carried it beyond Whittier and Lowell in respect of making it dramatic. You gave the farmer's point of view."

"I've tried to. But people oughtn't to get twisted up on my things the way they do. I've written dialect in two ways. One, as the modern man, bringing all the art he can to represent the way some other fellow thinks and speaks; but the 'Johnson' poems are intended to be like the old man's *written* poems, because he is supposed to have sent them in to the paper himself. They are representations of written dialect, while the others are representations of dialect as manipulated by the artist. But, in either case, it's the other fellow doin' it. I don't try to treat of people as they *ought* to think and speak, but as they do think and speak. In other words, I do not undertake to edit nature, either physical or human."

"I see your point, but I don't know that I would have done so without having read 'The Old Swimmin' Hole,' and the 'Tale of the Airly Days.'"

I quoted here those lines I always found so meaningful:

"Tell of the things just like they was,
They don't need no excuse.
Don't tech 'em up as the poets does,
'Till they're all too fine for use!"

Riley rose to his feet, and walked about the room. "I don't believe in dressing up nature. Nature is good enough for God, it's good enough for me. I see Old Man Johnson, a living figure. I know what the old feller has read. I'd like to have his picture drawn, because I love the old codger, but I can't get artists to see that I'm not making fun of him. They seem to think that if a man is out o' plumb in his language he must be likewise in his morals."

I flung my hand-grenade: "That's a relic of the old school, the school of

caricature—a school that assumes that if a man has a bulbous nose he necessarily has a bulbous intellect, which doesn't follow. I've known men with bulbous noses who were neither hard drinkers nor queer in any other particular, having a fine, dignified speech and clear, candid eyes."

"Now, old Benjamin looks queer, I'll admit. His clothes don't fit him. He's bent and awkward. But that don't prevent him from having a fine head and deep and tender eyes, and a soul in him you can recommend."

Riley paused, and looked down at me with a strange smile. "I tell you, the crude man is generally moral, for Nature has just let go his hand. She's just been leading him through the dead leaves and the daisies. When I deal with such a man I give him credit for every virtue; but what he does, and the way he does it, is his action and not mine."

He read at this point, with that quaint arching of one eyebrow, and the twist at the side of the mouth with which he

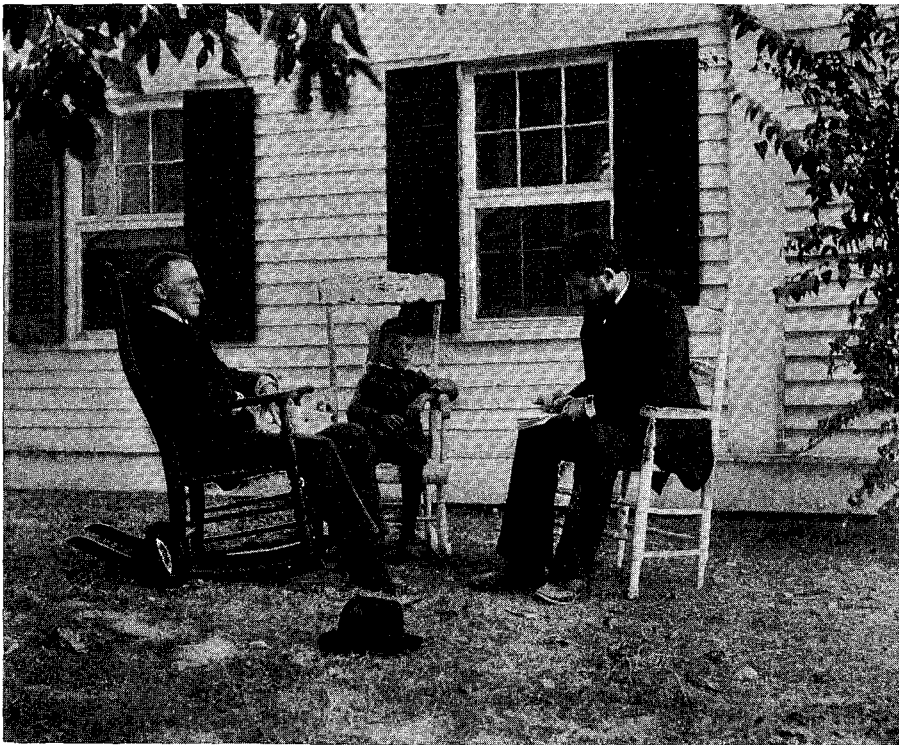
always represents "Benjamin F. Johnson":

"My Religen is to jest
Do by all my level best,
Feelin' God'll do the rest.—
Facts is, fur as I can see,
The Good Bein', makin' me.
'Ll make me what I ort to be."

And that's the lovely Old Man Johnson talkin', and not *me*—but I'm *listenin'* to him, understand, yes, and keepin' still!"

The tender side of the poet came out here, and I said: "I had a talk with your father yesterday, and I find that we're in harmony on a good many reform topics. He's a populist and a greenbacker. Do you have any reform leanings?"

"Father is a thinker, and ain't afraid of his thinkin' machine. I'm turned away from reform because it's no use. We've got to *conform*, not *reform*, in our attitude with the world and man. Try reformin', and sooner or later you've got to quit, because it's always a question of politics. You start off with a reform idea, that is, a moral prop-



MR. GARLAND TAKES NOTES WHILE THE "HOOSIER" POET TALKS.

BEREAVED.
 LET me come in where you sit weeping—Aye,
 Let me, who have not any child to die,
 Weep with you for the little one whose love
 I have known nothing of.

The little arms that slowly, slowly loosed
 Their pressure round your neck;—the hands you used
 To kiss.—Such arms—such hands I never knew.
 May I not weep with you?

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

—James Whitcomb Riley.

Snaphs. Aug. 7:
 —1893—

FACSIMILE OF AN AUTOGRAPH POEM.

osition. You end up by doing something politic. It's in the nature of things. You can, possibly, reform just one individual, but you can't reform the world at large. It won't work."

"All reforms, in your mind, are apparently hopeless, and yet, as a matter of fact, the great aggregate conforms to a few men every quarter of a century."

This staggered Riley, and he looked at me rather helplessly. "Well, it's an unpleasant thing, anyhow, and I keep away from it. I'm no fighter. In my own kind of work I can do good, and make life pleasant."

He was speaking from the heart. I changed the subject by looking about the room. "You don't read much, I imagine?"

He turned another quizzical look on me. "I'm afraid to read much, I'm so blamed imitative. But I read a good deal of chop-feed fiction, and browse with relish through the short stories and poems of to-day. But I have no place to put books. Have to do my own things where I catch time and opportunity."

"Well, if you'd had a library, you wouldn't have got so many people into your poems. You remind me of Whit-

man's poet, you tramp a perpetual journey. Where do you think you get your verse-writing from?"

"Mainly from my mother's family, the Marines. A characteristic of the whole family is their ability to write rhymes, but all unambitiously. They write rhymed letters to each other, and joke and jim-crow with the Muses."

"Riley, I want to ask you. Your father is Irish, is he not?"

"Both yes and no. *His* characteristics are strongly Irish, but he was born a Pennsylvania Dutchman, and spoke the German dialect before he spoke English. It has been held that the name Riley probably comes from 'Ryland,' but there's an 'O'Reilly' theory I muse over very pleasantly."

I saw he was getting tired of indoors, so I rose. "Well, now, where's the old swimmin' hole?"

His face lighted up with a charming, almost boyish, smile. "The old swimmin' hole is right down here on Brandywine—the old 'crick,' just at the edge of town."

"Put on your hat, and let's go down and find it."

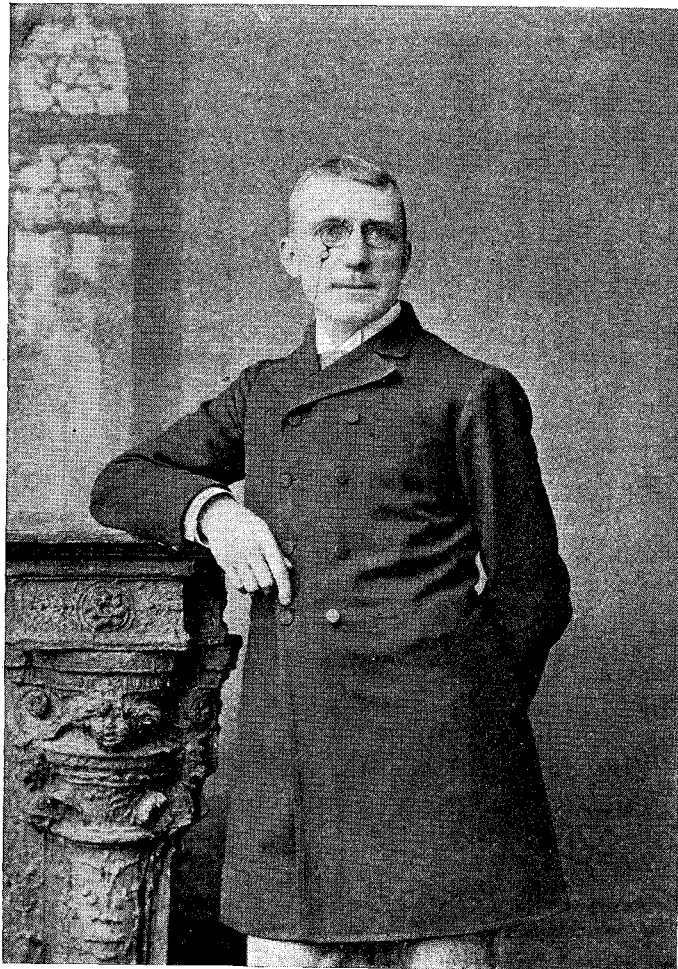
We took our way down the main street and the immensely dusty road towards the east. The locusts quavered in duo and trio in the ironweeds, and were answered by others in the high sycamores. Large yellow and black butterflies flapped about from weed to weed. The gentle wind came over the orchards and cornfields, filled with

the fragrance of gardens and groves. The road took a little dip towards the creek, which was low, and almost hidden among the weeds.

Riley paused. "I haven't been to the old swimmin' hole for sixteen years. We used to go across there through the grass, all except the feller with the busted toenail. He had to go round." He pointed at the print of bare, graceful feet in the dust, and said:

"We could tell, by the
dent of the heel
and the sole,
There was lots of fun
on hand at the old
swimmin' hole."

As we looked out on the hot mid-summer landscape, Riley quoted again, from a poem in his forthcoming book—a poem which he regards as one of his very best:



JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

"The air and the sun and the shadows
Were wedded and made as one.
And the winds ran o'er the meadows
As little children run :

"And the winds flowed over the meadows,
And along the willowy way
The river ran, with its ripples shod
With the sunshine of the day :

"O, the winds poured over the meadows
In a tide of eddies and calms,
And the bared brow felt the touch of it
As a sweetheart's tender palms.

"And up through the rifted tree-tops
That signalled the wayward breeze
I saw the hulk of the hawk becalmed
Far out on the azure seas."

Riley recited this with great beauty of tone and rhythm—such as audiences never hear from him, hearing only his dialect.

As we walked on we heard shouts, and I plucked Riley's sleeve : "Hear that? If that isn't the cry of a swimming boy, then my experiences are of no value. A boy has a shout which he uses only when splashing about in a pond."

Riley's face glowed. "That's right, they're there—just as we used to be."

After climbing innumerable fences, we came upon the boys under the shade of the giant sycamore and green thorn-trees. The boys jiggled themselves into their clothes, and ran off in alarm at the two staid and dignified men, who none the less had for them a tender and reminiscent sympathy.

All about splendid elm-trees stood, and stately green thorn-trees flung their delicate, fern-like foliage athwart the gray and white spotted boles of tall, leaning sycamores. But the creek was very low, by reason of the dry weather.

We threaded our way about, seeking out old paths and stumps and tree trunks, which sixteen years of absence had not entirely swept from the poet's mind. Then, at last, we turned homeward over the railroad track, through the dusty little town. People were seated in their little backyards here and there, eating watermelon, and Neighbor Johnson's poem on the "Wortermelon" came up :

"Oh, wortermelon time is a-comin' 'round agin,
And they ain't no feller livin' any tickleder'n me."

We passed by the old courthouse, where Captain Riley, the poet's father, has practised law for fifty years. The captain lives near, in an odd-looking house of brick, its turret showing above the trees. On the main street groups of men of all ranks and stations were sitting or standing, and they all greeted the poet as he passed by with an off-hand : "How are ye, Jim?" to which the poet replied : "How are you, Tom?" or "How are you, Jack? How's the folks?" Personally, his townsmen like him. They begin to respect him also in another way, so successful has he become in a way measurable to them all.

Back at the house, we sat at lunch of cake and watermelon, the sisters, Mrs. Payne and Mrs. Eitels, serving as hostesses most delightfully. They had left their own homes in Indianapolis for the summer, to give this added pleasure to their poet-brother. They both have much of his felicity of phrase, and much the same gentleness and sweetness of bearing. The hour was a pleasant one, and brought out the simple, domestic side of the man's nature. The sisters, while they showed their admiration and love for him, addressed him without a particle of affectation.

There is no mysterious abyss between Mr. Riley and his family. They are well-to-do, middle-conditioned Americans, with unusual intellectual power and marked poetic sensibility. Mr. Riley is a logical result of a union of two gifted families, a product of hereditary power, coöperating with the power of an ordinary Western town. Born of a gentle and naturally poetic mother, and a fearless, unconventional father (lawyer and orator), he has lived the life common to boys of villages from Pennsylvania to Dakota, and upon this were added the experiences he has herein related.

It is impossible to represent his talk that night. For two hours he ran on—he the talker, the rest of us the irritating cause. The most quaintly wise

sentences fell from his lips in words no other could have used; scraps of verse, poetic images, humorous assumptions of character, daring figures of speech—I gave up in despair of ever getting him down on paper. He read, at my request, some of his most beautiful things. He talked on religion, and his voice grew deep and earnest.

"I believe a man prays when he does well," he said. "I believe he worships God when his work is on a high plane; when his attitude towards his fellow-men is right, I guess God is pleased with him."

I said good-night, and went off down the street, musing upon the man and his work. Genius, as we call it, defies conditions. It knows no barriers. It finds in things close at hand the most inexhaustible storehouse. All depends upon the poet, not upon materials. It is his love for the thing, his interest in the fact, his distribution of values, his selection of details, which makes his

work irresistibly comic or tender or pathetic.

No poet in the United States has the same hold upon the minds of the people as Riley. He is the poet of the plain American. They bought thirty thousand dollars' worth of his verse last year; and he is also one of the most successful lecturers on the platform. He gives the lie to the old saying, for he *is* a prophet in his own country. The people of Indiana are justly proud of him, for he has written "*Poems Here at Home*." He is read by people who never before read poetry in their lives, and he appeals equally well to the man who is heart-sick of the hollow conventional verse in imitation of some classic.

He is absolutely American in every line he writes. His schooling has been in the school of realities. He takes things at first-hand. He considers his success to be due to the fact that he is one of the people, and has written of



VIEW OF GREENFIELD FROM "IRVING'S SPRING," BRANDYWINE.

"Whilse the old town, fur away
'Crost the hazy pastur-land,
Dozed-like in the heat o' day
Peaceful as a hired hand."

—*Up and Down Old Brandywine.*

the things he liked and they liked. The time will come when his work will be seen to be something more than the fancies of a humorist.

As I walked on down the street, it all came upon me with great power—this production of an American poet. Everything was familiar to me. All this life, the broad streets laid off in squares, the little cottages, the weedy gardens, the dusty fruit-trees, the young people sauntering in couples up and down the sidewalk, the snapping of jack-knives, and the low hum of talk from scattered groups. This was Riley's school. This was his material, apparently barren, dry, utterly hopeless in the eyes of the romantic writers of the East, and yet capable of becoming world-famous when dominated and

mastered and transformed, as it has been mastered and transformed by this poet of the people.

In my estimation, this man is the most remarkable exemplification of the power of genius to transmute plain clods into gold that we have seen since the time of Burns. He has dominated stern and unyielding conditions with equal success, and reflected the life of his kind with greater fidelity than Burns.

This material, so apparently grim and barren of light and shade, waited only for a creative mind and a sympathetic intelligence; then it grew beautiful and musical, and radiant with color and light and life.

Therein is the magnificent lesson to be drawn from the life and work of the Hoosier poet.

The portrait of James Whitcomb Riley is from a photograph by Barraud, London.

THE SEASONS.

BY AUGUSTA DE GRUCHY.

WOODS for the Spring! the stirring, wakening woods,
Full of dim glades that daily duskier grow,
And arched recesses where the blackbird builds,
And chants, full-voiced, his oft-repeated stave.
O, for the cool fresh woods in early Spring!

Gardens for Summer! homely village plots,
Where roses clasp the long-arm'd apple-trees,
And columbines join hands with mint and rue,
While bees grow clamorous over beds of thyme,
And June is hastening to the longest day.

For Autumn, moorland, sun-warmed, wind-caressed;
Scant change from summer glory do we know
On the wide moor. In the clear Autumn air
The lark resumes his interrupted song,
And on the distant hills the heather burns.

And what for Winter? Why, the lone sea shore;
The sandy waste puts forth nor bud nor leaf
For frost to smite. No promise unfulfilled
Vexes us here; the sea suffices us,
The patient, wise, companionable sea.

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