

# TO QUIET THE SPIRITS.

## Playthings for Negro Ghosts.

### A Queer Custom Observed in Washington.

#### Graves of Deceased Friends Littered With Articles Used in Life.

A curious custom is still observed in an old negro burying-ground in Washington, D. C.—that of placing upon the graves of departed friends and relatives the articles that were most enjoyed, or used by them while living and the bottles containing the residuum of the medicines that were administered during the last illness.

The Mount Zion graveyard, as it is called, lies in the shadow of the beautiful Oak Hill Cemetery, on Georgetown Heights. Both are charmingly situated on rising ground, overlooking Rock creek at its most picturesque point. Separated only by a short stretch of land and a high board fence, the two "silent cities" present the most vivid contrast imaginable.

On one side are soft green lawns, flowering shrubs, graveled walks and magnificent monuments; on the other a rank growth of grass and weeds, wormeaten and discolored wooden headboards, and instead of flowers a miscellaneous jumble of toys, ornaments, tools, etc.

The old, white-haired sexton, in his quaint dialect, gives many amusing obituaries, and explains the significance of certain articles that litter the mounds.

The idea of the negroes in placing them in the cemetery is that they may be within easy reach of the spirits whom they confidently believe revisit the scenes of their earthly sufferings. If they find familiar objects on their graves they confine their manifestations to the cemetery; if not, they haunt the families who have neglected to provide them.

One grave has, instead of a monument, a large wooden hobby-horse, buried to its haunches in the ground. It marked—the sexton said—the last resting-place of one Mr. "Johnsing," who, while living, was the driver of an express wagon. He was extremely fond of his horse, and his widow, who was obliged to sell it, used some of the proceeds to purchase a wooden one. A complete set of harness was provided also, and, to quote the old negro, "Ebery night he hitches and on-hitches dat hoss, and den goes back and layes down again quiet. Ef he didn't have dat to ockerpy 'im he'd haunt de ol' woman."

Often one grave is made to serve for an entire family. One of the most pretentious monuments in the cemetery—a plain marble slab—has carved upon its surface the names of Andrew Johnson and his four children—Erastus, Sophia, Andrew and Washington. "Ob course," said the sexton, commenting on the practice, "I has to dig de first grave deeper, but it's eekernomical an' soshertie in de end."

Most of the inscriptions are real curiosities. With few exceptions they are painted roughly in black on white wooden tablets. Few of them bear any date whatever, and, in the majority of cases, names are not given in full. Nearly all of them were composed and printed by the sexton himself, who modestly deplored the fact that he was not as handy at it as he might be, but the look of pride with which he regarded his handiwork belied the sincerity of his words.

On the grave of a little boy—Groyer Hancock Van Glierf—a high chair and a toy wheelbarrow stand guard. He had been a special pet of the old sexton, and the grass waving over him showed evidences of cultivation in striking contrast to the tangled, neglected growth on either side. The sexton admitted that these objects often disappeared from the graveyard, but scorning the idea that there was any one mean enough to steal from "dead folks" asserted that it was a sign that the spirits were never coming back again, and so had taken them to "fory." The medicine bottles, accompanied in most instances by a glass and spoon, were, he said, placed upon the graves that they might be "finished up."

The old man called attention to the grave of "Aunt Chloe Brown," whom he apostrophized as a "reg'lar terror." On its surface is a large palm-leaf fan. It seems that "Aunt Clo" "uset ter git up in mestin' an' talk an' pray louder 'en anybody else an' deh go home and cut up lively." The chief bone of contention with her was that the rest of the family would insist on eating twice a day. She usually terminated the family repasts when, in her opinion, they lasted long enough, by routing the feasters with a broomstick.

One day while chasing her husband, "who was the patientest nigger alive," she caught her foot in her dress and fell, striking her temple on a sharp stone. When they picked her up she was dead.

"I put de fan on her grave," said the old sexton finishing his recital, "cause ef eber any one went to de hot place, she did, certin shore, an' she'll find it re-freshin' when she comes back in de night."—*New York World.*