


***JAMES
WHITCOMB
RILEY***



***THE OLD
SOLDIER'S
STORY:
POEMS AND
PROSE
SKETCHES***



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James Whitcomb Riley

The Old Soldier's Story: Poems and Prose Sketches

EAN 8596547017509

DigiCat, 2022

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THE OLD SOLDIER'S STORY

AS TOLD BEFORE THE NEW ENGLAND SOCIETY IN NEW YORK CITY

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SINCE we have had no stories to-night I will venture, Mr. President, to tell a story that I have heretofore heard at nearly all the banquets I have ever attended. It is a story simply, and you must bear with it kindly. It is a story as told by a friend of us all, who is found in all parts of all countries, who is immoderately fond of a funny story, and who, unfortunately, attempts to tell a funny story himself—one that he has been particularly delighted with. Well, he is not a story-teller, and especially he is not a funny story-teller. His funny stories, indeed, are oftentimes touchingly pathetic. But to such a story as he tells, being a good-natured man and kindly disposed, we have to listen, because we do not want to wound his feelings by telling him that we have heard that story a great number of times, and that we have heard it ably told by a great number of people from the time we were children. But, as I say, we can not hurt his feelings. We can not stop him. We can not kill him; and so the story generally proceeds. He selects a very old story always, and generally tells it in about this fashion:—

I heerd an awful funny thing the other day—ha! ha! I don't know whether I kin git it off er not, but, anyhow, I'll tell it to you. Well!—le's see now how the fool-thing goes. Oh, yes!—W'y, there was a feller one time—it was durin' the army, and this feller that I started in to tell you about was in

the war, and—ha! ha!—there was a big fight a-goin' on, and this feller was in the fight, and it was a big battle and bullets a-flyin' ever' which way, and bombshells a-bu'stin', and cannon-balls a-flyin' 'round promiskus; and this feller right in the midst of it, you know, and all excited and het up, and chargin' away; and the fust thing you know along come a cannon-ball and shot his head off—ha! ha! ha! Hold on here a minute!—no sir; I'm a-gittin' ahead of my story; no, no; it didn't shoot his *head* off—I'm gittin' the cart before the horse there—shot his *leg* off; that was the way; shot his leg off; and down the poor feller drapped, and, of course, in that condition was perfectly he'pless, you know, but yit with presence o' mind enough to know that he was in a dangerous condition ef somepin' wasn't done fer him right away. So he seen a comrade a-chargin' by that he knowed, and he hollers to him and called him by name—I disremember now what the feller's name was....

Well, that's got nothin' to do with the story, anyway; he hollers to him, he did, and says, "Hello, there," he says to him; "here, I want you to come here and give me a lift; I got my leg shot off, and I want you to pack me back to the rear of the battle"—where the doctors always is, you know, during a fight—and he says, "I want you to pack me back there where I can get med-dy-cinal attention er I'm a dead man, fer I got my leg shot off," he says, "and I want you to pack me back there so's the surgeons kin take keer of me." Well—the feller, as luck would have it, ricko-nized him and run to him and throwed down his own musket, so's he could pick him up; and he stooped down and picked him up and kindo' half-way shouldered him and half-way helt him

betwixt his arms like, and then he turned and started back with him—ha! ha! ha! Now, mind, the fight was still a-goin' on—and right at the hot of the fight, and the feller, all excited, you know, like he was, and the soldier that had his leg shot off gittin' kindo fainty like, and his head kindo' stuck back over the feller's shoulder that was carryin' him. And he hadn't got more'n a couple o' rods with him when another cannon-ball come along and tuk his head off, shore enough!—and the curioust thing about it was—ha! ha!—that the feller was a-packin' him didn't know that he had been hit ag'in at all, and back he went—still carryin' the deceased back—ha! ha! ha!—to where the doctors could take keer of him—as he thought. Well, his cap'n happened to see him, and he thought it was a ruther cur'ous p'ceedin's—a soldier carryin' a dead body out o' the fight—don't you see? And so he hollers at him, and he says to the soldier, the cap'n did, he says, "Hullo, there; where you goin' with that thing?" the cap'n said to the soldier who was a-carryin' away the feller that had his leg shot off. Well, his head, too, by that time. So he says, "Where you goin' with that thing?" the cap'n said to the soldier who was a-carryin' away the feller that had his leg shot off. Well, the soldier he stopped—kinder halted, you know, like a private soldier will when his presidin' officer speaks to him—and he says to him, "W'y," he says, "Cap, it's a comrade o' mine and the pore feller has got his leg shot off, and I'm a-packin' him back to where the doctors is; and there was nobody to he'p him, and the feller would 'a' died in his tracks—er track ruther—if it hadn't a-been fer me, and I'm a-packin' him back where the surgeons can take keer of him; where he can get medical attendance—er

his wife's a widder!" he says, "'cause he's got his leg shot off!" Then *Cap'n* says, "You blame fool you, he's got his *head* shot off." So then the feller slacked his grip on the body and let it slide down to the ground, and looked at it a minute, all puzzled, you know, and says, "W'y, he told me it was his leg!" Ha! ha! ha!

SOMEPI'N COMMON-LIKE

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SOMEPI'N 'at's common-like, and good
And plain, and easy understood;
Somepi'n 'at folks like me and you
Kin understand, and relish, too,
And find some sermint in 'at hits
The spot, and sticks and benefits.

We don't need nothin' extry fine;
'Cause, take the run o' minds like mine,
And we'll go more on good horse-sense
Than all your flowery eloquence;
And we'll jedge best of honest acts
By Nature's statement of the facts.

So when you're wantin' to express
Your misery, er happiness,
Er anything 'at's wuth the time
O' telling in plain talk er rhyme—
Jes' sort o' let your subject run
As ef the Lord wuz listenun.

MONSIEUR LE SECRETAIRE

[JOHN CLARK RIDPATH]

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MON cher Monsieur le Secretaire,
Your song flits with me everywhere;
It lights on Fancy's prow and sings
Me on divinest voyagings:
And when my ruler love would fain
Be laid upon it—high again
It mounts, and hugs itself from me
With rapturous wings—still dwindlingly—
On!—on! till but a *ghost* is there
Of song, Monsieur le Secretaire!

A PHANTOM

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LITTLE baby, you have wandered far away,
And your fairy face comes back to me to-day,
But I can not feel the strands
Of your tresses, nor the play
Of the dainty velvet-touches of your hands.

Little baby, you were mine to hug and hold;
Now your arms cling not about me as of old—
O my dream of rest come true,

And my richer wealth than gold,
And the surest hope of Heaven that I knew!

O for the lisp long silent, and the tone
Of merriment once mingled with my own—
For the laughter of your lips,
And the kisses plucked and thrown
In the lavish wastings of your finger-tips!

Little baby, O as then, come back to me,
And be again just as you used to be,
For this phantom of you stands
All too cold and silently,
And will not kiss nor touch me with its hands.

IN THE CORRIDOR

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AH! at last alone, love!
Now the band may play
Till its sweetest tone, love,
Swoons and dies away!
They who most will miss us
We're not caring for—
Who of them could kiss us
In the corridor?

Had we only known, dear,
Ere this long delay,
Just how all alone, dear,
We might waltz away,

Then for hours, like this, love,
We are longing for,
We'd have still to kiss, love,
In the corridor!

Nestle in my heart, love;
Hug and hold me close—
Time will come to part, love,
Ere a fellow knows;
There! the Strauss is ended—
Whirl across the floor:
Isn't waltzing splendid
In the corridor?

LOUELLA WAINIE

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LOUELLA WAINIE! where are you?
Do you not hear me as I cry?
Dusk is falling; I feel the dew;
And the dark will be here by and by:
I hear no thing but the owl's hoo-hoo!
Louella Wainie! where are you?

Hand in hand to the pasture bars
We came loitering, Lou and I,
Long ere the fireflies coaxed the stars
Out of their hiding-place on high.
O how sadly the cattle moo!
Louella Wainie! where are you?