

Was This Riley's Ghost?

Poet's Fondness for Jokes Leads to Story

By WILLIAM ATHERTON DU PUY

"I HAVE participated in an incident that is the basis of a ghost story," Senator Harry New, of Indiana, genial raconteur, was saying. "It is a ghost story that is unique in many of its aspects, but in the first place because it unfolded itself in broad daylight. It is very real to me because I knew all the persons who participated in it and because none of them afterward could explain what happened without attributing certain accomplishments to the supernatural. It is of interest to the reader chiefly because it wove itself about America's best loved writing man, James Whitcomb Riley.

"This ghost story would not have meant so much to me had I not known Riley so well, had I not previously participated in two or three of his experiences which had revealed to me the quaintness of his own faith in the visitations of departed friends," he continued. "Despite his belief in these visitations, he could not be styled a spiritualist. It would be as true to say that he believed in fairies. If there were a middle ground, half-way between fairyland and the séance chamber, that might still more nearly approximate the habitat of the Riley astral mind.

"For 35 years Riley and I were close friends and for most of that time intimate associates in the daily labor which earned for us our livelihoods. I had been a young reporter on the Indianapolis Journal when that paper, impressed with the quaint philosophy of the Hoosier poet, had offered him a place on its staff.

"Later, I had been managing editor and many experiences with Riley came to me, of which I may relate one, incidentally, showing the manner in which he worked. I was the witching hour of 1 a. m. and the paper was virtually made up, when the poet rushed in in evident excitement and some disarray to my desk.

"I have done something good," he said. "I had gone to bed and to sleep. It came to me and woke me up. I got up and put it down. It is good. There it is. You may have it."

"So saying, he threw a penciled manuscript on my desk. I examined it and immediately recognized in it one of his poems in a happy vein. It afterward became well known. It was 'The Song of the Bullet.'

"Fine," said I. "I will use it tomorrow and give it a good spread."

"No, you won't," said the poet. "You will use it right now or not at all. What do you suppose I got up in the middle of the night for?"

"So I called the make-up man, had him make over a form, delayed the time of going to press, got the poem a good place, and thus we gave to the world one of the products of this man's genius.

"This condition of excitement was Riley's, however, only following composition, and ordinarily he was as playful as a 12-year-old boy. He liked to play practical jokes on his friends and one which gave the office constant delight was a so-called lung tester which he rigged up. There was an ordinary electric call box in the office, one of those in which you push over the lever, release it and it returns with considerable clatter. Riley rigged this in such a way that he would push the lever over and could release it at will. He attached a tube to it and put the nipple from a baby's bottle on the end of the tube.

"When a friend came in, he would slap him on the back, compliment him on his apparently vigorous health, ask him how his lungs were, and finally suggest that he try them out on the office lung tester. The friend would put the baby nipple in his mouth, blow lustily, Riley would release the lever and it would clatter to the end of the slot. The friend would swell up with pride until some one cut the device loose again without the aid of any lung power and thus spilled the beans.

"This, however, had nothing to do with Riley's belief in fairies, ghosts, or spiritualism. There was an incident in his friendship with Francis Wilson, the opera star, that illustrated this point. One day Riley got a package from Wilson enclosing a letter and a book. The book was a volume of Eugene Fields' poems and the letter asked Riley to write in the book a verse which he (Riley) had written about Fields at the time of the latter's death. Wilson asked that the book then be mailed to him at a certain hotel in Cincinnati. Riley, always accommodating, followed the instructions in detail.

"A week later he got another letter from Wilson saying that he was leaving Cincinnati and, not having received the book, would Riley send it to another address. Riley wrote explaining that he had sent the book. Wilson made every effort to get it through the hotel, but never succeeded in doing so.

"A year later Wilson went into a favorite book store in Chicago, a book store of the existence of which Riley was not aware. The book seller told him that he was glad to have him come in, that, in fact, he had been holding a package for him for some time.

"He handed him a package addressed to him in the hand of Riley but to the book store. He opened it and there was the lost book with the Riley verse duly endorsed on the fly leaf. Naturally, he wrote Riley and told him of the circumstance. Strange as it was it

did not seem to greatly impress the poet. He dismissed it with the remark:

"Gene Fields did that."

"Sir Henry Irving, the English actor, was a great friend of Riley. Whenever Irving came to Indianapolis he and Riley were usually together each afternoon. The meetings were more likely to be in the actor's room at the hotel than elsewhere, and the time more likely to be taken by Riley's recitation of his own poems than in any other way. Irving was fond of the poems and highly approved of the Riley method of reading them.

"But, getting back again to the supernatural and its place in the consciousness of the author of 'That Old Sweetheart of Mine,' there was a happening that had to do with Robert Louis Stevenson that was not unlike the instance of Eugene Fields. When Stevenson died, the publisher of his books wrote to Riley and asked the poet to prepare an appreciation of him. Riley was very fond of Stevenson and readily complied.

"In a few days the publishers sent Riley a check that was very liberal payment for the work performed. Riley sent the check back with a letter saying that it would be impossible for him to accept a check for paying a tribute to so dear a friend. The publishers in response asked if they might not give Riley some books in appreciation of what he had done. Riley agreed to accept a set of Stevenson's books in a modest binding which he chose.

"But the books did not arrive. Riley wondered but did not write. Finally the anniversary of the birth of the poet arrived. Bright and early on that morning an expressman came whistling up the walk and delivered the set of Stevenson. The poet was sure to his dying day that his friend in the spirit world had so hindered the books as to make their arrival timely and additionally appreciated.

"But despite his belief in the ministrations of those in the spirit world, Riley nursed a stupendous abhorrence of death. This abhorrence took a most pronounced form in a hatred for undertakers, a nausea in contemplating the tasks which they perform. It is this antipathy for undertakers that makes the background in the final chapter in the story of Riley, a chapter enacted after he had ceased to be.

"The Riley home was in East Lockerie street in Indianapolis, and it was there that the poet died. His

death came in the afternoon and it was still early when the undertaker, that individual most repellent to Riley in his lifetime, arrived to perform the preliminary services of those of his kind. The room in which the dead man lay was on the second floor and was a modest apartment with but a single door and a window opposite, which looked out on a narrow side yard. In that room what was left of the sensitive poet was alone with the creature he despised, and if the soul of the dead lingers near the mortal clay, it may be conceived that Riley's spirit had a bad half hour with the follower of the grim reaper. But that half hour passed and the servitor of the departed soft-footedly went his way, silently closing the door behind him.

"This was but part of the work of the undertaker. He was to return some hours later to finish his task. He returned as the day was drawing to its close, and mournfully climbed the Riley stairs. He applied the cautious pressure of a silent hand to the Riley door knob which he had deftly turned but a few hours earlier. The knob refused to turn. The door declined to open.

Evidently, said the methodical worker, some member of the family has locked the death chamber. He summoned those in the house and asked for the key. He was told that the door had not been locked. No one had been in the second floor room since his former visit.

"Nevertheless, he assured them, the door was locked. So the family bunches of keys were produced and the journey of the undertaker, this time not alone, wound again to the second floor. But there it halted at the poet's door. One after one the keys were tried in the lock. None would enter the keyhole. The door might not be unlocked.

"A delicacy was felt in doing violence to the door of the dead. As there was no other entrance to the room except the window, the party went into the yard, procured a ladder and the undertaker climbed it and entered the room of the departed through the window.

"When he had gained an entrance he investigated carefully and found that the door was locked from the inside and that the key had been left in the lock.

"Those who knew Riley best, his penchant for a practical joke, his dislike for undertakers, his belief in the ministrations of the spirits of the departed, are willing to admit that here was a prank quite characteristic and to be expected—the sort of thing that might be done by the ghost of him who was gone, if ghosts were a matter of fact.

"The next day I was one of the pall bearers at the last rites at Crown Hill cemetery."



SENATOR HARRY S. NEW,
of Indiana.

Some Great Men Who Were Self-Made

ROBERT BURNS, Scotland's lyric poet, was the son of a poor nurseryman, and was himself a small farmer and a revenue officer.

Charles Dickens was a label-sticker in a shoe blacking factory.

Confucius, the Chinese sage, was a poor boy who began life as a storekeeper.

Sir Richard Arkwright, inventor of the cotton spinning frame, was a barber.

John Bunyan, author of "The Pilgrim's Progress," was a traveling tinker.

Miguel de Cervantes, author of "Don Quixote," was a page and a common soldier.

Christopher Columbus, discoverer of the New World, was a sailor, the son of a wool comber.

Daniel Defoe, author of "Robinson Crusoe," was the son of a butcher.

Benjamin Franklin was a journeyman printer, the son of a tallow chandler.

Giuseppe Garibaldi, whom Italians revere as their liberator, was the son of a sailor.

Ben Jonson, on whose grave in Westminster Abbey is the famous inscription, "O rare Ben Jonson," was a poor boy, the stepson of a bricklayer.

Edmund Kean, the celebrated tragedian, was the son of a stage carpenter.

John Keats, author of "Endymion," was the son of a hostler.

Jean Francois Millet, painter of "The Angelus," was a farm laborer, the son of a small farmer.

Mohammed, founder of a great religion, was a shepherd and a soldier in early life.

Thomas Moore, author of the "Irish Melodies," was the son of a country grocer.

Napoleon was a penniless second lieutenant in 1785; in 1804 he was crowned an emperor.

Thomas Paine, author of "The Rights of Man," was a stay maker.

Samuel Richardson, one of the first famous novelists, was a journeyman printer, the son of a carpenter.

William Shakespeare was the son of a glover in a little country town; both his grandfathers were husbandmen.

George Stephenson, the inventor of the locomotive, was the son of a fireman in a colliery, and began life as his father's helper.

Terence, the Roman comic poet, was a slave. Trajan, perhaps the greatest of all Rome's emperors, was the son of a common soldier, and began his career in the ranks.

Vergil, whose "Aeneid" is the typical Latin epic, was the son of a small farmer.

James Watt, inventor of the condensing steam engine, was the son of a small merchant who failed in business.

A Girl Coal Miner Doing Thriving Business

"I WONDER when we'll ever get our coal," the complaint of many housewives for a few seasons past, will not be voiced by Miss Ricka Ott, 21 years

old, who industriously mines coal daily in a little "wagon mine" on her father's farm in the hills of Mount Oliver, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh.

Ricka is her own boss—miner, operator, manager, distributor. Day after day she cheerfully sings as she wheels her "black diamonds" from the mine. Along about three years ago, when all the mines of Western Pennsylvania were working to their fullest capacity to keep an unending stream of coal flowing to the mills where weapons and munitions were being turned out, Ricka was imbued with the desire to do her share toward the winning of the great conflict. She suggested to her father, Gregor Ott, a steel worker, that they open a mine. Ricka's father scorned the idea of giving up a perfectly good job in



MISS RICKA OTT

the steel mills for the uncertainty of the small coal mine.

"I will mine the coal and sell it," said Ricka. He laughed at the idea of a girl mining coal, and driving a truck. She gave her father no rest until he agreed to start a mine for her, and she has since proved more than a match for the other miners of the country.

Last year Miss Ott mined 9,000 bushels of coal, and distributed it to her customers.