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A Soldier's Burial That Made a Native Holiday

Ponce, Puerto Rico, Aug. 5—A company of regular infantry marched into the plaza at Ponce, halted, stacked arms and broke ranks. In the cool shade of the trees the men loafed carelessly while the natives, always intensely interested in the soldiers, gathered near and began their comic, good-natured pantomime. The lazy, still, tropic afternoon drifted slowly, hour by hour, with only the rumble of passing carriages to interrupt its profound serenity.

The captain of the regulars went down the street to where, before the door of a house, waited a hearse. There was a carriage containing two American women and on the pavement stood a little group of officers, with their battered old hats in their hands. The natives began to accumulate in a crowd, and from them arose a high-pitched babble of gossip concerning this funeral. They stretched their necks, pointed, dodged those who would interfere with their view. Amid the chatter the Americans displayed no signs of hearing it. They remained calm, stoical, superior, wearing the curious, grim dignity of people who are burying their dead.

The company of regulars swung down the street, drew up in front of the house, and presented arms with a clash. Six big, blue-shirted privates paced out with the coffin. The throng edged up suddenly, dodging and peering. The little band of Americans seemed like beings of another world, with their gently mournful, impassive faces, during this display of monkeyish interest.

The cortege moved off, preceded, accompanied, followed by the crowd of natives. Ponce, a large city, drowsed on peacefully in the sun, and the passing of the small procession brought no particular emotion to its mind. In the suburbs women hurried out to the porches of the little wooden houses, and naked babies, swollen with fruit, strutted out to see, sucking their thumbs. A man walking directly behind the hearse was hailed interrogatively from a distance. He answered loudly, waving his arm toward the graveyard.

A girl called greetings to some friends in the crowd. Suddenly, close to the road, a woman broke out in a raucous tirade at some of her children. The crowd still babbled. All these sounds beat like waves upon the hearse; noisy, idle, senseless waves beating upon the hearse, the invulnerable ship of the indifferent dead man. And the Americans, moving along behind it, were still calm, stoical, superior. The spray of the chatter whirled against them and they were bronze, bronze men going to bury their dead, and the humming and swishing and swashing were only as important as the rattling of so many pebbles in a tin box.

The graveyard was circled by a high wall which was surmounted by broken bottles sunk into the mortar. The interior presented the appearance of a misused potato patch were it not for the gaunt wooden crosses which upreared here and there. The crowd of natives ploughed through each other in order to reach the gate.

The troops marched forward and faced up sharply before an open grave. A chaplain appeared. The Americans, barring the infantry, stood bareheaded. The natives, noting this, took off their hats. There was a moment of intense expectancy.

“I am the resurrection and the life—” The chaplain’s words were quite smothered in the ejaculations, inquiries, comments which came over the wall where many people were pushing toward the gate. An enterprising lot had climbed a bit of old wall which overlooked the cemetery wall and upon it they shrilled like parrots. The chaplain, beset, badgered, drowned out, went on imperturbably.

The first volley of the firing party created a great convulsion in the crowd outside, who could not see the proceedings and were taken by surprise. As the sound crashed toward the hills many jumped like frightened rabbits and then a moment later the whole mob, seeing the joke, burst into wild laughter.

A bugler stepped forward. Into a medley of sounds such as would come from a combined baseball game and clambake he sent the call of “taps,” that extraordinary wail of mourning and song of rest and peace, the soldier’s good-bye, his night, the fall of eternal darkness, the end.

The sad, sad, slow voice of the bugle called out over the grave, a soul appealing to the sky, a call of earthly anguish and heavenly tranquility, a solemn heart-breaking song. But if this farewell of the soldier to the sky, the flowers, the bees and all life was heard by the natives their manner did not betray it.