

Green Fields and Running Brooks, and Other Poems eBook

Green Fields and Running Brooks, and Other Poems by James Whitcomb Riley

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JOHN MCKEEN.

John McKeen, in his rusty dress,
His loosened collar, and swarthy throat;
His face unshaven, and none the less,
His hearty laugh and his wholesomeness,
And the wealth of a workman's vote!

Bring him, O Memory, here once more,
And tilt him back in his Windsor chair
By the kitchen-stove, when the day is o'er
And the light of the hearth is across the floor,
And the crickets everywhere!

And let their voices be gladly blent
With a watery jingle of pans and spoons,
And a motherly chirrup of sweet content,
And neighborly gossip and merriment,
And old-time fiddle-tunes!

Tick the clock with a wooden sound,
And fill the hearing with childish glee
Of rhyming riddle, or story found
In the Robinson Crusoe, leather-bound
Old book of the Used-to-be!

John McKeen of the Past! Ah, John,
To have grown ambitious in worldly ways!—
To have rolled your shirt-sleeves down, to don
A broadcloth suit, and, forgetful, gone
Out on election days!

John, ah, John! did it prove your worth
To yield you the office you still maintain?
To fill your pockets, but leave the dearth
Of all the happier things on earth
To the hunger of heart and brain?

Under the dusk of your villa trees,
Edging the drives where your blooded span
Paw the pebbles and wait your ease,—
Where are the children about your knees,
And the mirth, and the happy man?



The blinds of your mansion are battened to;
Your faded wife is a close recluse;
And your “finished” daughters will doubtless do
Dutifully all that is willed of you,
And marry as you shall choose!—

But O for the old-home voices, blent
With the watery jingle of pans and spoons,
And the motherly chirrup of glad content
And neighborly gossip and merriment,
And the old-time fiddle-tunes!

THEIR SWEET SORROW.

They meet to say farewell: Their way
Of saying this is hard to say.—
He holds her hand an instant, wholly
Distressed—and she unclasps it slowly.

He bends his gaze evasively
Over the printed page that she
Recur to, with a new-moon shoulder
Glimpsed from the lace-mists that enfold her.

The clock, beneath its crystal cup,
Discreetly clicks—“Quick! Act! Speak up!”
A tension circles both her slender
Wrists—and her raised eyes flash in splendor,

Even as he feels his dazzled own.—
Then, blindingly, round either thrown,
They feel a stress of arms that ever
Strain tremblingly—and “Never! Never!”

Is whispered brokenly, with half
A sob, like a belated laugh,—
While cloyingly their blurred kiss closes,
Sweet as the dew's lip to the rose's.

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SOME SCATTERING REMARKS OF BUB'S.

Wunst I looked our pepper-box lid
An' cut little pie-dough biscuits, I did,
And cooked 'em on our stove one day
When our hired girl she said I may.

Honey's the goodest thing—Oo-*ooh*!
And blackberry-pies is goodest, too!
But wite hot biscuits, ist soakin'-wet
Wiv tree-mullasus, is goodest yet!

Miss Maimie she's my Ma's friend,—an'
She's purtiest girl in all the lan'!—
An' sweetest smile an' voice an' face—
An' eyes ist looks like p'serves tas'e'!

I *ruther* go to the Circus-show;
But, 'cause my *parunts* told me so,
I ruther go to the Sund'y School,
'Cause there I learn the goldun rule.

Say, Pa,—what *is* the goldun rule
'At's allus at the Sund'y School?

MR. WHAT'S-HIS-NAME.

They called him Mr. What's-his-name:
From where he was, or why he came,
Or when, or what he found to do,
Nobody in the city knew.

He lived, it seemed, shut up alone
In a low hovel of his own;
There cooked his meals and made his bed,
Careless of all his neighbors said.

His neighbors, too, said many things
Expressive of grave wonderings,
Since none of them had ever been
Within his doors, or peered therein.



In fact, grown watchful, they became
Assured that Mr. What's-his-name
Was up to something wrong—indeed,
Small doubt of it, we all agreed.

At night were heard strange noises there,
When honest people everywhere
Had long retired; and his light
Was often seen to burn all night.

He left his house but seldom—then
Would always hurry back again,
As though he feared some stranger's knock,
Finding him gone, might burst the lock.

Beside, he carried, every day,
At the one hour he went away,
A basket, with the contents hid
Beneath its woven willow lid.

And so we grew to greatly blame
This wary Mr. What's-his-name,
And look on him with such distrust
His actions seemed to sanction just.

But when he died—he died one day—
Dropped in the street while on his way
To that old wretched hut of his—
You'll think it strange—perhaps it is—

But when we lifted him, and past
The threshold of his home at last,
No man of all the crowd but stepped
With reverence,—Aye, *quailed* and *wept*!

What was it? Just a shriek of pain
I pray to never hear again—
A withered woman, old and bowed,
That fell and crawled and cried aloud—

And kissed the dead man's matted hair—
Lifted his face and kissed him there—
Called to him, as she clutched his hand,
In words no one could understand.

Insane? Yes.—Well, we, searching, found
An unsigned letter, in a round

Free hand, within the dead man's breast:
"Look to my mother—*I'm* at rest.



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You'll find my money safely hid
Under the lining of the lid
Of my work-basket. It is hers,
And God will bless her ministers!"

And some day—though he died unknown—
If through the City by the Throne
I walk, all cleansed of earthly shame,
I'll ask for Mr. What's-his-name.

WHEN AGE COMES ON.

When Age comes on!—
"The deepening dusk is where the dawn
Once glittered splendid, and the dew
In honey-drips, from red rose-lips
Was kissed away by me and you.—
And now across the frosty lawn
Black foot-prints trail, and Age comes on—
And Age comes on!
And biting wild-winds whistle through
Our tattered hopes—and Age comes on!

When Age comes on!—
O tide of raptures, long withdrawn,
Flow back in summer-floods, and fling
Here at our feet our childhood sweet,
And all the songs we used to sing! . . .
Old loves, old friends—all dead and gone—
Our old faith lost—and Age comes on—
And Age comes on!
Poor hearts! have we not anything
But longings left when Age comes on?

ENVOY.

Just as of old! The world rolls on and on;
The day dies into night—night into dawn—
Dawn into dusk—through centuries untold.—
Just as of old.



Time loiters not. The river ever flows,
Its brink or white with blossoms or with snows;
Its tide or warm with Spring or Winter cold:
Just as of old.

Lo! where is the beginning, where the end
Of living, loving, longing? Listen, friend!—
God answers with a silence of pure gold—
Just as of old.