

An Indianapolis Adventure

By Donald E. Curtis

Many members of The Literary Club will probably recall from our conversations that I am a self-confessed Sherlock Holmes enthusiast and a great fan of Victorian literature including Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and, of course Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. What many probably do not know is that Doyle, the creator of the world's greatest detective was very fond of Indianapolis and made a special effort on his third trip to America to have our city included in his itinerary as he had enjoyed his visit here so much on his first trip.

In the fall of 1894, Arthur Conan Doyle, famed author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, made his first trip to the United States. He was on a "lecture circuit" under the management of Major J. B. Pond, and was booked to speak in many places on a variety of subjects. Major Pond was at the top of his profession at this time. He had begun as a journalist in abolitionist days, later served the Union Army during the Civil War and later sent ex-Mormons and anti-Mormons on the lecture trail. He gained further experience with the Redpath Lyceum Bureau of Boston managing tours for the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

By 1879 Pond owned his own lecture company in New York and was the premier manager of entertainers, writers, and advocates of special causes such as women's suffrage. Major Pond represented many luminaries including James Whitcomb Riley and Mark Twain. In 1894, Pond had a new special attraction to offer: the popular young British author Arthur Conan Doyle, well-known as the creator of the very popular Sherlock Holmes

In preparation for this lecture tour, Doyle had constructed three addresses: the first was entitled "Facts About Fiction" with

comments on such writers as Thomas Hardy, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Rudyard Kipling. The second was on “The Novels of George Meredith. Only a few audiences were interested in these topics. Of thirty-four lectures in northeastern US cities, the vast majority wanted to hear his prepared talk entitled “Readings and Reminiscences” which included commentary regarding his creation of Sherlock Holmes. This was the requested topic at nearly every stop, and reporter’s interview questions also reflected the American public’s interest in the new detective.

Doyle’s first journey to America began as he and his younger brother embarked at Southampton, England on September 23. Their ship, the *Elbe*, arrived in New York on October 2. Doyle gave speeches in New York, went on a hunting expedition in the Adirondack Mountains, then proceeded by train to Chicago. He lectured at the Twentieth Century Club on Friday evening and arrived in Indianapolis on Monday, October 15. His Indianapolis lecture was to be for the Montefiore Society at the Plymouth Congregational Church. The Society had advertised in the local papers that tickets for the Montefiore Lecture course were available at Baldwins (yes, the piano company) for \$1.00 for the entire course and fifty cents for a single event.

At 5:30pm, shortly before he was to speak, the Doyle brothers, Arthur and his younger sibling, Innes arrived at Union Station in Indianapolis where they were met by a group from the Montefiore Society and taken to the Denison House hotel, then located at Pennsylvania and Ohio Streets. Arthur Conan Doyle was signing the register at the front desk when he was greeted by James Whitcomb Riley, the well-known Hoosier poet. Riley was eager to discuss literary matters with Doyle and the two men dined together. Later, after Doyle’s talk at the Plymouth Congregational Church, then at the corner of Meridian and New York St., where Mark Twain had spoken nine years earlier, city leaders gathered

for a late supper and the two writers continued to develop their new acquaintance. (Redmond, pp 55-57)

Doyle and Major Pond had included Indianapolis in the speaking itinerary because of an invitation by the Montefiore Society. This influential club had previously been known as the Youths' Social Society of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, but in 1893 had renamed itself after the famous English Jewish philanthropist, Sir Moses Montefiore. The Indianapolis Montefiore Society was comprised mostly of native-born sons of German Jewish immigrants, and was dedicated to educational and charitable activities. They often sponsored debates of current issues such as capital punishment, women's suffrage, and religious issues. They also sponsored speakers, dramatic readings and musical events.

Local social registry sources of the 1890's list a wide variety of arts and literary societies in Indianapolis – you will recall that our own Indianapolis Literary Club had been active for nearly two decades by this time. Indianapolis was a growing city in the 1890's. The 1890 census was 105,000 and by 1900 had risen to 171,000. Groups like the Montefiore Society contributed to a lively cultural scene.

Riley and Doyle had much in common: they were both well-known successful writers and both were lyceum speakers which gave them huge access to the American public during the post-Civil War era. Both traveled extensively on their lecture tours and both toured under the management of Major J. B. Pond and his New York agency.

This was, of course, in an age before electronic media. Folks didn't watch television in their homes. Rather, they went out to public lecture halls and churches to hear speakers for entertainment.

Both men had very wide circles of friendship, especially among literary figures. Riley sought out such friends. One was Meredith Nicholson. (Incidentally, both Riley and Nicholson were members of the Literary Club.) Nicholson's verses had been discovered by Riley in a Cincinnati newspaper. Riley investigated to find where Nicholson worked and went to meet him. When they met, Nicholson was employed in a law office where he copied legal documents, ran errands, and scribbled verses in his spare time. Nicholson says, "He was the most interesting and the most amusing and lovable man I have known."

Riley and Nicholson liked to loaf together at a common bookstore where once Riley took note of many copies of a Nicholson book. Later when Nicholson returned he learned that Riley had furtively purchased seventy-five of them to distribute widely to friends. Riley often did that for authors he liked. He was beloved within the literary community because he boosted others careers.

In the course of time, Riley's fame as a poet and platform speaker brought him recognition from many of the best writers of his era. They wrote him letters that he was glad to answer in his inimitable style and through correspondence and personal contacts there was established a lasting friendship with such writers as Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris, John Burroughs, Rudyard Kipling, William Dean Howells, John Hay, William Lyon Phelps and many others.

Locally, three of Riley's closest friends were Meredith Nicholson, George Ade, and Booth Tarkington. These four and a few others were the shining stars of the "Golden Age of Indiana Literature." James Whitcomb Riley once courted Booth Tarkington's sister.

The day after his arrival in Indianapolis, and the lecture at the Plymouth Church, the Doyle brothers toured the city's highlights with Riley and together they climbed to the top of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument where Riley discovered his new friend was a Kodak fiend – Doyle brought out his snapshot camera and enthusiastically took pictures of all that he saw. Among other sights, they visited the State House and Kingan and Company, the major firm in Indianapolis' sizable pork industry.

At some time during Conan Doyle's Indianapolis visit, the two met for a private chat whilst sitting on a hotel bed. From various reports, it is evident the Hoosier Poet and the creator of Sherlock Holmes liked each other and shared many mutual friends in the world's literary community. Their opportunity for friendship was limited by the brevity of Doyle's visit in Riley's hometown, but for a number of years thereafter the two continued their occasional correspondence. That correspondence began the very day after Doyle left Indianapolis and traveled to Cincinnati. Riley had said many kind things about Doyle the man and his talk at the Plymouth Church which appeared in the newspapers and Innes Doyle passed them along to his brother. When Arthur Conan Doyle heard of the many compliments, he was prompted to grab a sheet of Burnet House hotel stationery and write:

Cincinnati, Oct 16, 1894

My dear Riley,

Many thanks for kindly things which my brother says you have said of me in the paper.

You'll send me home all head like a tadpole. It was a delight to me to meet you.

Yours always,

A. Conan Doyle

(Note: Interestingly, the envelope in which this note was mailed was addressed simply to Whitcomb Riley, Esq., Indianapolis, Indiana)

The friendship of Doyle and Riley, begun so well in 1894, and continued through occasional correspondence, never really had the chance to develop to the point where the two writers truly came to know one another and fully appreciate each other's traits of character and nuances of personality. In short, due to the constraints of distance and limited contact, it remained on the level of a rather superficial acquaintance.

Conan Doyle had made a trip to America in 1914 when he was described as the best-known Englishman, though little of the details of this trip remain. Indianapolis was not on his agenda.

Nearly thirty years after his first visit here, Arthur Conan Doyle returned to America to speak on spiritualism. In 1922, Doyle spoke in many Eastern U. S. cities and Toronto. As he prepared to return to England, his one regret was that he had been unable to travel further west. (Green & Gibson, pp 318) During the trip, he received many offers to speak, and as he wrote his account, he was already planning a return visit.

In the spring of 1923, Doyle did indeed return to America and toured all the way to California and then back east through Canada. One of his scheduled stops was in Indianapolis, which he remembered fondly and where he had made a good friend many

years earlier. James Whitcomb Riley had died a few years earlier in 1916, but was remembered well by Conan Doyle. Because their friendship was not deep-rooted, Doyle may be forgiven his acceptance of remarks about Riley by a man he described as “one who professed to know him well.” In his book, *Our Second American Adventure*, he writes:

From Cincinnati, Which had been made pleasant by the attentions of Mr. Horgan, of the Sinton Hotel, my path led to Indianapolis (sic), a favorite of mine in former days, but I did not re-establish touch with any single soul whom I could remember of old. ...

I used to know Whitcomb Riley, the poet, and now I visited his grave with some flowers. They have buried him on the summit of a high hill whence the pilgrim can get a long view of the fertile plains of Indiana.

Doyle’s carriage driver and escort told him “Everything in Jim Riley came by contraries” professing to know him well. “He wanted to just sink into the earth unnoticed, and here they have planted him on a hill. He never liked children. He could write verses about them, but he didn’t want to see them. But they would organize processions to the child-poet. Jim would look out of his window and cry, “My God! Here are a bunch of these brats coming after me again”. So said my informant, and it seemed a comical situation. I well remember my first interview with Riley, when he sat hunched up at one end of my unmade bed, and I at the other, and we discussed with the eagerness of youth the work of all our peers. I couple him with Eugene Field as one of the remarkable Bohemians of America. I still preserve the poem which Riley wrote for me which wound up:

“Oh, had we met on the other side, what rapture had been
mine,

For I was broke in London in the fall of '89.”

¹ Riley’s friends vigorously deny this anecdote, and their denial should be put on record. (Doyle, pp47)

This Hoosier liar’s fabricated analysis of Riley could not have been more off-target. James Whitcomb Riley was a confirmed bachelor who dearly loved children and thoroughly enjoyed their company. He doted on his sister’s children, showering them with gifts and the love and generosity usually reserved for one’s own. He was particularly close to his niece, Lesley Payne. They remained devoted friends until Riley’s death in 1916. Ms. Payne’s papers, including journals, random thoughts jotted on scraps and voluminous correspondence are preserved in the collections of the Lilly Library at Indiana University and served as source material for a 40-page reminiscence edited by a Riley biographer, Thomas Williams.

Included in Ms. Payne’s papers is a note from Arthur Conan Doyle written on April 23, 1923 requesting an appointment with her at 10am the next day (April 24th.) It is likely that when they met, Doyle mentioned his visit to her uncle’s grave and the fallacious comments of the guide that led him to write the above anecdote. Her negative reaction to the claim that Riley disliked children very possibly led to Doyle’s footnote. On this same subject, Ms. Payne writes:

Sometime after his death an impression regarding the sincerity of the poet’s affection for children circulated as the result of a chance paragraph written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the travel notes of what was, I believe, his last American tour. A widely read periodical first published the notes serially, and they later appeared in book form. Sir Arthur wrote me that he had no wish to spread the unfortunate story, which originally he had accepted in good

faith, and he requested his publishers to omit the misleading paragraph in subsequent editions of the book. [There were no additional editions.]

Evidently a wish to be humorous at the expense of the late Mr. Riley, and to appear as an intimate friend, inspired [the Hoosier liar to inform] Sir Arthur that, although the poet wrote so delightfully of children, he greatly disliked them and could not bear to have them near him. If true, it would, of course be a curious and interesting bit of "copy" illuminative of the hypocrisy of a man whose writings were pre-eminently an expression of the most tender affection for childhood. Sir Arthur could not be blamed for accepting, as authentic, the misinformation given him by the Indianapolis man who was a stranger to him, and who assumed such an air of authority.

They were at the grave of the poet, where Sir Arthur had requested to be taken, that he might place some flowers as a tribute to his old acquaintance. Doubtless the opportunity to prattle importantly and to impress a visiting celebrity could not be resisted. In any case, the malicious comment of Sir Arthur's escort might never have attracted such attention had it not been that Mr. Riley was quoted as referring to certain visiting school children as "damn brats." The use of this word was what at once betrayed the story as fictitious, because it so happens that, among real and closest friends, Mr. Riley was known to have a peculiar [aversion] to a number of words which he would never have used in conversation. "Brat" was known to be one of the abhorred collection.

Nor could he have looked out the window, in surprise, and cried: "My God! Here are a bunch of those damn brats coming after me again!" He was at this time an invalid due to a series of strokes during his last years, and no such visit could have been paid him by surprise, as no one attempted to

see him without appointment. In the room in which he invariably received guests, his favorite fireside armchair was distant from the front windows viewing. A view of the entrance to his home would have been difficult. His right side being foreclosed, he remained seated in this chair and would not stroll about the room looking out windows. Furthermore, it eventually transpired that the person who fabricated the story was one who had the slenderest acquaintance with [Riley], having been admitted only by appointment because of a position to discuss a [party] which was being planned in Riley's honor.

Author Meredith Nicholson, in a magazine article [published after the appearance of *Our Second American Adventure*], indignantly denounced the falsehood which had victimized Sir Arthur, and, naturally, every one else who knew Mr. Riley, felt similarly. Nicholson, as one of Riley's closest friends stated in a Metropolitan Magazine review of Doyle's comments, that, "They are preposterous. I knew Riley as well if not better than any of Doyle's acquaintances could possibly have known him and I would stake anything on the untruth of the statement. In the first place, if it were only a question of the words, I would say that Riley never uttered them, for in all the years I knew him I never knew him to speak of a child as a 'brat'. More than that, he didn't think of them in such a way." That outsiders accepted it as truth is unfortunately often evident. (Payne, pp 18)

Due to Riley's celebrity, this story was reported far and wide. To illustrate, a brief report was included in the December 17, 1923 issue of the Bismarck Tribune, a newspaper in North Dakota. Though James Whitcomb Riley achieved international fame at the peak of his writing career and his many volumes of poetry are still in print and are still enjoyed by children and adults today, it is only

to his fellow Hoosiers that the aspects of his personality, character and behavior are familiar.

Few, if any, residents of Indiana would have been taken in either then or now, by the lies told to Doyle during his graveyard visit to his old friend. Riley's ability to inform, entertain, and enchant young and old with his dialect poetry was attributable not only to his insightful understanding of the minds of children, but also because of his great love for them.

Immediately following Riley's death, his dear friends George Ade, Meredith Nicholson, and Booth Tarkington appeared at the Lockerbie Street House and arranged with the financial assistance of William Fortune, a wealthy Indianapolis businessman, to purchase the building to be kept as a memorial. The James Whitcomb Riley Memorial Association which they formed has created many memorials to Riley throughout the state of Indiana.

It is unfortunate that the identity of the perpetrator of this incident has been lost to the ravages of time. Since Ms. Payne alludes to his "slenderest acquaintance" with Riley, and the circumstances of their meeting, we may deduce that she knew the man's name, but chose to save him from further embarrassment. It was, after all, a kinder and gentler age.

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