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The Porto Rican "Straddle"

Juana Diaz, Puerto Rico, Aug. 10—The American soldier alludes often to the natives here as handshakers. It is his way of expressing a cynical suspicion regarding all the "viva Americanos" business that he hears and sees in this city of Ponce. One cannot define a type at once when the type has just been captured, and knows that it must be very, very good, although the same may be foreign to its ordinary manners. It is correct enough that the American soldier should be suspicious; there is more or less in the handshaking idea.

Johnson, one of the Journal's correspondents here, and myself had recently an opportunity to see the Porto Rican when he was right in the middle and couldn't tell which way to dodge. The incident was instructive.

Two companies of the Sixteenth Pennsylvania Infantry at that time formed the advance of the army along the main military road. They were encamped just beyond the town of Juana Diaz, which is nine miles from Ponce. We heard that General Ernst, the brigade commander, was going to reinforce these pickets with five more companies and then extend the American advance five more miles into the hills. When we reached Juana Diaz we could see the men slinging their kits, preparatory to marching, and in the little hotel facing the plaza and the old church the General and his staff were just finishing their luncheon. We thought it was only a question of minutes, so we passed them and went on along the road which the troops were to take. We were under the impression that an advance party had gone on ahead. However, it was not long before a peasant's answers convinced us that Johnson, mounted on a bicycle, was the sure-enough vanguard of the American army. His immediate support bestrode a long, low, rakish plug, with a maximum speed of seven knots. We had no desire to win fame by any two-handed attack on the Spanish army, so, on receiving the peasant's information, we slowed down to a pace that was little more than a concession to one man's opinion of the other.

The road, beautifully hard, wound through two thick lines of trees. We circled spurs of the mountains, the grass upon them being yellowish green in the afternoon sunlight. We crossed tumbling brooks. With the palm trees out, it was a scene such as can be found in summertime in southern New York. There was no man nor beast to be seen ahead on the road nor in the fields. We learned afterward that we were about two miles and a half ahead of the American scouts, the difficulties attending the work of the flanking parties causing the march to be extremely slow. Rounding a corner we came suddenly upon a country store. Chickens and pigs scouted in the road and in the yard of the house across the road. On the steps of the store, on a fence, on boxes and barrels, and leaning against trees were about thirty men dressed in civilian garb. As we appeared they turned their heads, and as we rode slowly up every eye swung to our pace. They preserved an absolute, stony silence. Now, here were men between the lines. The Americans were on one side and the Spaniards were on the other. They knew nothing of any American advance. They were, as far as they knew, on strictly independent ground, and could drop on either side of the fence. Americanism was here elective.

We drew up and looked at them. They looked at us. Not a word was said.

The native in the zone already ours is always quick to greet the American with a salute or with hat in hand. He cries out “Bueno!” at every opportunity, meaning, “I am glad you have come.” When he is a crowd he is forever yelling “Viva Americanos!” When he is one he is forever nodding and smiling with absolute frankness and telling you that he prefers the Americans by all means. He is busy at it day and night.

But here was a contrast. This reception was new to our experience. These men were as tongue-tied and sullen as a lot of burglars met in the daytime. Not one of them could endure a straight glance, and if we turned suddenly we were likely to catch two of them whispering.

Time passed slowly, with no change in the situation. We remained in the road and grouped in front of the store was the crowd, with their strange foreign eyes moving in shifty glances. The situation got to be insupportable. It was no fun to stand there with an obligation of stoicism upon us and withstand this business of moving on a stage before an audience of thirty hostile dramatic critics. We finally developed a plan. We would concentrate our glance on one man and talk about him in English, ominously.

“Look at that brute on the barrel there. He certainly is glad to see us. Look at him, will you?”

“Ah, the whole crowd of ’em are Spanish—that’s easy. Never mind. Let ’em wait. We’ll know how it is later. Just size up the storekeeper. He’ll be grinning, and charging the boys two prices tomorrow. But look at him, now. Never mind. We’ll get even.”

“Look at that Willie in the gray coat. See him stare back at us. Never mind. We’ll fix him.”

A half-hour passed as slowly as time in the sick room. Hardly a man in the crowd moved out of his place during this time. We called to the storekeeper for some cigarettes, and he came and handed them to us with a manner that was subtly offensive enough to be artistic. Some girls came out on the porch of the house and surveyed us impassively. A man talking with another glanced at us, and spat in a way that left a feeling in our minds that perhaps it was not altogether unlikely that he was referring insultingly to us.

We could not tell whether these people were all pro-Spanish Porto Ricans or whether a part of them were really pro-American but afraid yet to give themselves away to the others or whether they were all simply timid people who wanted to play both ends against the middle until they were absolutely sure who were to be supreme. At any rate, they were a sulky, shifty, bad lot, with the odds strongly in favor of Spanish leanings. They had nothing but distrust in their eyes, and nothing but dislike in their ways.

Up the cool, shady country road toward Juana Diaz appeared a figure. It was a quarter of a mile away, but no one could mistake the slouched service hat, the blue shirt, the wide cartridge belt, the blue trousers, the brown leggings, the rifle held lightly in the hollow of the left arm. It was the first American scout.

He stood for almost two minutes, looking in our direction. Then he moved on toward us. When he had come ten paces four more men, identical in appearance, showed behind him. The crowd around the front of the store could not see them. Their first information was when a young American sergeant galloped up on a native pony. Then two of them mounted their horses quietly and started off in the direction of the Spanish lines. The young sergeant cried to us:

“Well, say, I guess I won’t have that. Those Indians riding off to give us away!”

He galloped hastily down the road and we piled after him, but the two Porto Ricans came back docilely enough.

The five soldiers on foot arrived opposite the store. They did not stop, paying little heed to anyone. With their passing the Porto Ricans began to brace up and smile. Then appeared the support of the scouts and flankers, forty men blocked in a solid wall of blue-black, up the road. The Porto Ricans looked cheerful. After the support had gone on there was a considerable pause. Then six companies of Pennsylvania infantry marched past, with a rattling of canteens and shuffling of feet. The Porto Ricans looked happy. By the time the general clattered forward with his staff they were happy, excessively polite, overwhelming every one with attentions and shyly confessing their everlasting devotion to the United States. The proprietor of the store dug up a new English and Spanish lexicon and proudly semaphored his desire to learn the new language of Porto Rico. There was not a scowl anywhere; all were suffused with joy. We told them they were a lot of honest men. And, after all, who knows?