

A Spray of Kentucky Pine eBook

A Spray of Kentucky Pine

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A SPRAY OF KENTUCKY PINE

—Placed At The Feet Of The Dead Poet—
—James Whitcomb Riley—

By The Hand
Of the Man From
Down On The Farm—
—George Douglass Sherley

—On The Banks
Of Wolf Run—
—1916—

Second Edition

From Ye Olden Printe Shope—
—James M. Byrnes, Esquire—
On Ye Long Highway
Called Shorte in Ye Goodly
Towne Of Lexington Kentucky

The Inscription Two-fold

To The Dead:
Reverently Inscribed
—To the Indiana-Born
World-Wide Poet—
—James Whitcomb Riley—

—This Spray Of Kentucky Pine—

To The Living:
Also Lovingly Inscribed
By The Man From Down
On The Farm To The
Dear Lady Here On The
Banks Of Wolf Run
—His Mother—
On Grateful Commemoration
Of Her Eighty-Fifth Birthday
August 20, 1916



The Prelude

—A Note Explanatory—

With James Whitcomb Riley, some years ago. This Man From Down On The Farm, made a Reading Tour, of—in Population—more than one-half of this Imperial Republic, including the Cream of the Canadian Provinces. Of that Tour, at some other time, in some more leisurely hour, he desires, if able, to make a full and faithful Record. This, is but a humble Spray of Kentucky Pine, placed at the feet of the Dead Poet!

According to a long established Custom,
the Man, in some way, in private print—
—for the Relative, for the Friend, for the Stranger too—
quietly Celebrates the various Red-Letter Days, of the
Dear Lady Here, On the Banks of Wolf Run—his Mother!
Her full Restoration, to her usual Good Health,
is a Source of much Joy, and the cause of much Gratitude.
The many Prayers made for her Recovery must have been of
much avail before the Great White Throne, of Infinite Mercy!
He is also deeply grateful, that the nearness of her
Eighty-Fifth Birthday, makes it possible for him,
to make an Inscription Two-fold, for the Dead,
for the Living—for the Dear Poet, for the Beloved Mother!
The linking of their names together, under this Spray of
Kentucky Pine—culled by a hand most loving—is like
unto finding the other half of a broken Chord, in some
Prelude Elusive: for James Whitcomb Riley, deeply
endeared himself, to the Dear Lady Here, while he and
her son were a long while away, on their Reading Tour.
Out of sheer Kindliness, out of Goodness of Heart, he often
wrote to her, delightful Letters of Good Cheer, filled with
a charming detail, with more than a trifle of over-Praise;
all of which, is most acceptable, to the heart of a too fond mother.
Recently, from his Winter Home in the South-land, he sent to
her, in response to one of these Farm Bubbles, a little
Bit of unpublished Verse, written before his hand had
failed him, reproduced for her—and others—in *fac-simile*.



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Pray deem it not, all too presumptuous, this humble
Spray of Kentucky Pine!
It serves as a Reverent Tribute to the One!
As a Loving Commemoration to the Other!

The Interlude

—Holding Two Telegrams And A Plea—

I.

When the word came that James Whitcomb Riley was Dead this Telegram was sent to a near Relative an astute Man of Affairs who with the Head of a Great Publishing House—a Prime Favorite from his early Boyhood of the Poet—held his well-placed Confidence in all matters concerning the necessary material Things of Life.

The mightiest Monarch of the Indiana Forest
lies prone upon his Native Soil!
This Man From Down On The Farm,
Reverently, sends this humble Spray of Kentucky Pine,
as a Symbol, ever-green, of his Lasting Love, for the Dead Poet:
as a Symbol, made manifest, of his deep Sympathy,
for You, for Yours.

II.

This Message was wired to a most Gentle Lady who had meant so much in so many ways to James Whitcomb Riley appealing as she did to the Best to the Highest in his Nature and who was indeed a “Ministering Angel” when “Pain and Anguish” wrung his brow, racked his frail body where lingered its Tenant his Immortal Soul!

Tenderly, Lovingly, let the Fair Elaine cherish
the Shield Invincible of her Sir Launcelot!
Some Day—Some Glad Day—she too, will go upward
with the Flood, in the Dark Barge, decked with Flowers:
clasping in her Beautiful Hand of Gentle Service,
the Lily of Fidelity: floating with the Mystic
Tide, to meet again—at Towered Camelot—
—her Gallant, her Waiting Knight!
For Love shares with the Soul its Precious Immortality!



III.

The Plea

—To The Relatives To The Intimate Friends of James Whitcomb Riley—

Let Lockerbie Street, in its Lovely Brevity,
be held—if you will—as a Perpetual Reservation
for the Children of your Great, your Growing City,
holding the House, which for many years was the
Happy Home of the Poet, as a Sacred Shrine.
Let your fine Civic Building, now rising in its
Majesty—like the Towers of Illion—made possible
by his Generous Gift of the Site, made Glorious
by the touch of his hand, on its Great Cornerstone:
let it—if you will—proudly bear his Name.
Let either one, or both, of these Noble Things
be done, for the sake of his memory.
Let this, that, or any other form of a Memorial wait upon
the wisdom of your Choice: but no matter what is done;
how much is done; or how it is done; there is one Thing
which ought not to be left undone.
Every tender, slender needle, rising out of its
Globular Greenness, in this humble Spray of Kentucky Pine,
harbors this One Thought, this Single Plea!
This is the Plea:



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Let James Whitcomb Riley, skillfully cast in Bronze, simply clad in the plain blue garb of a Union Soldier Lad a Private— let him stand fur all Time, in your Circle, in the Centre, in the Heart of your City, the beloved City of his adoption. Let him stand there, under the shadow of that Mighty Shaft, the Tribute of your Grand Commonwealth, to her Valiant Sons—the Soldier, the Sailor. Let him stand there, on a one-piece Pedestal of Indiana Stone; Simple, Massive. Thereon carve his Name, the date of his Birth; the date of his Death; and these Immortal words:

“Well, Goodby, Jim:
Take Keer of Yourse’f!”

Read, re-read, and read again, the Poem. That Poem is an American Classic! It is the Epitome of Self-Sacrifice for the Sake of a Vital Cause! It is the one Idyl of the Middle-West! It is thoroughly America! It is intensely Indiana! Pardon the Plea! But Prepare the Way! Turn the Page—read the Poem!

The Poem

Old man never had much to say—
‘Ceptin’ to Jim.—
And Jim was the wildest boy he had—
And the old man jes’ wrapped up in him!
Never heerd him speak but once
Er twice in my life,—and first time was
When the army broke out, and Jim he went,
The old man backin’ him, fer three months;
And all ’at I heerd the old man say
Was jes’ as we turned to start away,—
“Well, good-by, Jim:
Take keer of yourse’f!”

’Peared-like, he was more satisfied
Jes’ *lookin’* at Jim
And likin’ him all to hisse’f-like, see?
‘Cause he was jes’ wrapped up in him!
And over and over I mind the day
The old man come and stood round in the way
While we was drillin’, a-watchin’ Jim—
And down at the deepot a-heerin’ him say,
“Well, good-by, Jim:
Take keer of yourse’f!”



Never was nothin' about the *farm*
Disting'ished Jim;
Neighbors all ust to wonder why
The old man 'peered wrapped up in him;
But when Cap. Biggler he writ back
'At Jim was the bravest boy we had
In the whole dern rigiment, white er black.
And his fighten' good as his farmin' bad—
'At he had led, with a bullet clean
Bored through his thigh, and carried the flag
Through the bloodiest battle you ever seen,
The old man wound up a letter to him
'At Cap. read to us, 'at said: "Tell Jim
Good-by,
And take keer of hisse'f!"

Jim come home jes' long enough
To take the whim
'At he'd like to go back in the calvery—
And the old man jes' wrapped up in him!
Jim 'lowed 'at he'd had sich luck afore,
Gussed he'd tackle her three years more.
And the old man give him a colt he'd raised,
And follered him over to Camp Ben Wade,
And laid around fer a week er so,
Watchin' Jim on dress-parade—
Tel finally he rid away,
And last he heerd was the old man say,
"Well, good-by, Jim:
Take keer of yourse'f!"



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Tuk the papers, the old man did,
A-watchin' fer Jim—
Fully believin' he'd make his mark
Some way—jes' wrapped up in him!—
And many a time the word 'u'd come
'At stirred him up like the tap of a drum—
At Petersburg, fer instunce, where
Jim rid right into their cannons there,
And *tuk* 'em, and p'inted 'em t'other way,
And socked it home to the boys in gray,
As they scooted fer timber, and on and on—
Jim a lieutenant and one arm gone,
And the old man's words in his mind all day,—
“Well, good-by, Jim:
Take keer of yourse'f!”

Think of a private now, perhaps,
We'll say like Jim,
'At's clumb clean up to the shoulder-straps
And the old man jes' wrapped up in him!
Think of him—with the war plum, through.
And the glorious old Red-White-and-Blue
A-laughin' the news down over Jim,
And the old man bendin' over him—
The surgeon turin' away with tears
'At hadn't leaked for years and years,
As the hand of the dyin' boy clung to
His father's, the old voice in his ears,—
“Well, good-by, Jim:
Take keer of yourse'f!”

[Illustration]

The Spray of Kentucky Pine

O! James Whitcomb Riley! This Man From Down On The Farm—one-while your constant Companion, in work most Congenial, all-while your Faithful Friend—rejoices. and is exceeding Glad, That All Is Well With You! For no one knew, better than you, the Wisdom, the Beauty, of Death! No one the more fully realized the Folly, the Futility, of human Grief! You firmly believed, that he, who follows The Christ; that he, who, in all Humility, bears the Cross; that he, who, in all Gratitude, wears upon his unworthy brow, the imprint of the Kiss Divine!—the Kiss of Forgiveness Complete—you firmly believed, that he ought to be brave enough, strong enough, to meet the Call, whensoever,



wheresoever, it may chance to come. You firmly believed that the Call always comes at the Right Moment: that Incompletion Here, finds its Completement There: that every human Life holds—like the Palace of Aladdin—its unfinished Window: that the finite mind, hampered by its mortality, is a clog to any Completion, to any Earthly Perfection. Therefore, feeling, believing, as you did Here, now knowing, as you must *know* There, this Man rejoices, and is exceeding Glad, That All Is Well With You!O! James Whitcomb Riley Your Nature—on the surface—was Simple, Honest, Open, Direct. It was all of that but—it was More! It was deeper than Tears! It was wider than Laughter! It was more profound, more subtle, than either your spoken Word. or, your written, your printed Thought. You were infinitely better than the Very Best that you ever did! High Praise, but True! Your nature was strangely Complex:

There was the Man!
There was the Poet!
There was the Mystic!



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The Man could be known—and was—of all men. The Poet could be read—as he was—and he understood. He could Sing—as he did—Songs which caught the Hearts of the People—from the Cradle to the Grave! The Mystic!O! James Whitcomb Riley! That Mystic Element in your Nature! It was held under a Strong Curb: It was constantly held in Check: But it was never Overcome! It was a Mood—not a Madness. It seldom made an Outward Sign. Then, it was brief, spasmodic, erratic. It was known to but few, even of those who came with you, in constant contact. To this Man, that Mystic Element in your Nature, made a most wonderful Appeal, deep, strong. To him, it was the *real* James Whitcomb Riley! You were a Mystic, but never a Reformer. You cheerfully rendered unto Ceasar all things that were his just due. You had no desire to overturn Natural Law, Human Regulation. You accepted, without question, the Established Order of Things. But so strong was this touch of the Mystic that, if you had desired, you could have, quickly, thickly, populated some far off Smiling Isle, of the Fair Summer Seas, with a Band of Cultured Men, of Cultured Women, ready, eager, to follow you—that Mystic You! into the Creation of a New Cult, of a New Religion! In your Poems there is but a trickle of the Mystic—a flash a dash—as the falling of a Star! That Edgar Allen Poe Episode, is the Answer. You were unduly humiliated by that Incident— —and it was but as Nothing But your Super-Sensitiveness, made you Suffer!O! James Whitcomb Riley! Death, hath yet other Compensations! It has placed you Beyond the Cloy of Fulsome Praise: Beyond the Sting of Cruel Blame: the One, may not help You the Other, cannot hurt You!O! James Whitcomb Riley! Once, when under the Spell of a Mystic Mood, you sought—as you had often sought before—that Wise Wizard of White River. He met you, when you came into that Peaceful Indiana Valley—where dwells this Wizard—by the Flowing Fountain of those Healing Waters. He knew your need; he spoke no unnecessary word; he quickly set his place in order, and was ready to go with you—anywhere. There had been, on your arrival, a clamor to have you Read that afternoon—but the Wizard quietly slipped you away. Out into the Open you drove, in an old Barouche, behind a Pair of Good Horses. It was a long Drive; it was a beautiful Drive. It was driven in Silence. After several hours—the spell was still upon you—a sharp turn brought you to the Banks of White River; and there—under a Clump of the Sycamore, of the Willow, in a deep, Shady Pool, an Eddy, undisturbed by the current of the broad, shallow Stream—a Batch of Boys, swimming, chattering, diving. “Stop” you said to the driver; “Come here” you called to the Lads. They came trooping, dripping, out of the Pool. A change came over you; flinging off your coat, your hat, you arose to your feet.



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There they stood before you, naked, unabashed, curious. A complacent smile, flickered across the bearded face of the Wise Wizard. He must have known! He must have timed your arrival at that particular spot, at that particular moment. But even the Wizard could not have known what was to follow. Without a word of explanation, you gave them, that crowd of naked Boys—gave it, as you had never given it before, doubtless, as you never gave it again—your

“Old Swimmin’ Hole”

Oh! the old swimmin’ hole! whare the crick so still and deep
Looked like a baby-river that was laying half asleep,
And the gurgle of the worter round the drift jest below
Sounded like the laugh of something we onc’t ust to know
Before we could remember anything but the eyes
Of the angels lookin’ out as we left Paradise;
But the merry days of youth is beyond our controle,
And its hard to part ferever with the old swimmin’-hole.

Oh! the old swimmin’-hole! In the happy days of yore,
When I ust to lean above it on the old sickamore.
Oh! it showed me a face in its warm sunny tide
That gazed back at me so gay and glorified,
It made me love myself, as I leaped to caress
My shadder smilin’ up at me with sich tenderness.
But them days is past and gone, and old Time’s tuck his toll
From the old man come back to the old swimmin’-hole.

Oh! the old swimmin’-hole! In the long, lazy days
When the humdrum of school made so many run-a-ways.
How plesant was the jurney down the old dusty lane,
Whare the tracks of our bare feet was all printed so plane
You could tell by the dent of the heel and the sole
They was lot o’ fun on hands at the old swimmin’-hole.
But the lost joys is past! Let your tears in sorrow roll
Like the rain that ust to dapple up the old swimmin’-hole.

Thare the bullrushes growed, and the cattails so tall,
And the sunshine and shadder fell over it all;
And it mottled the worter with amber and gold
Tel the glad lilies rocked in the ripples that rolled;
And the snake-feeder’s four gauzy wings fluttered by
Like the ghost of a daisy dropped out of the sky,



Or a wovnded apple-blossom in the breeze's controle
As it cut acrost some orchurd to'rds the old swimmin'-hole.

Oh! the old swimmin'-hole! When I last saw the place,
The scenes was all changed, like the change in my face;
The bridge of the railroad now crosses the spot
Whare the old divin'-log lays sunk and fergot.
And I stray down the banks whare the trees ust to be—
But never again will theyr shade shelter me!
And I wish in my sorrow I could strip to the soul.
And dive off in my grave like the old swimmin'-hole.

Their little jaws dropped!
Their little eyes distended!
Their little ears stood erect!



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They fairly bristled with an intense attention. You said the last word, of the last line. Then—absolute, unbroken—Silence! Finally—but without another word—you reached down, patted the youngest one on his wet curly Locks. The Wizard whispered to the driver “Go.” As the team, in a brisk trot, started away. you, still standing, coatless, hatless, waved your hand—in that quick little jerky fashion peculiar to you—to those little naked Urchins. With a mighty Shout, they ran back to the Pool, and gave a rapid-firing Exhibition of the Single Dive; the Double Dive; and one—a dare-devil—the Triple Dive! What a Memory, what a Priceless Memory, you must have given those Boys of Martinsville, that Ideal Summer Afternoon, in the Long While Ago! Martinsville! To you of Blessed Memory! For the sake of an early, enduring, Friendship, did you not encrust one Jap Miller of Martinsville with no mean verse? And did it not run something like this?

Jap Miller down at Martinsville’s the blamedest feller yit!
When *he* starts in a-talkin’ other folks is apt to quit!—
‘Pears like that mouth o’ his’n wuzn’t made fer nothin’ else
But jes’ to argify ‘em down and gether in their pelts:
He’ll talk you down on tariff; er he’ll talk you down on tax.
And prove the pore man pays ‘em all and them’s about the fac’s!
Religen, law, er politics, prize-fightin’, er base-ball
Jes’ tetch Jap up a little and he’ll post you ‘bout ‘em all.

* * * * *

W’y, that-air blame Jap Miller, with his keen sircastic fun,
Has got more friends than ary candidate ‘at ever run!
Don’t matter what *his* views is, when he states the same to you,
They allus coincide with your’n, the same as two and two:
You *can’t* take issue with him—er, at least, they haint no sense
In startin’ in to down him, so you better not commence.—
The best way’s jes’ to listen, like your humble servant does.
And jes’ concede Jap Miller is the best man ever wuz!

On the drive back to the little Station, you were the Man, the Poet, but not the Mystic!
You delighted the Wizard with your genial flow of Verse, of Story. When the watchful
Wizard, smuggled you aboard your train—with privacy unbroken you, like King Saul,
returned to your People, refreshed in body, restored in mind; for had not the Wizard
done for you, as David did for Saul, for had not he brought Peace to your no longer
Troubled Soul? Did he not say to you, in parting, “All Is Well With You?” O! James
Whitcomb Riley! It is late in the Afternoon, of a Perfect Summer Day. This Man From
Down On The Farm, is standing on the Banks Of Wolf Run. He is thinking of You!
Joyfully, not Regretfully! A Pastoral Scene stretches before him— a Scene of much
Beauty! The Cattle stand, not “knee-deep in June” but well into the pure rippling Waters



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of an August Wolf Run, under the dense shade overhead, where arching branches interlock, casting a net-work of shifting Shadows on the bosom of the Peaceful Waters, which seem to murmur, as they flow, your Name—Joyfully, not Mournfully!

James Whitcomb Riley!
James Whitcomb Riley!
James Whitcomb Riley!

Smiling, undulating, across the Creek, a Blue Grass Meadow gently rolls away, toward the White, the Winding Pike: Each blade of Blue Grass—Joyfully, not Tearfully—seems to whisper your Name:

James Whitcomb Riley!
James Whitcomb Riley!
James Whitcomb Riley!

But Hark! The belated Song of a Mocking Bird—
its Vesper Song—to its enraptured Mate!
This, the Glad Song:

To You James Whitcomb Riley! The World was full of Roses! Every Rose held hidden, within its Tremulous Heart, a Slender Crystal Chalice of Perfumed Dew, which, overflowing, spilled its Prodigal Sweetness, onto the Earth, into the Air,

For You James Whitcomb Riley!
—For You, and for All Humanity!
And this, the Joyful Refrain:
—Joy, without Regret!
 Joy, without Mourning!
 Joy, without Tears!—
—A Refrain which readily, willingly,
finds Grateful Echo in the Heart of
This Man From Down On The Farm!

O! James Whitcomb Riley!
All Is Well With You!
All Is Well With You!
O! James Whitcomb Riley!
All Is Well With You!
O! James Whitcomb Riley!

[Illustration]



Postlude

—Which ought to have been The Prelude to this Spray of Kentucky Pine. Because it was written, published, a little more than a year before the Death of the Poet. Therefore, it was a Tribute to him, *Living!* A Promethean Poet was there. He had touched the Heavenly flame; he had lusted the Waters of Inspiration: he had drained the Crystal Cup of Fancy, finding therein neither Lees nor Dregs, which bite the tongue, stifle the song, of lesser Men; he had reverently kissed the coy hand of Fame, when she had crowned his Worthy Brow, with her Wreath Immortal! His Poems, homely, simple, sweet—springing from the lap of Nature—had spread, like wild-fire of the Forest, into the Four Quarters of the Globe. He came from the Land, across the River, where, in these latter days, the People quit the planting of the Potato, to pen a Poem: pause in the cultivation of the Corn, to compose a Novel. Some of it is good, very good; Some of it is bad, very bad: but all of it produces a princely Revenue far in excess of any return from either the Potato or the Corn. Long before the avalanche-like advent of this State-wide Literary Madness, the Star of this Poet had risen— risen before, and still shines beyond, and above them all. The hand which wrote “Goodbye, Jim”—not classical in either Greek

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or Roman sense, yet a great American Classic—with its pungent odor of Blue Jeans, with its clean, sweet, clear-cut, fine smell, of its native soil— that hand may never again hold the Pen; the man himself, may crumble—God forbid!—back into the Dust— that “Little Dust of Harm”—out of which he came; but his Poems will not, cannot die. When those other Writers will have been forgotten; when even the gifted Maker of “Ben Hur” will be, but as an empty name; even then, this Poet, and his Poems, will cleave to the Mind, cling to the Heart, of countless Generations, not yet born!

[Illustration]

Whatever Is—Is Best