

LIFE STANDS STILL WHEN YOU'RE BURIED AT CROWN HILL

I don't get released from Crown Hill very often, but this seemed like an occasion that would be beneficial to me for several reasons. Life gets boring at Crown Hill so when the invitation came from this fellow, Ryder, who impersonates me, to appear at the 130th Annual end-of-the-season formal dinner of The Indianapolis Literary Club, I readily accepted, particularly since Ryder said he would pay the \$35 dinner cost. Thirty-five dollars! My God, how can you afford it? The dinner cost in 1880 was 50 cents.

Being invited as a 30 year-old poet to join the Indianapolis Literary Club in 1880, the 3rd year of its existence, was an honor beyond my expectations. These were business and professional leaders of Indianapolis, all older than I. Only three years before, I was disgraced and lost my job at the Anderson "Democrat" by the "Leonainie" incident. To prove a point, I wrote the Leonainie poem in the style of Edgar Allen Poe who ironically died the day I was born. Together with a fellow journalist from Kokomo, we concocted the story that the poem was found written in the flyleaf of a book, signed with initials "E.A.P.," and recently discovered in Kokomo. The discovery was widely publicized. Critics disagreed as to its authenticity. We

finally admitted the hoax when the writer of a Poe biography posted a bond to see the book for comparison of Poe's handwriting.

The embarrassment turned out to be the turning point of my career as a poet. Indiana newspapers started publishing my poetry because of my notoriety. Also, my appearances on stages and opera houses around the state began to happen, including readings before the Indianapolis Literary Club in both 1878 and 1879, before I was invited into membership.

One of the poems I read before the Literary Club was "The Little Town of Tailholt" -- a one-blink town, near the Hancock/Shelby County line -- in the words of one of its proud residents:

**THE LITTLE TOWN
O' TAILHOLT**

**You kin boast about yer cities, and their stiddy growth and
size,
And brag about yer County-seats, and business enterprise,
And railroads, and factories, and all sich foolery
But the little Town o' Tailholt is big enough fer me!
You kin harp about yer churches, with their steeples in the
clouds,
And gas about yer graded streets, and blow about yer crowds;
You kin talk about yer "*theaters*," and all you've got to see
But the little Town o' Tailholt is *show* enough fer me!**

**They hain't no *style* in our townhit's little-like and small
They hain't no "*churches*," nuther,-jes' the meetin'-house is
all;
They's no sidewalks, to speak ofbut the highway's allus free,
And the little Town o' Tailholt is wide enough fer me!
Some finds it discommodin'-like, I'm willing to admit
To hev but one post-office, and a womern keepin' hit,
And the drug-store, and shoe-shop, and grocery, all three
But the little Town o' Tailholt is handy 'nough fer me!
You kin smile and turn yer nose up, and joke and hev yer fun,
And laugh and holler "Tail-holts is better holts'n none!"
Ef the city suits you better, w'y hit's where you'd ort'o be
But the little Town o' Tailholt's good enough fer me!**

When I signed on with the Western Lyceum Bureau in the early 1880's to go on the lecture circuit, I gained fame and notoriety but became a prisoner of my agent, often performing in different cities six days a week.

Recognition came to me in 1887 when I received an invitation from the International Copyright League via James Russell Lowell to appear in New York City's Chickering Hall with other well-known Eastern authors such as Mark Twain, William Dean Howell and George Washington Cable, for two days of Author Readings. As a newcomer I was honored to be the only one

asked by Lowell to read a second day. Here is one of my favorites which I gave on the second day.

NOTHIN' TO SAY

Nothin' to say, my daughter! Nothin' at all to say!
Gyrls that's in love, I've noticed, giner'ly has their way!
Yer mother did, afore you, when her folks objected to me
Yit here I am and here you air! and yer motherwhere is
she?
You look lots like yer mother: purty much same in size;
And about the same complected; and favor about the eyes:
Like her, too, about livin' here, because *she* couldn't stay;
It'll most seem like you was dead like her!but I hain't got
nothin' to say!
She left you her little Biblewrit yer name acrost the page
And left her ear-bobs fer you, of ever you come of age;
I've alluz kep' 'em and gyuarded 'em, but of yer goin' away
Nothin' to say, my daughter! Nothin' at all to say!
You don't rickollect her, I reckon? No: you wasn't a year old
then!
And now yerhow old *air* you? W'y, child, not "*twenty*"!
When?
And yer nex' birthday's in Aprile? and you want to git married
that day?
I wisht yer mother was livin'!but I hain't got nothin' to say!
Twenty year! and as good a gyrl as parent ever found!

**There's a straw ketched on to yer dress thereI'll bresh it
off-turn round.**

(Her mother was jes' twenty when us two run away.)

Nothin' to say, my daughter! Nothin' at all to say!

I suppose I differ from other authors on stage by trying to act or become the person or persons whose story I tell in rhyme and often in dialect. Sir Henry Irving, the noted British actor, gave me the ultimate compliment when he said that America lost a great actor when I refused to make that my life work. In truth, I find much more satisfaction in composing rather than reading poetry.

In 1890 my indentured servant contract, which I foolishly signed, ended. I was getting \$40-60 a night from my lecture income of \$1000. I was a wreck and needed recovery and support.

You provided me with that support. The Indianapolis Literary Club planned a large reception in my honor. With distinguished members such as President Harrison, Charles Fairbanks, John New and William Fishback supporting me, the public gave me their support as well.

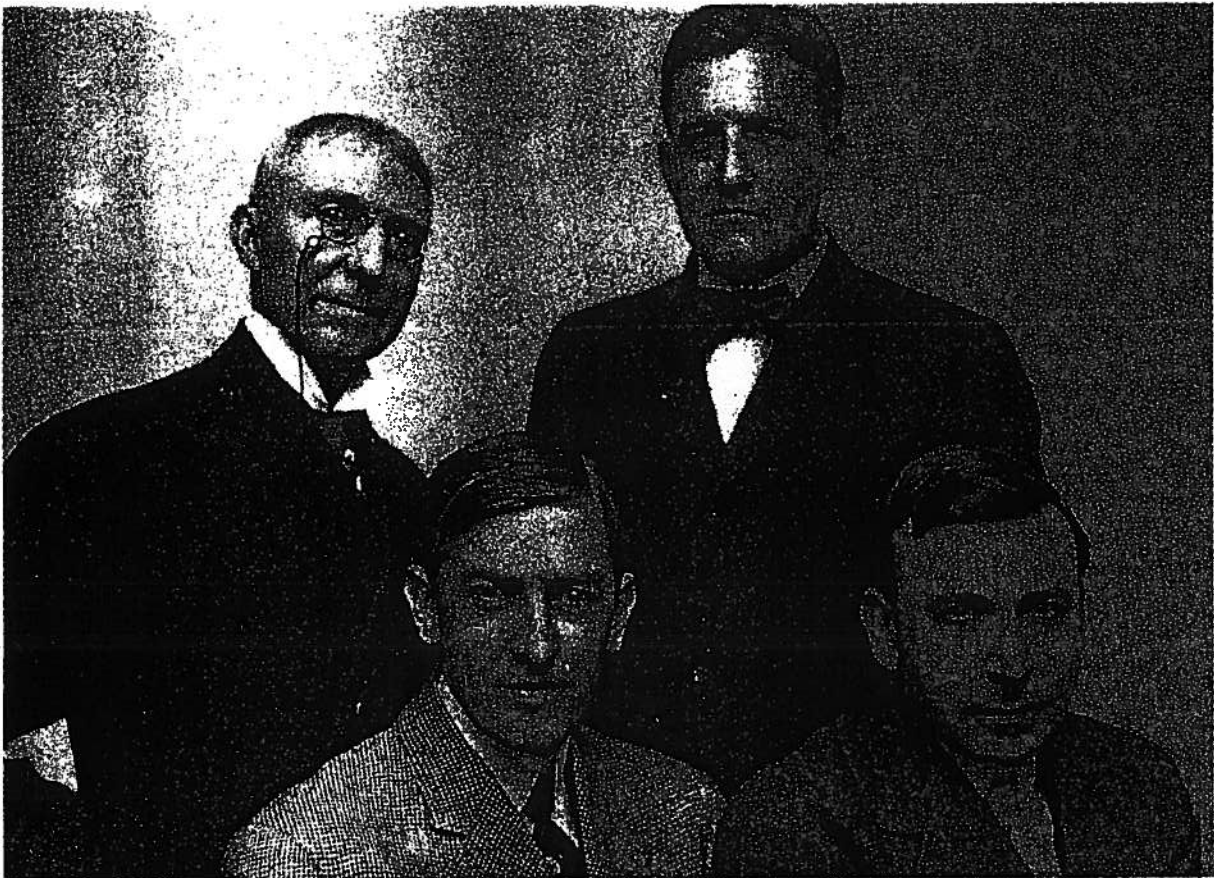
In the '90's, but with my brother-in-law, Henry Eitel as my financial advisor, I continued stage readings, but at a reduced level, and with broader

geographical exposures (the West Coast and England). Rudyard Kipling and I had established a writer's relationship in admiration of each other's works. Although we didn't meet in England, we continued our friendship and exchange of books. When he later visited the U.S., we finally met in N.Y.C. We exchanged poetry. Here is what Kipling wrote to me upon receipt of my new "Rhymes of Childhood" book"

**Your trail runs to the westward
And mine to my own place;
There is water between our lodges,
And I have not seen your face.
But since I have read your verses
'Tis easy to guess the rest.
-- Because in the hearts of the children
There is neither East nor West.**

In the year 1902, I was near the end of my touring the country to give my readings to what had become an adoring public who filled the auditoriums where I appeared and bought my books by the thousands. At the persuasion of Charles W. Fairbanks, later to be Vice President Fairbanks, and by my Indiana literary friends, I agreed to a two-night stand at English's Theatre on the NW quadrant of the Circle. It was an emotional experience for me and the two audiences, packed to overflowing.

Along with Lew Wallace, Charles Major, George McCutcheon, Evaleen Stein and Mary Catherwood were my three closest literary giants, Meredith Nicholson, George Ade and Booth Tarkington. Here is a photograph of the four of us taken two years later in 1904.



James Whitcomb Riley

Meredith Nicholson

George Ade

Booth Tarkington

Of those three, I knew Tarkington the longest. Twenty years my junior, Booth Tarkington was a 12 year-old in 1881 when I visited the Tarkington family on Sundays (when I was not touring) because of my friendship with his older sister Haute (as in Terre Haute). I became a child again in the presence of young Booth. I taught him how to draw. And when he was 16 I asked him what he would draw as an illustration for my new book entitled "The Boss Man." He drew an imp which I used in the book's front cover. With Haute as his negotiator with would-be publishers, you know the rest of the story of Booth Tarkington's remarkable publishing career. What you may not know is that Booth illustrated two other of my books before he wrote novels.

Meredith Nicholson was three years older than Booth Tarkington. When he was 19, some of his poetry was published by the Indianapolis Journal where I was employed. Impressed, I paid a visit to Nicholson where he worked as a clerk in a law firm. Thus began a lasting friendship, first as poets and then, after 1900 with his publishing a history called "Hoosiers," a successful career as a novelist. A later chapter of his career was as Ambassador in South and Central America. His essay on me published in the December issue of the Atlantic Monthly after my death in 1916 is a personal tribute which I regard as my eulogy. For more on Nicholson, read your member, Ralph Gray's definitive biography of Meredith Nicholson.

George Ade and I became friends when he was in Chicago as a feature writer for the Chicago News and an author of "Fables in Slang" and a slew of plays that all became box office hits. A much more social man than I, George Ade and I basked in each other's company. He wrote some nice things about me which enhanced our friendship.

But back to the two-night stand at the English Theatre in 1902. It was a highlight of my stage career to be back in Indianapolis with people I love and who love me. These were two electric evenings. After three encores the second night, I said, "I will give one more sketch, and if that does not remove the audience, we will fumigate the hall." And that is what I say to you.

My last sketch is for the heavily weighted medical doctors in the Indianapolis Literary Club.

DOC SIFERS

Of all the doctors I could cite you to in this-'ere town
Doc Sifers is. my favorite, jes' take him up and down!
Count in the Bethel Neighborhood, and Rollins, and Big Bear
And Sifers' standin' jes' as good as ary doctor's there!
There's old Doc Wick, and Glenn, and Hall, and Wurgler, and
 McVeigh,
But I'll buck Sifers 'g'inst 'em all and down 'em any day!
Most old Wick ever knowed, I s'pose, was *whisky*! Wurgler
 well,
He et morphine-ef actions shows, and facts' reliable!
But Sifersthough he ain't no sot, he's got his faults; and yit
When you *git* Sifers onc't 'you've got a *doctor*, don't fergit!

He ain't much at his office, er his house, er anywhere
You'd natchurly think certain fer to ketch the feller there.
But don't blame Doc: he's got all sorts o' cur'ous notions
The feller says, his odd-come-shorts, like smart men mostly
has.

He'll more'n like be potter'n' 'round the Blacksmith Shop; er
in

Some back lot, spadin' up the ground, er gradin' it ag'in.
'Er at the work bench, planin' things; er buildin' little traps
To ketch birds; galvenizin' rings; er graftin' plums, perhaps.
Make anything! good as the best! a gun-stocker a flute;
He whittled out a set o' chesstmen onc't o' laurel root.
Durin' the Army got his trade o' surgeon there I own
To-day a finger-ring Doc made out of a Sesesh bone!
An' glued a fiddle onc't fer mejes' all so busted you
'D 'a' threwed the thing away, but he fixed her as good as new!
And take Doc, now, in *ager*, say, er *biles*, er *rheumatiz*,
And. all afflictions thataway, and he's the best they is!
Er jandersmilksick I don't keerk-yore anything he
tries

A abscess; getherin' in yer yeer; er granilated eyes!
There was the Widder Daubenspeck they all give up fer dead;
A blame cowbuncle on her neck, and clean out of her head!
First had this doctor, what's-his-name, from "Pudblesburg,"
and then

This little red-head, "Burnin' Shame" they call him Dr.
Glenn.

And they "consulted" on the case, and claimed she'd haf to
die,

Ijes' was joggin' by the place, and heerd her dorter cry,
And stops and calls her to the fence; and I-says-I, "Let me
Send Sifersbet you fifteen cents he'll k-yore her!" "Well,"
says she,

"Light out!" she says: And, lipp-tee-cut, I loped in town, and
rid

'Bout two hours more to find him, but I kissed him when I
did!

He was down at the Gunsmith Shop a-stuffin' birds! Says he,
"My sulky's broke." Says I, "You hop right on and ride with
me!"

I got him there. "Well, Aunty, ten days k'yores you," Sifers
said,
"But what's yer idy livin' when yer jes' as good as dead?"
And there's Dave Banksjes' back from war without a
scratchone day
Got ketched up in a sickle-bar, a reaper runaway.
His shoulders, arms, and hands and legs jes' sawed in strips!
And Jake
Dunn starts fer Sifersfeller begs to shoot him fer God-sake.
Doc, 'course, was gone, but he had penned the notice, "At Big
Bear
Be back to-morry; Gone to 'tend the Bee Convention there."
But Jake, he tracked himrid and rode the whole endurin'
night!
And 'bout the time the roosters crowed they both hove into
sight.
Doc had to amputate but 'greed to save Dave's arms, and swore
He could 'a' saved his legs of he'd be'n there the day before.
Like when his wife's own mother died 'fore Sifers could be
found,
And all the neighbors fer and wide a' all jes' chasin' round;
Tel finallyI had to laughits jes' like Doc, you know,
Was learnin' fer to telegraph, down at the old deepo.
But all they're faultin' Sifers fer, there's none of 'em kin say
He's biggoty, er keerless, er not posted any way;
He ain't built on the common plan of doctors nowadays,
He's jes' a great, big, brainy manthat's where the trouble
lays!

**Delivered to the Indianapolis Literary Club by James Whitcomb Riley
aka Henry C. Ryder on May 14, 2008 at the Annual Meeting.**