

The Thrills of 1924- February 26, 1924

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Thrills of 1924

—Strangers talk together and no offense is taken and officers and seamen and men of doubtful trades dance with women of all classes loosely or courteously as the occasion required.

“Ah laid in jail. . .

Mah face turned to the wall

Ah don’ mind bein’ in jail,

But ah don’ like to stay there so long.”

It was the graveyard blues, the colored musicians were singing—a rhymeless thing sometime but full of a strange rhythm as they sang it. Some of the words were unintelligible but you gathered that the song was about a black girl that died, and a murder that was committed, and the philosophical reflections of the unfortunate darkey in jail on life and women.

“Ah went out to the graveyard—and fell down on my knees

Said to that grave-digger, Oh send me back my good gal, please.

But the grave-digger sighed, and looked into mah eye—

‘I’m sorry to tell yuh; Yo’ gal has said her last goodbye.’”

It’s a jagged melody with a monotonous plucking on the stringed instruments, and the darkeys roll their eyes and heads and open their big mouths wide and wail.

This is the sort of thing that makes this Royal street restaurant popular with all classes—the men who come off the ships, street loungers, men and women coming from the theater and the more fashionable restaurants. There is a kick in this primitive music, of course, after the regular jazz of the more ordinary cabarets, but what gives the excitement seeker the real thrill, is sitting at the same table with women of doubtful or no reputation who fill the place every night, and with seamen who talk Spanish and Swedish, and strange jargons which you can’t identify.

Strangers talk together and no offense is taken, and officers and seamen, and men of doubtful trades dance with women of all classes loosely or courteously as the situation requires.

Last night we sat there late at one of the corner tables, observing and fraternizing with our surroundings and it was a good night to be there because there was action and drama aplenty.

Not long after the dinner hour, through the glass paned door which leads into the kitchen you could see two uniformed policemen, comfortably munching sandwiches. They peered in the door, enjoying the music and the mad dancing, and the musicians more bold than we kept singing jovially, over and over again:

“Ah don mind bein’ in jail, but I don’t like to stay there long.”

Probably it’s the musicians themselves who dramatize the place. They sit and watch the room, and are filled with the spirit that permeates it, and they reflect that spirit.

Girls Share in Profits

For instance, there are the girls, who sit there night after night and make their living not only from the men they meet, but from the number of drinks they can induce the customers to buy. They are served ginger ale and they profit fifty-fifty on the liquor which they can induce others to consume. One of these girls is very handsome, of rather ample proportions, and marvelously waved, honey colored hair. She dimples when she smiles, but for some nights her eyes brooded over the room.

We were watching her late that night when a good-looking careless fellow entered the room, smiling at her casually as he did so. Panther-like, she leaped on him before anybody knew what was happening, and after hurling the water tumbler which was before her, picked up the carafe.

Everybody in the room stiffened except the musicians. Women wanted to flee, but feared the flying glasses. Then, too, they were getting the desired kick which led them to the place. The proprietor rushed to the scene, the cooks from the kitchen grinned as they peered out into the restaurant. The dancers stood back and waited for what would come next.

But the musicians! Imperturbably they struck up:

“Frankie went down to the hock shop.
She didn’t go there for fun.
She went to pawn her Sunday clo’es
And get herself a forty-four gun,
To kill her man, what had done her wrong!”

—and went on through the many verses. The room relaxed, everybody breathed more freely and in a moment people began to smile.

Girl Sits Quietly

Everybody was happy again, including the musicians who beamed at the impression they had made, except perhaps, the girl, who sat back quietly, her lip trembling, not hearing the scolding the Italian proprietor was giving her. The man, someone explained had been “going with” her for the last year, and the week before, had married a little girl from his town upstate.

“What she want to act like that for,” he was blustering. “She don’t gain nothing by it. I like

to be with good feelings towards everybody.” But no one listened to him; their sympathies were not with him.

At a long table on one side of the room, made by throwing three tables together, sat a dozen Spaniards talking together, and throwing back their heads with hearty laughs. They were none of them drinking, but they were filled with the joy of living, a spontaneous, pre-carnival hilarity that was infectious. Every now and then when the musicians stopped playing, the Spaniards sang together, Spanish tunes in which you could hear the rattle of the castanets and hear the swish of the dancer’s skirts. The tallest of the men, the one with the most rollicking laugh, had only one eye. He was a bull fighter, someone said, and we gave him our admiration as every one else in the room seemed to do, for we had never seen a toreador before. But we wished that he had worn a wide sash about his waist.

All Ardent Americans

This is a restaurant, which at times can be sordid and maudlin and ugly in every way. But there are some excitement seekers who found a thrill in the sordid and ugly, there were beautiful women who bloom like orchids in an unhealthy and vicious setting. There are even those who find nothing but the morbid in such a place as this restaurant with its chameleon changes of mood.

We have discovered the waiters in a patriotic mood, when Frenchmen, Spaniards and Italians alike, talk with Latin vivacity of the battles they’ve been in, the wounds they’ve received, how they’ve fought in the Phillipines, on the Mexican border, in France and in Italy. For French, Spanish or Italian, they are all ardent Americans, and any patron at the table who can show a soldier’s button, especially the silver one of the disabled veteran, is immediately greeted as “Buddy” and reminiscences begin.

“The head hunters were after me, in the Phillipines,” one was telling. “They’d gotten some of me buddies, and I swore they weren’t going to get me. They’d cook and pass around the brains of a white man, and they claimed that the head of a white man made the heart of a lion.” **Six Out of 175 Escape**

“The stations were too far apart. They could surround us and cut us down.”

“There were 175 of us and only six came out alive.”

“It took six stretcher bearers to get me in. I lay there for twenty-four hours before they found me, and they’d only got me fifty yards, before one of them fell, then the other, and I got a shot in the hip. They needed six stretcher bearers then and finally they came out, and then two more got it.”

Romance and thrill and high adventure! And with drink and music and revelry, in unpretentious surroundings in the old part of the city, where there is the atmosphere of Naples, and Paris and even of Shanghai—what more can women who crave excitement desire.

Tomorrow—The Thrills of Poker.