

NEIGHBORLY POEMS

AND

DIALECT SKETCHES

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

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PREFACE

As far back into boyhood as the writer's memory may intelligently go, the "country poet" is most pleasantly recalled. He was, and is, as common as the "country fiddler," and as full of good old-fashioned music. Not a master of melody, indeed, but a poet, certainly—

"Who, through long days of labor,
And nights devoid of ease,
Still heard in his soul the music
Of wonderful melodies."

And it is simply the purpose of this series of dialectic studies to reflect the real worth of this homely child of nature, and to echo faithfully, if possible, the faltering music of his song.

In adding to this series, as the writer has, for many years, been urged to do, and answering as steadfast a demand of Benj. F. Johnson's first and oldest friends, it has been decided that this further work of his be introduced to the reader of the volume as was the old man's

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first work to the reader of the newspaper of nearly ten years ago.

Directly, then, referring to the Indianapolis "Daily Journal,"—under whose management the writer had for some time been employed,—from issue of date June 17, 1882, under editorial caption of "A Boone County Pastoral," this article is herewith quoted:

Benj. F. Johnson, of Boone county, who considers the Journal a "very valubul" newspaper, writes to inclose us an original poem, desiring that we kindly accept it for publication, as "many neighbors and friends is astin' him to have the same struck off."

Mr. Johnson thoughtfully informs us that he is "no edjucated man," but that he has, "from childhood up tel old enough to vote, allus wrote more er less poetry, as many of an alburn in the neighborhood can testify." Again, he says that he writes "from the hart out"; and there is a touch of genuine pathos in the frank avowal, "Thare is times when I write the tears rolls down my cheeks."

In all sincerity, Mr. Johnson, we are glad to publish the poem you send, and just as you have written it. That is its greatest charm. Its very defects compose its excellence. You need no better education than the one from which emanates "The Old Swimmin'-Hole." It is real poetry, and all the more tender and

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lovable for the unquestionable evidence it bears of having been written "from the hart out." The only thing we find to—but hold! Let us first lay the poem before the reader:

Here followed the poem, "The Old Swimmin'-Hole," entire—the editorial comment ending as follows:

The only thing now, Mr. Johnson—as we were about to observe—the only thing we find to criticise, at all relative to the poem, is your closing statement to the effect that "It was wrote to go to the tune of 'The Captin with his Whiskers!'" You should not have told us that, O Rare Ben. Johnson!

A week later, in the "Journal" of date June 24th, followed this additional mention of "Benj. F. Johnson, of Boone":

It is a pleasure for us to note that the publication of the poem of "The Old Swimmin'-Hole," to which the Journal, with just pride, referred last week, has proved almost as great a pleasure to its author as to the hosts of delighted readers who have written in its praise, or called to personally indorse our high opinion of its poetic value. We have just received a letter from Mr. Johnson, the author, inclosing us another lyrical performance, which in many features even surpasses the originality and spirit of the former effort. Certainly the least that can be said

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of it is that it stands a thorough proof of our first assertion, that the author, though by no means a man of learning and profound literary attainments, is none the less a true poet and an artist. The letter, accompanying this later amaranth of blooming wild-wood verse, we publish in its entirety, assured that Mr. Johnson's many admirers will be charmed, as we have been, at the delicious glimpse he gives us of his inspiration, modes of study, home-life, and surroundings:

“To the Editer of the Indanoplus Jurnal:

“Respected Sir—The paper is here, markin' the old swimmin'-hole, my poetry which you seem to like so well. I joy to see it in print, and I thank you, hart and voice, fer speakin' of its merrits in the way in which you do. I am glad you thought it was real poetry, as you said in your artikle. But I make bold to ast you what was your idy in sayin' I had ortent of told you it went to the tune I spoke of in my last. I felt highly flatered tel I got that fur. Was it because you don't know the tune refered to in the letter? Er wasent some words spelt right er not? Still ef you hadent of said somepin' aginst it Ide of thought you was makin' fun. As I said before I well know my own unedjucation, but I don't think that is any reason the feelin's of the soul is stunted in theyr growth however. 'Juge not less ye be juged,' says The Good Book, and so say I, ef I thought you was makin' fun of the lines that I wrote and which you done me the onner to have printed off in sich fine style that

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I have read it over and over again in the paper you sent, and I would like to have about three more ef you can spare the same and state by mail what they will come at. All nature was in tune day before yisterday when your paper come to hand. It had ben a-raining hard fer some days, but that morning opened up as clear as a whissel. No clouds was in the sky, and the air was bammy with the warm sunshine and the wet smell of the earth and the locus blossoms and the flowrs and pennyroil and boneset. I got up, the first one about the place, and went forth to the plesant fields. I fed the stock with lavish hand and worterred them in merry glee, they was no bird in all the land no happier than me. I have jest wrote a verse of poetry in this letter; see ef you can find it. I also send you a whole poem which was wrote off the very day your paper come. I started it in the morning I have so feebly tride to pictur' to you and wound her up by suppertime, besides doin' a fare day's work around the place.

“Ef you print this one I think you will like it better than the other. This ain't a sad poem like the other was, but you will find it full of careful thought. I pride myself on that. I also send you 30 cents in stamps fer you to take your pay out of fer the other papers I said, and also fer three more with this in it ef you have it printed and oblige. Ef you don't print this poem, keep the stamps and send me three more papers with *the other*

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one in—makin' the sum total of six (6) papers altogether in full,
Ever your true friend,

BENJ. F. JOHNSON.

"N. B.—The tune of this one is 'The Bold Privateer.'"

Here followed the poem, "Thoughts Fer The Discouraged Farmer";—and here, too, fittingly ends any comment but that which would appear trivial and gratuitous.

Simply, in briefest conclusion, the hale, sound, artless, lovable character of Benj. F. Johnson remains, in the writer's mind, as from the first, far less a fiction than a living, breathing, vigorous reality.—So strong, indeed, has his personality been made manifest, that many times, in visionary argument with the sturdy old myth over certain changes from the original forms of his productions, he has so incontinently beaten down all suggestions as to a less incongruous association of thoughts and words, together with protests against his many violations of poetic method, harmony, and grace, that nothing was left the writer but to submit to what has always seemed—and in truth still seems—a superior wisdom of dictation.

J. W. R.

Indianapolis, July, 1891.

“THE OLD SWIMMIN’-HOLE”

AND

’LEVEN MORE POEMS

BY

BENJ. F. JOHNSON, OF BOONE

!

*The delights of our childhood is soon passed away,
And our gloryus youth it departs,—
And yit, dead and burried, they's blossoms of May
Ore theyr medderland graves in our harts.
So, friends of my bare-footed days on the farm,
Whether truuant in city er not,
God prosper you same as He's prosperin' me,
Whilse your past haint despised er fergot.*

*Oh! they's nothin', at morn, that's as grand unto me
As the glorys of Nachur so fare,—
With the Spring in the breeze, and the bloom in the trees,
And the hum of the bees ev'rywhare!
The green in the woods, and the birds in the boughs,
And the dew spangled over the fields;
And the bah of the sheep and the bawl of the cows
And the call from the house to your meals!*

*Then ho! fer your brekfast! and ho! fer the toil
That waiteth alike man and beast!
Oh! its soon with my team I'll be turnin' up soil,
Whilse the sun shoulders up in the East
Ore the tops of the ellums and beeches and oaks,
To smile his godspeed on the plow,
And the furry and seed, and the Man in his need,
And the joy of the swet of his brow!*

THE 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 it's 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.

THE OLD SWIMMIN'-HOLE

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 hum-drum 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 lots 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 lillies 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 wownded apple-blossom in the breeze's controle
As it cut acrost some orchurd to'rds the old swimmin'-
hole.

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 they 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.

WORTERMELON TIME

OLD wortermelon time is a-comin' round again,
And they ain't no man a-livin' any tickleder'n me,
Fer the way I hanker after wortermelons is a sin—
Which is the why and wharefore, as you can plainly see.

Oh! it's in the sandy soil wortermelons does the best,
And it's thare they'll lay and waller in the sunshine
and the dew

Tel they wear all the green streaks clean off of theyr
breast;

And you bet I ain't a-findin' any fault with them; air
you?

They ain't no better thing in the vegetable line;
And they don't need much 'tendin', as ev'ry farmer
knows;

And when theyr ripe and ready fer to pluck from the
vine,

I want to say to you theyr the best fruit that grows.

WORTERMELON TIME

It's some likes the yeller-core, and some likes the red,

And it's some says "The Little Californy" is the best;
But the sweetest slice of all I ever wedged in my head,
Is the old "Edingburg Mounting-sprout," of the west.

You don't want no punkins nigh your wortermelon vines—
'Cause, some-way-another, they'll spile your melons,
shore;—

I've seed 'em taste like punkins, from the core to the rines,
Which may be a fact you have heerd of before.

But your melons that's raised right and 'tended to with
care,

You can walk around amongst 'em with a parent's
pride and joy,

And thump 'em on the heads with as fatherly a air
As ef each one of them was your little girl er boy.

I joy in my hart jest to hear that rippin' sound

When you split one down the back and jolt the halves
in two,

And the friends you love the best is gethered all around—

And you says unto your sweethart, "Oh, here's the
core fer you!"

WORTERMELON TIME

And I like to slice 'em up in big pieces fer 'em all,
Especshally the childern, and watch theyr high delight
As one by one the rines with theyr pink notches falls,
And they holler fer some more, with unquenched
appetite.

Boys takes to it natchurl, and I like to see 'em eat—
A slice of wortermelon's like a frenchharp in theyr
hands,
And when they "saw" it through theyr mouth sich
music can't be beat—
'Cause it's music both the sperit and the stummick
understands.

Oh, they's more in wortermelons than the purty-colored
meat,
And the overflowin' sweetness of the worter squshed
betwixt
The up'ard and the down'ard motions of a feller's teeth,
And it's the taste of ripe old age and juicy childhood
mixed.

WORTERMELON TIME

Fer I never taste a melon but my thoughts flies away
To the summertime of youth ; and again I see the dawn,
And the fadin' afternoon of the long summer day,
And the dusk and dew a-fallin', and the night a'comin'
on.

And there's the corn around us, and the lispin' leaves
and trees,
And the stars a-peekin' down on us as still as silver
mice,
And us boys in the worter melons on our hands and
knees,
And the new-moon hangin' ore us like a yellor-cored
slice.

Oh! it's worter melon time is a-comin' round again,
And they ain't no man a-livin' any tickle der'n me,
Fer the way I hanker after worter melons is a sin—
Which is the why and wharefore, as you can plainly
see.

WHEN THE FROST IS ON THE PUNKIN

WHEN the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the
shock,

And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin'
turkey-cock,

And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the
hens,

And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence ;
O, its then's the times a feller is a-feelin' at his best,
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peace-
ful rest,

As he leaves the house, bare-headed, and goes out to
feed the stock,

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the
shock.

They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmusfere
When the heat of summer's over and the coolin' fall is
here—

WHEN THE FROST IS ON THE PUNKIN

Of course we miss the flowers, and the blossums on the
trees,

And the mumble of the hummin'-birds and buzzin' of the
bees;

But the air's so appetizin'; and the landscape through
the haze

Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airy autumn days
Is a pictur' that no painter has the colorin' to mock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the
shock.

The husky, rusty russel of the tassels of the corn,
And the raspin' of the tangled leaves, as golden as the
morn;

The stubble in the furries—kindo' lonesome-like, but still
A-preachin' sermons to us of the barns they growed to
fill;

The strawstack in the medder, and the reaper in the shed;
The hosses in theyr stalls below—the clover overhead!—
O, it sets my hart a-clickin' like the tickin' of a clock,
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the
shock!

WHEN THE FROST IS ON THE PUNKIN

Then your apples all is getherd, and the ones a feller
keeps

Is poured around the celler-floor in red and yellor heaps ;
And your cider-makin' 's over, and your wimmern-folks is
through

With their mince and apple-butter, and theyr souse and
saussage, too! . . .

I don't know how to tell it—but ef sich a thing could be
As the Angels wantin' boardin', and they'd call around
on *me*—

I'd want to 'commodate 'em—all the whole-indurin'
flock—

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the
shock!

MY FIDDLE

My fiddle?—Well, I kindo' keep her handy, don't you know!

Though I ain't so much inclined to tromp the strings and switch the bow

As I was before the timber of my elbows got so dry,
And my fingers was more limber-like and caperish and spry;

Yit I can plonk and plunk and plink,
And tune her up and play,
And jest lean back and laugh and wink
At ev'ry rainy day'

My playin' 's only middlin'—tunes I picked up when a boy—

The kindo'-sorto' fiddlin' that the folks calls "corda-roy";

"The Old Fat Gal," and "Rye-straw," and "My Sailor's on the Sea,"

Is the old cowtillions I "saw" when the ch'ice is left to me;

MY FIDDLE

**And so I plunk and plonk and plink,
And rosum-up my bow
And play the tunes that makes you think
The devil's in your toe!**

**I was allus a romancin', do-less boy, to tell the truth,
A-fiddlin' and a-dancin', and a-wastin' of my youth,
And a-actin' and a-cuttin'-up all sorts o' silly pranks
That wasn't worth a botton of anybody's thanks!**

**But they tell me, when I ust to plink
And plonk and plunk and play,
My music seemed to have the kink
O' drivin' cares away!**

**That's how this here old fiddle's won my hart's indurin'
love!**

**From the strings acrost her middle, to the schreechin'
keys above—**

**From her "apern," over "bridge," and to the ribbon
round her throat,**

**She's a woin', cooin' pigeon, singin' "Love me" ev'ry
note!**



MY FIDDLE

And so I pat her neck, and plink
Her strings with lovin' hands,—
And, list'nin' clos't, I sometimes think
She kindo' understands!