

## James Whitcomb Riley

IN a delightful conversation quoted in an essay entitled "The Dusk of the Gods" in the current *Atlantic Monthly*, George Moore says, "If there be a future for the English language, which I doubt, it is in America. A great deal of your speech is Elizabethan, and what is not you have invented. You are still inventing a language, while we have stopped; we take what additions foreigners and our savage subjects supply us, but that is all. Perhaps in America another language will arrive, adapted to literary usage—out of slang, your dialects."

Appearing almost on the morrow of the death of our most accomplished singer of dialect lyrics, these penetrating words brought to mind one of the most beautiful endowments of James Whitcomb Riley.

Like "Uncle Remus" he was an inventor of language, and his unique singing speech has contributed to human expression. He brought words from life into letters. Familiar phrases which had vibrated as mere blatant discords at the touch of a lesser writer, were at the hands of his skill harmonies from the strings of his spirit's lute. He was a magician who could use terms such as "Looky there!" and "Lawzy!" in a manner that lent a biting reality to tragedy, and echoed in your memory like the tale of something an acquaintance has looked on in life.

"Pore folks lives at Lonesomeville  
Lawzy! but they're pore!  
Houses with no winders in,  
And hardly any door:  
Chimbley all tore down, and no  
Smoke in that at all—  
Ist a stovepipe through a hole  
In the kitchen-wall!

Pump that's got no handle on;  
And no woodshed—And *wooh!*  
Mighty cold there, choppin' wood,  
Like pore-folks has to do!  
Winter-time, and snow and sleet  
Ist fairly fit to kill!—  
Hope to goodness *Santy Claus*  
Goes to Lonesomeville!"

Music enters at the spaces left by all those hard g's and guttural word-endings he cuts out so gracefully. The reproduction of illiteracy is generally a mere verbatim copy of ignorances; but James Whitcomb Riley's reproduction is a subtle enhancement of the tone of the sound he modulates. I suppose no one will deny that "shadder" sounds longer and thinner and more alarming than "shadow" or that "saranade" has a more harmonic air than "serenade."

"And when the boys' u'd saranade, I've laid  
so still in bed  
I've even heard the locus'-blossoms droppin'  
on the shed  
When 'Lily Dale' er 'Hazel Dell,' had  
sobbed and died away—

. . . I want to hear the *old* band play."

Besides the lovely musical web he wove of our unpromising middle-western colloquialisms, he has given an innumerable words of his own improvisation, as in "the kyouch

and gobble of the struttin' turkey-cock" and the description of the boy standing up and driving, who

" — comes skallyhootin' through  
Our alley, with one arm  
A-wavin' Fare-ye-well to you —!"

Widely enjoyed and beloved, the poetry of James Whitcomb Riley will probably always in our lifetime encounter a species of objection in the minds of many Americans. His poetry sings. Its force is emotional. Its sincere charm is absolute, and depends not at all on being something like something else—on the audience's recollection of Greek verse, or familiarity with Japanese art, or impressionistic landscape. To the kind of reader for whom a recognizable, musical idea limits, instead of greatly liberating the communicative faculty of poetry, to the kind of reader who thinks of poetry as a species of mere tight-mouthed and cryptic prose, to the kind of reader who is worried by poets who will not give him, so to speak, any reliable library references for their inspiration—to such American readers as these James Whitcomb Riley's poetry must always seem all wrong and misguided. Anyone can understand his songs. People have always been cutting them out of the newspapers and reciting them at ice-cream sociables and church benefits. They are a part of the national consciousness. To Brahmins of poetry these are disquieting manifestations inclining them to the Brahminical error of supposing that poetry which is commonly understood and enjoyed cannot be supposed to be of beauty or value.

The reader of "A Small Boy and Others" will recall a charming passage descriptive of a relative of the James family who investigated an inherited estate in remote fastnesses of our land typified by Henry James as "The Beaver Kill." This large, humorous phrase seemed to indicate in Henry James absorbing recollections, all in our country that rose west of the Allegheny mountains, all that was not turned towards the East, just as in the American Indian phrase the words "High-Muck-a-Muck" denote all manner of persons of constituted authority among other races—expressions both of them fascinating to consider, defining as they do a comprehensive, but clearly and even agreeably acknowledged ignorance.

Undoubtedly the wisdom and beauty of James Whitcomb Riley can never sing to the ears of those of our compatriots who readily adopt the ignorance of sophistication without troubling themselves to learn its knowledge; and on account of the fact that his poetry belongs to the Beaver Kill it must remain undistinguished for the whole range of taste, so pleasantly disparaged by George Moore, which does not care for indigenous expression but only for expression derived.

"If a ship-load of Elgin marbles," he says, "had been landed at Yokohama in the seventeenth century there would have been no more Japanese art. They would have said, 'This is the thing to do,' and they would have done it—badly.

"When European art did come to Japan, it killed the Japanese formula. The Japanese now go to Paris to paint, and a pretty mess they make of it; or they stay at home and try to imitate their own handicraft of two hundred years ago; but the inward vision has vanished from Japan."

Innumerable doubtless are those dwellers in the country of Lincoln's familiar habitation who possess a hopeless faith or fancy that the middle west has been blessed by the

presence of an inward vision unnameable. Rock-shod rivers, brown prairies, friendly towns, the wide run of grain-fields and corn-bottoms must seem always for the lovers of that lay of land, the natural home of a spirit inexpressibly spacious, plain and free. The air that forever comforts you and breaks your heart and assuages you again with pleasurable pain in James Whitcomb Riley's poetry is the melody that tells you that you are a part of that spirit of life. You may have dropped beneath it a hundred and a thousand times. But you have known its wild and infinitely endearing grace. Your soul has felt the shadows of its might. You too have lived these staunchnesses and dreams that are the last realities, and heard the band play in the square and seen the neighbors bring home Coon Dog Wess.

I once had occasion to read to an English night-class of young Russian and Polish people James Whitcomb Riley's "Raggedy Man." In their pleasure in its sincerity and quiet intangible delight I felt a tribute to a certain magic of interpretation in the poem I had never really appreciated before.

"O the Raggedy Man! He works for Pa;  
An' he's the goodest man you ever saw!  
He comes to our house every day,  
An' waters the horses, an' feeds 'em hay;  
An' he opens the shed—an' we all ist laugh  
When he drives out our little old wobble-ly calf;  
An' nen—ef our hired girl says he can—  
He milks the cow for 'Lizabuth Ann—  
Ain't he a' awful Raggedy Man?  
Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man!

"The Raggedy Man—one time, when he  
Wuz makin' a little bow'n'-erry fer me,  
Says, 'When you're big like your Pa is,  
Air you go' to keep a fine store like his—  
An' be a rich merchant—an' wear fine clothes?  
Er what air you go' to be, goodness knows?  
An' nen he laughed at 'Lizabuth Ann,  
An' I says, 'M go' to be a Raggedy Man!—  
I'm ist go' to be a nice Raggedy Man!  
Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man!"

Something of their own, not like the spirit of other lands, something better far indeed than we are often able to be, and better than our thoughts or any of the formulæ, but somehow like our best fleet instincts, spoke truly to alien listeners in the genius of this poem sung as lightly as the wind blew down the locust blossoms on the shed roof.

When all our ways and days are vanished, and far-off people hardly distinguish the memory of Henry George from that of George Washington, what will tell the nameless spirit we live, to distant listeners? Some such word as this, one may hope—simple and brief and true out of the silence.

Nothing has been said here of James Whitcomb Riley's remarkable gift in characterization—so that not a creature appears in his brief lyric tables, from the thoroughly disagreeable wife of Myle Jones to the heroic Coon Dog Wess, but is fully individualized. Nothing has been said of his nonsense poems or his enchanting parodies, or his verse not in dialect. For some of us—or rather for me, at least, James Whitcomb Riley's poetry has become a part of the country of one's mind; and one walks about in it

without thinking of the names of the different places there; and hears—

"The echoes of old voices, wound  
In limpid streams of laughter where  
The river Time runs bubble-crowned,  
And giddy eddies ripple there;  
Where roses, bending o'er the brink,  
Drain their own kisses as they drink  
And ivies climb and twine and cling  
About the song I never sing."—

and listens to the song you never sing yourself.

Here are poems made of the living word. In the mortality of their maker, it is a comfort to turn back to their charm and truth that sing so far in the surrounding night—

"Sing on! sing on, you gray-brown bird  
Sing from the swamps, the recesses—pour  
your chant from the bushes,  
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars  
and pines."

EDITH WYATT.

## The Faiths of India

*Indian Thought, Past and Present*, by R. W. Frazer (I. C. S. retired). New York: F. A. Stokes Co. \$3.00.

SOME of the best Anglo-Indian administrators of India keep up their interest in that country even after retirement by writing books on Indian subjects, either from a purely scholarly point of view or "in the best interests of the Empire." The earlier generation of Anglo-Indians, amongst whom we count William Jones, Colebrook, H. H. Wilson, Col. Tod, Grant Duff, Elphinstone, and several others, made some extremely valuable contributions to the literature of the world by opening out Hindu thought and Hindu history to the western people. Before that the people of the West generally considered India a barbarous country and her people savages or semi-savages. The labors of these early writers on India have since been supplemented by some very able contributions by other Anglo-Indian, German, French, American and Indian investigators in the same field. The literature bearing on India is thus growing fast, though a great many of the books are at best only second-hand copies of what has already been achieved by others—repetitions and reproductions with a few comments of the author. These publications have their own value though, in so far as they stimulate interest in Indian subjects and are at least useful reminders. The pity of it is, however, that even the more serious among them prefer to plough the old furrows and make no attempt to break new ground. Religion and the philosophic speculations of ancient India alone monopolize their attention. Very rarely, if at all, they throw light on the social, economic, and political thought and practices of ancient and modern India. There is a mass of material on these subjects that awaits eager and capable students. The work is being undertaken by Hindu scholars. The immediate cause of these reflections is the publication of a volume under the name of "Indian Thought, Past and Present," by Mr. R. W. Frazer, a retired Anglo-Indian civilian. Mr. Frazer professes to give us "a history of Indian thought in so far as that thought has influenced the aspirations, religious beliefs and