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Sousa, Et Cetera

Alas! For The March King

The bank down at River View is still playing Sousa marches, a sign of fidelity almost pathetic in this iconoclastic age. Ten or 15 years ago, all the bands in Christendom were braying those marches day in and day out, and all the orchestras and piano-thumpers were helping. But no more! Today the brisk measures of Sousa are heard as rarely as the waltzes of Gung'l. No doubt the composer's own band still plays them, and now and then of course, you will hear one of them coming from an old-fashioned and decrepit hand-organ, but they are no longer the universal favorites they were upon a time—say, in 1896.

During the two or three years before the Spanish American Sousa was the March King in truth. Whenever news came that he had a new march upon the stocks there was excitement throughout the habitable universe, and band leaders devised all sorts of schemes for getting early copies. And when the piano score was ready—what a scramble there was at the music counters! In the show-windows of Willig's old music store, on Charles Street, near Baltimore, a big sign always announced its coming two or three days in advance, and on the morning of the great day there would be a big crowd waiting in line.

I don't know how many copies of each new march Baltimore managed to absorb, but it must have been fully 10,000. All of the music stores had special Sousa counters, and every amateur pianist in town owned a complete set of the marches, beginning with "The Chicago Belles" and "The Washington Post" and ending with the very latest. At all public and private leg-shakings fully half of the dances were of Souses parentage. More than once, indeed, the few waltzes upon the program were ruthlessly abandoned, and the whole evening was given over to two-steps. There was even a legend, back in those gay days, of a hall at which the only music had been "The Directorate," then a fascinating novelty. It was played, so the Homers of the time reported, not less than 43 times in the course of the evening. The story of course, presents difficulties, but all the same it is not entirely incredible.

The Glorious Summer of 1898

"The Stars and Stripes Forever" lifted Sousa to the estate and dignity of a god. It came just at the time Uncle Sam began to oil his ancient bird gun in anticipation of a duel with the accursed Don. When the *Maine* was blown up, the emotions of the moment demanded thrilling military music and "The Stars and Stripes Forever" was fortunately at hand. Throughout the electric summer of 1898 it was played from dawn to dark by a hundred thousand bands. One breakfasted to it, lunched to it, dined to it. It came floating out of the open windows of every home that could boast a piano, a melodeon or an accordion. The boys whistled it on the streets,

maudlin words were fitted to it, and the dear girls bawled them on excursion boats. It was even played in the churches.

In the end of course the public got its fill. There came a time, indeed, when the first notes of “The Stars and Stripes Forever” brought forth groans of protest. And with that time came the beginning of Sousa’s decline. The marches following his patriotic masterpiece never enjoyed the popularity of those that had preceded it. It is difficult at the moment even to recall their names. One of them, if I remember rightly, was called “Hands Across the Sea” and a lively tuneful march it was. Another was “King Cotton.” Yet another was—but the names grow dim. As marches, they were fully as good as “The Beau Ideal” and “The Directorate,” but the day of Sousa was passing and so they missed fire.

A Sousa Revival?

At present the March King seems to be resting on his laurels. I have heard of no new march from his pen for two or three years. He is still touring the country with his band, and no doubt it still plays the old marches, but apparently they are to have no successors. It is a pity, for the world is always in need of stirring marches and no living man can write them as well as Sousa.

In his palmy days every last band leader in the world tried to copy his style, but not many succeeded. Their best efforts sounded like weak echoes of the Master. He was solitary and unapproachable—an overtowering and lonesome colossus of rhythm. The others could make us beat time with our feet, but he alone could make our hearts leap and our hair stand on end. Maybe we shall have a revival of the Sousa marches later on. Perhaps “The Washington Post” will delight us, in the dim and misty future, as a novelty. Perhaps we shall pass once more through the tail of the Sousa comet:

Enough of Sousa! We were at River View, listening to the band. It is playing, this year, in a new and enlarged shell somewhat nearer the water than the old one and the result is that there is room in front of it for a larger crowd than of yore, and the fold on the broad desk of the clubhouse can now hear it. As bands go, it is not remarkable. It plays with an honest determination to sound all of the notes, and the gentlemen on the brass side do not spare their lungs, but....

For Two Nickels

But let us but no buts. What would you for so little? It costs nothing to hear the band if you are content to lean against a tree. You pay the United Railways 5 cents to carry you to River View and 5 cents to bring you back, and not another cent need you spend if you don’t want to. But if you spy out a comfortable seat and venture to sit down to the feast of harmony, your eye will quickly fall upon the following sign, nailed bravely to the table before you:

PATRONS OCCUPYING these TABLES
are EXPECTED to PATRONIZE the WAITER
or make room for others that will.

This somewhat impertinent importation from the pleasure parks on the south side of the river spoils the sextet from “Lucia,” played violently with valve trombones. A waiter standing

nearby regards you cynically. It is plain that he has taken your measure. He knows that you will try to escape. He even seems to be preparing to head you off. So you determine to give the lie to his suspicious by ordering a soft crab sandwich. It comes on in a wrapping of greasy paper. No plate. No knife. No fork. Such things apparently do not belong to an *al fresco* feast. You tackle the sandwich with your bare hands and quickly give it up. A soft crab is hard to handle, and if middling cold, hard to eat. So you pay up—and make way for another.

On the deck the chairs are more comfortable and there are gay decorations, but those disconcerting signs are still under your nose. You order a bottle of beer. Nothing doing. It is Sunday night and at River View the liquor laws are enforced with a degree of rigor amounting almost to cruelty to animals. What is to be had? Ginger pop, sarsaparilla, claret lemonade, that awful drug plain lemonade, coffee, tea. You tackle the ginger pop and then adventure upon a tour of the grounds.

Humorists On The Rail

There must be 10,000 Baltimoreans within the gates. Hundreds of young couples are promenading the narrow boardwalk hand in hand, the girls in big hats and high-heeled shoes, the youths in hats with gay ribbons and elegantly creased pantaloons. Romance: On the rickety rail a few score unattached mashers perch like crows exercising their humor upon the girls without beaux. The girls giggle and pass on to the pier. Out there another brigade of humorists takes them in hand.

Further back from the water the youths and maidens of five years ago, married since with bell and book, are wrestling with their progeny. Youngsters of two or three are rubbing pop-corn into their hair: others of even tenderer years are bawling merrily. Still further back thousands of folk crowd about the Venetian gondolas, the photograph gallery, the carousel, the bowling alley, the switchbacks. There are no less than three switchbacks in the park, and two of them of enormous size. They make a lot of noise and do a rushing business.

Down in the shell the band is still playing. The music comes softly through the trees. Suddenly it ceases and lights begin to go out here and there. The crowd comes rushing for the cars.

(Source: Parks Media Center, Iowa State University, microfilm collection)