

Rambles in Florida

by R. E. C. Stearns

Part 1

Florida, the "Land of Flowers," the enchanted ground wherein it has been said Ponce de Leon sought for the "fountain of perpetual youth," is not far away; the fountain, quite likely, is as remote as ever, but the land which it was said to bless with its ever flowing and rejuvenating waters, can be reached after a journey of a few days from New York, by steamship if the traveler is not unpleasantly affected by a sea-voyage, or, if the apprehension of "rough weather off Hatteras" should make a different route preferable, then by rail to Charleston, thence by steamer over waters generally smooth to Fernandina, stopping on the way at Savannah just long enough to look about and obtain a general idea of the place.

Fernandina, situated on Amelia Island, is the principal town upon the east coast of Florida, and of importance, being the eastern terminus of a line of railway, which connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico. Its population is not far from fifteen hundred. At first sight it is not prepossessing, but a walk about the place reveals many buildings of pleasing architecture hidden among the trees.

Within a small enclosure not far from the landing, "the ...forefather of the hamlet sleeps." Upon a marble stone may be seen the name of

DOMINGO FERNANDEZ,
NATIVE OF VIGO IN GALLICIA, SPAIN.
BORN THE FOURTH DAY OF AUGUST, 1766.
AND DIED THE THIRD DAY OF SEPTEMBER, 1833.
IN THE SIXTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF HIS AGE.

Senor Fernandez, it is presumed, never found the fabled fountain, or, drinking of its waters they were powerless to avert the inevitable doom of man. The morning was pleasant; the sun shone brightly; it lighted up the cross and gave roundness to the skull and bones that are carved above his name. From an oak near by the Spanish moss hung drooping midway to the ground, casting a filmy shadow, and hiding a choir of mocking-birds, who filled the air with music.



Leaving the grave of Fernandez and following the streets, a careful search in the loose sand of which they are composed will disclose fragments of pottery of the size of a penny, perhaps a part of the debris of some aboriginal tribe once camped hereabout, the souvenirs of a race, of whose history how little is known! Farther on is an ancient mound of large size, nearly three hundred yards in circumference. Undisturbed ten years ago its surface was as the builders left it, but its slopes and summit were so changed, through the military purposes for which it was used during the recent civil war, that its original proportions are destroyed, and its former outline obliterated.

About a mile from the town towards the ocean is the lighthouse, built upon somewhat elevated ground, forming with the adjacent buildings and moss-festooned oaks, a bit of highly picturesque and pleasing scenery.

Between the lighthouse and the road to the beach, not far distant, is another mound in the centre of an ancient camping ground, the latter covered with bleaching shells, the remnants of unrecorded clambakes and oyster-feasts. This mound is much smaller than the first, only about one hundred yards in circumference and about fifteen feet in height; it was covered with trees and shrubs, the largest of the former being perhaps nine inches in diameter; their roots penetrating the loose material of which the mound is composed, and in their ramifications wound and twisted among the skeletons of unknown men whose decayed bones crumbled at a touch. Stone implements were found, and in the surrounding field fragments of earthenware less perishable than the hands that made them.

From here to the ocean the path lies through a low and, in some places, dense growth of Saw palmetto, interspersed with one or more species of Cactus. The leaf stalks of the former have sharp points along the edges, hence the name; and the prickly Cactaceae may be considered the porcupines and hedgehogs of the vegetable kingdom. Though painful to the touch and dangerous to the apparel they should not be denounced; many of the Cacti, as well as of the Palmaceae, to which family the Saw palmetto belongs, bear delicious fruit, and some species of Cacti are the feeding parks of the insect, from which the celebrated scarlet dyestuff, known as cochineal, is derived.

Without enlarging upon the merits of the Palms and Cacti, which would require a volume, we will consider the species we have encountered as unworthy representatives of noble families, and proceed upon our way.

It is hard work for either man or beast toiling through shifting sands, but pressing on we soon achieve the summit of the mimic mountain range, which the wind and sea always pile up on the landward side of the shore. Descending the slope we are face

to face with Old Ocean, whose majesty, whether in storm or calm, is ever impressive; the sea is smooth, the surf beats gently on the beach. We pause a while to admire the glories of sky and water; to ponder upon the mysteries of life and form that dwell within the broad blue bosom of the deep; to peer into the hazy beauty of the atmosphere which hangs like a curtain at the remote horizon, implying hidden and greater beauty beyond; to note the distant sails of coming or departing ships; or watch the gulls riding upon the ripples like tiny shallops at anchor; to recall how in the north the wintry winds nipped us on New Year's day, only a week or two ago, and how bland and genial are the breezes here; to behold at our feet as we follow the more recent drift-rows, the rejected treasures which the sea has cast aside, forms different from any that we have elsewhere found, and each curious in its way.

There are but few sea-weeds (algae) on the beach, and not many species of shells; of some of the species, however, many individuals can be obtained. Here are numerous specimens of the Fan Mussels (*Pinna*). What is written of the lilies of the field, "they toil not, neither do they spin," does not apply to them; for these submarine weavers spin a byssus, or beard, by which they attach themselves to the bottom of the sea: the byssus serves as a mooring cable, and its fibers are tubular, like human hair. When fresh and flexible, gloves and stockings can be woven from it, and at Tarento it is manufactured into articles of wear "According to Verany the byssus is a successful remedy for the earache, but he does not say in what manner it is applied." *Pinna rudis*, an English species, is sometimes eaten, and Henry and Arthur Adams also mention that some species are used for food.

A dead fish, half eaten by the birds, is not an attractive object; it is in an unsavory state, but doubtless its scales would, under a microscope, astonish us with many lines of beauty. The butterflies, so unlike the fishes in form and habits, also have minute scales, hence the metallic luster and brilliancy of their coloring; impalpable to the naked eye, their tiny scales resemble the pollen of flowers. Columbus "gave a new world to Castile and Leon;" but think of the world of enchantment, of the precious treasures that the microscope has opened to all.

A thin slice cut from a spine of the Sea-urchin (*Echinus*) that we have just picked up, if magnified, would furnish a partial insight to the wonders of its plan of structure.

We find the oblong pouch-like egg-cases of a species of Skate (*Raia*) quite common. The texture and color of these pouches are such, that a person not knowing would sooner suppose that in some way they rather belonged to the sea-weeds, perhaps the pod of a species of Alga, than pertaining to the fishes. If we were strolling along the shores of California or Europe we should meet with the same queer forms. In

England the people call them "pixy-purses," "fairy-purses," etc. A species of Dog-fish (Scyllium) makes a similar purse-like egg-case, with long strings at the corners. The Skate-fishes are eaten in England, and appear in the stalls of the Italian fish-market in San Francisco, the Californian species may generally be found, but they are eaten only by the foreign population. The common English Skate sometimes attains the weight of two hundred pounds; it is used by the fishermen for bait.

The skates and dog-fishes are not the only marine animals that make curious egg-cases. We have here three species of univalve shells, called by the Floridians, Conchs (Busycon), which also makes egg-cases. Each case is round and flat, about one-half to three-fourths of an inch in diameter, and one-sixth of an inch in thickness; the edge of each flat case is coarsely ribbed or milled, and numbers of them are strung together, only they are immovable upon the string, which is situated upon one side or edge, instead of being central as in a bead necklace. These egg-chains are sometimes two feet in length, and the cases are frequently bored into by different species of carnivorous mollusks to obtain the contents for food. These Conch animals were probably eaten by the aborigines, as we find the shells quite numerous in their Kjoekkenmoeddings; they are now sometimes eaten by both the whites and negroes of Florida, but from appearances they must be tough chewing, and as indigestible as a rubber boot.

At the edge of the beach, rolling in the surf-ripples, a large fleet of Ark shells is coming ashore; these prettily ribbed bivalves look like the Cockles (Cardium), but the animal and the hinge are quite different. The velvety epidermis which generally covers the surface has been worn off by the friction of sand and water in the surf, exposing the clean white fabric of the shells; lighted by the sun they look like a squadron of little dismasted hulls. Two of the three species that we have here obtained are widely distributed, and may be picked up near Galveston, on the Gulf of Mexico. Some of the family may be found in every sea, and many species are used for food. The animal of *Arca grandis*, which is found in the Bay of Panama, is eaten by the natives; a single valve of this giant Ark sometimes weighs two and a quarter pounds. Odd valves of the Ark shells are found in the shell heaps, but are not common.

A mile and a half from where the road enters the beach are the remains of two wrecks; the planking of the decks and sides has long ago been broken up and swept away by the sea, and the timbers projecting from the sands resemble the ribs of some gigantic mammal. No vestige of name is left; their wooden skeletons tell of fierce storms, when wind and waves, acting in unison, hurled ships and shells, and sea-weeds, like weightless bubbles, upon the beach. A wreck is a sad sight, but the crevices of an old hulk are a fine field for the naturalist, for many forms of marine life have a home

therein. Here we found a tiny species of Mussel (*Mytilus cubitus*), and a new species of Siphonaria, a univalve shell shaped like a small shield, with elevated lines or ribs radiating from centre to circumference.

Without farther enumerating or explaining the prizes that are ours through the bounty of old ocean, we must retrace our steps towards the road, for the sun has so nearly set that its level rays are shining in our eyes. With baskets and pockets packed and full we jog along, stopping occasionally to pick up a fine specimen of a white bivalve shell, *Dosinia discus*, which is very abundant, thanks to a storm which threw them high and dry above the reach of ordinary tides. The Fish-crows (*Corvus ossifragus*) and a large species of Blackbird (*Quiscalus baritus*) are running over the wet sands, stooping sometimes to pick up some tit-bit for their suppers. Bidding them good-bye, we hurry on, and after a weary walk of what seemed many miles, made longer by the toilsome tug through sand and chapparal, we reach our haven; tired as dogs (at times are said to be) we gladly cast aside our packs, and after a refreshing wash, rush to supper with appetites as keen as hungry wolves!

The evenings here are chilly, and a fire of the Pitch-pine wood (*Pinus palustris* Linn.) is pleasant, aside from the warmth, for its bright flames fill the room with a cheerful light...How glorious is sleep after a day of toil; of toil, yet still of pleasure. How gently it descends upon us, how quietly we yield to its embrace; it touches the drowsy eye, and we feel that

“The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wing of night.”

