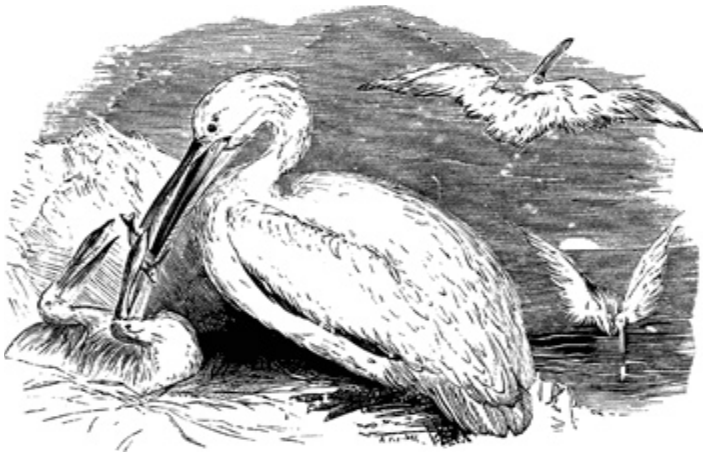
A Florida Sketch-Book

by Bradford Torrey

Chapter 3: On the Beach at Daytona



The first eight days of my stay in Daytona were so delightful that I felt as if I had never before seen fine weather, even in my dreams. My east window looked across the Halifax River to the peninsula woods. Beyond them was the ocean. Immediately after breakfast, therefore, I made toward the north bridge, and in half an hour or less was on the beach. Beaches are much the same the world over, and there is no need to describe this one—Silver Beach, I think I heard it called—except to say that it is broad, hard, and, for a pleasure-seeker's purpose, endless. It is backed by low sand-hills covered with impenetrable scrub,—oak and palmetto,—beyond which is a dense growth of short-leaved pines. Perfect weather, a perfect beach, and no throng of people: here were the conditions of happiness; and here for eight days I found it. The ocean itself was a solitude. Day after day not a sail was in sight. Looking up and down the beach, I could usually see somewhere in the distance a carriage or two, and as many foot passengers; but I often walked a mile, or sat for half an hour, without being within hail of any one. Never were airs more gentle or colors more exquisite.

As for birds, they were surprisingly scarce, but never wanting altogether. If everything else failed, a few fish-hawks were sure to be in sight. I watched them at first with eager interest. Up and down the beach they went, each by himself, with heads pointed downward, scanning the shallow water. Often they stopped in their course, and by means of laborious flappings held themselves poised over a certain spot. Then, perhaps, they set their wings and

shot downward clean under water. If the plunge was unsuccessful, they shook their feathers dry and were ready to begin again. They had the fisherman's gift. The second, and even the third attempt might fail, but no matter; it was simply a question of time and patience. If the fish was caught, their first concern seemed to be to shift their hold upon it, till its head pointed to the front. That done, they shook themselves vigorously and started landward, the shining white victim wriggling vainly in the clutch of the talons. I took it for granted that they retired with their quarry to some secluded spot on the peninsula, till one day I happened to be standing upon a sand-hill as one passed overhead. Then I perceived that he kept on straight across the peninsula and the river. More than once, however, I saw one of them in no haste to go inland. On my second visit, a hawk came circling about my head, carrying a fish. I was surprised at the action, but gave it no second thought, nor once imagined that he was making me his protector, till suddenly a large bird dropped rather awkwardly upon the sand, not far before me. He stood for an instant on his long, ungainly legs, and then, showing a white head and a white tail, rose with a fish in his talons, and swept away landward out of sight. Here was the osprey's parasite, the bald eagle, for which I had been on the watch. Meantime, the hawk too had disappeared. Whether it was his fish which the eagle had picked up (having missed it in the air) I cannot say. I did not see it fall, and knew nothing of the eagle's presence until he fluttered to the beach.

Some days later, I saw the big thief—emblem of American liberty—play his sharp game to the finish. I was crossing the bridge, and by accident turned and looked upward. (By accident, I say, but I was always doing it.) High in the air were two birds, one chasing the other,—a fish-hawk and a young eagle with dark head and tail. The hawk meant to save his dinner if he could. Round and round he went, ascending at every turn, his pursuer after him hotly. For aught I could see, he stood a good chance of escape, till all at once another pair of wings swept into the field of my glass.

"A third is in the race! Who is the third, speeding away swift as the eagle bird?"

It was an eagle, an adult, with head and tail white. Only once more the osprey circled. The odds were against him, and he let go the fish. As it fell, the old eagle swooped after it, missed it, swooped again, and this time, long before it could reach the water, had it fast in his claws. Then off he went, the younger one in pursuit. They passed out of sight behind the trees of an island, one close upon the other, and I do not know how the controversy ended; but I would have wagered a trifle on the old white-head, the bird of Washington.

The scene reminded me of one I had witnessed in Georgia a fortnight before, on my

way south. The train stopped at a backwoods station; some of the passengers gathered upon the steps of the car, and the usual bevy of young negroes came alongside. "Stand on my head for a nickel?" said one. A passenger put his hand into his pocket; the boy did as he had promised,—in no very professional style, be it said,—and with a grin stretched out his hand. The nickel glistened in the sun, and on the instant a second boy sprang forward, snatched it out of the sand, and made off in triumph amid the hilarious applause of his fellows. The acrobat's countenance indicated a sense of injustice, and I had no doubt that my younger eagle was similarly affected. "Where is our boasted honor among thieves?" I imagined him asking. The bird of freedom is a great bird, and the land of the free is a great country. Here, let us hope, the parallel ends. Whether on the banks of Newfoundland or elsewhere, it cannot be that the great republic would ever snatch a fish that did not belong to it.

I admired the address of the fish-hawks until I saw the gannets. Then I perceived that the hawks, with all their practice, were no better than landlubbers. The gannets kept farther out at sea. Sometimes a scattered flock remained in sight for the greater part of a forenoon. With their long, sharp wings and their outstretched necks,—like loons, but with a different flight,—they were rakish-looking customers. Sometimes from a great height, sometimes from a lower, sometimes at an incline, and sometimes vertically, they plunged into the water, and after an absence of some seconds, as it seemed, came up and rested upon the surface. They were too far away to be closely observed, and for a time I did not feel certain what they were. The larger number were in dark plumage, and it was not till a white one appeared that I said with assurance, "Gannets!" With the bright sun on him, he was indeed a splendid bird, snowy white, with the tips of his wings jet black. If he would have come inshore like the ospreys, I think I should never have tired of his evolutions.

The gannets showed themselves only now and then, but the brown pelicans were an every-day sight. I had found them first on the beach at St. Augustine. Here at Daytona they never alighted on the sand, and seldom in the water. They were always flying up or down the beach, and, unless turned from their course by the presence of some suspicious object, they kept straight on just above the breakers, rising and falling with the waves; now appearing above them, and now out of sight in the trough of the sea. Sometimes a single bird passed, but commonly they were in small flocks. Once I saw seventeen together,—a pretty long procession; for, whatever their number, they went always in Indian file. Evidently some dreadful thing would happen if two pelicans should ever travel abreast. It was partly this unusual order of march, I suspect, which gave such an air of preternatural gravity to

their movements. It was impossible to see even two of them go by without feeling almost as if I were in church. First, both birds flew a rod or two with slow and stately flappings; then, as if at some preconcerted signal, both set their wings and scaled for about the same distance; then they resumed their wing strokes; and so on, till they passed out of sight. I never heard them utter a sound, or saw them make a movement of any sort (I speak of what I saw at Daytona) except to fly straight on, one behind another. If church ceremonials are still open to amendment, I would suggest, in no spirit of irreverence, that a study of pelican processionals would be certain to yield edifying results. Nothing done in any cathedral could be more solemn. Indeed, their solemnity was so great that I came at last to find it almost ridiculous; but that, of course, was only from a want of faith on the part of the beholder. The birds, as I say, were brown pelicans. Had they been of the other species, in churchly white and black, the ecclesiastical effect would perhaps have been heightened, though such a thing is hardly conceivable.

Some beautiful little gulls, peculiarly dainty in their appearance ("Bonaparte's gulls," they are called in books, but "surf gulls" would be a prettier and apter name), were also given to flying along the breakers, but in a manner very different from the pelicans'; as different, I may say, as the birds themselves. They, too, moved steadily onward, north or south as the case might be, but fed as they went, dropping into the shallow water between the incoming waves, and rising again to escape the next breaker. The action was characteristic and graceful, though often somewhat nervous and hurried. I noticed that the birds commonly went by twos, but that may have been nothing more than a coincidence. Beside these small surf gulls, never at all numerous, I usually saw a few terns, and now and then one or two rather large gulls, which, as well as I could make out, must have been the ring-billed. It was a strange beach, I thought, where fish-hawks invariably outnumbered both gulls and terns.

Of beach birds, properly so called, I saw none but sanderlings. They were no novelty, but I always stopped to look at them; busy as ants, running in a body down the beach after a receding wave, and the next moment scampering back again with all speed before an incoming one. They tolerated no near approach, but were at once on the wing for a long flight up or down the coast, looking like a flock of snow-white birds as they turned their under parts to the sun in rising above the breakers. Their manner of feeding, with the head pitched forward, and a quick, eager movement, as if they had eaten nothing for days, and were fearful that their present bit of good fortune would not last, is strongly characteristic, so that they can be recognized a long way off. As I have said, they were the only true beach

birds; but I rarely failed to see one or two great blue herons playing that role. The first one filled me with surprise. I had never thought of finding him in such a place; but there he stood, and before I was done with Florida beaches I had come to look upon him as one of their most constant habitues. In truth, this largest of the herons is well-nigh omnipresent in Florida. Wherever there is water, fresh or salt, he is certain to be met with sooner or later; and even in the driest place, if you stay there long enough, you will be likely to see him passing overhead, on his way to the water, which is nowhere far off. On the beach, as everywhere else, he is a model of patience. To the best of my recollection, I never saw him catch a fish there; and I really came to think it pathetic, the persistency with which he would stand, with the water half way to his knees, leaning forward expectantly toward the breakers, as if he felt that this great and generous ocean, which had so many fish to spare, could not fail to send him, at last, the morsel for which he was waiting.

But indeed I was not long in perceiving that the Southern climate made patience a comparatively easy virtue, and fishing, by a natural consequence, a favorite avocation. Day after day, as I crossed the bridges on my way to and from the beach, the same men stood against the rail, holding their poles over the river. They had an air of having been there all winter. I came to recognize them, though I knew none of their names. One was peculiarly happy looking, almost radiant, with an educated face, and only one hand. His disability hindered him, no doubt. I never saw so much as a sheep-head or a drum lying at his feet. But inwardly, I felt sure, his luck was good. Another was older, fifty at least, sleek and well dressed. He spoke pleasantly enough, if I addressed him; otherwise he attended strictly to business. Every day he was there, morning and afternoon. He, I think, had better fortune than any of the others. Once I saw him land a large and handsome "speckled trout," to the unmistakable envy of his brother anglers. Still a third was a younger man, with a broad-brimmed straw hat and a taciturn habit; no less persevering than Number Two, perhaps, but far less successful. I marveled a little at their enthusiasm (there were many beside these), and they, in their turn, did not altogether conceal their amusement at the foibles of a man, still out of Bedlam, who walked and walked and walked, always with a field-glass protruding from his side pocket, which now and then he pulled out suddenly and leveled at nothing. It is one of the merciful ameliorations of this present evil world that men are thus mutually entertaining.

These anglers were to be congratulated. Ordered South by their physicians,—as most of them undoubtedly were,—compelled to spend the winter away from friends and business,

amid all the discomforts of Southern hotels, they were happy in having at least one thing which they loved to do. Blessed is the invalid who has an outdoor hobby. One man, whom I met more than once in my beach rambles, seemed to devote himself to bathing, running, and walking. He looked like an athlete; I heard him tell how far he could run without getting "winded;" and as he sprinted up and down the sand in his scanty bathing costume, I always found him a pleasing spectacle. Another runner there gave me a half-hour of amusement that turned at the last to a feeling of almost painful sympathy. He was not in bathing costume, nor did he look particularly athletic. He was teaching his young lady to ride a bicycle, and his pupil was at that most interesting stage of a learner's career when the machine is beginning to steady itself. With a very little assistance she went bravely, while at the same time the young man felt it necessary not to let go his hold upon her for more than a few moments at once. At all events, he must be with her at the turn. She plied the pedals with vigor, and he ran alongside or behind, as best he could; she excited, and he out of breath. Back and forth they went, and it was a relief to me when finally he took off his coat. I left him still panting in his fair one's wake, and hoped it would not turn out a case of "love's labor's lost." Let us hope, too, that he was not an invalid.

While speaking of these my companions in idleness, I may as well mention an older man,—a rural philosopher, he seemed,—whom I met again and again, always in search of shells. He was from Indiana, he told me with agreeable garrulity. His grandchildren would like the shells. He had perhaps made a mistake in coming so far south. It was pretty warm, he thought, and he feared the change would be too great when he went home again. If a man's lungs were bad, he ought to go to a warm place, of course. He came for his stomach, which was now pretty well,—a capital proof of the superior value of fresh air over "proper" food in dyspeptic troubles; for if there is anywhere in the world a place in which a delicate stomach would fare worse than in a Southern hotel,—of the second or third class, may none but my enemies ever find it. Seashell collecting is not a panacea. For a disease like old age, for instance, it might prove to be an alleviation rather than a cure; but taken long enough, and with a sufficient mixture of enthusiasm,—a true *sine qua non*,—it will be found efficacious, I believe, in all ordinary cases of dyspepsia.

My Indiana man was far from being alone in his cheerful pursuit. If strangers, men or women, met me on the beach and wished to say something more than good-morning, they were sure to ask, "Have you found any pretty shells?" One woman was a collector of a more businesslike turn. She had brought a camp-stool, and when I first saw her in the distance

was removing her shoes, and putting on rubber boots. Then she moved her stool into the surf, sat upon it with a tin pail beside her, and, leaning forward over the water, fell to doing something,—I could not tell what. She was so industrious that I did not venture to disturb her, as I passed; but an hour or two afterward I overtook her going homeward across the peninsula with her invalid husband, and she showed me her pail full of the tiny coquina clams, which she said were very nice for soup, as indeed I knew. Some days later, I found a man collecting them for the market, with the help of a horse and a cylindrical wire roller. With his trousers rolled to his knees, he waded in the surf, and shoveled the incoming water and sand into the wire roller through an aperture left for that purpose. Then he closed the aperture, and drove the horse back and forth through the breakers till the clams were washed clear of the sand, after which he poured them out into a shallow tray like a long bread-pan, and transferred them from that to a big bag. I came up just in time to see them in the tray, bright with all the colors of the rainbow.

"Will you hold the bag open?" he said. I was glad to help (it was perhaps the only useful ten minutes that I passed in Florida); and so, counting quart by quart, he dished them into it. There were thirty odd quarts, but he wanted a bushel and a quarter, and again took up the shovel. The clams themselves were not, canned and shipped, he said, but only the "juice."

Many rudely built cottages stood on the sand-hills just behind the beach, especially at the points, a mile or so apart, where the two Daytona bridge roads come out of the scrub; and one day, while walking up the beach to Ormond, I saw before me a much more elaborate Queen Anne house. Fancifully but rather neatly painted, and with a stable to match, it looked like an exotic. As I drew near, its venerable owner was at work in front of it, shoveling a path through the sand,—just as, at that moment (February 24), thousands of Yankee householders were shoveling paths through the snow, which then was reported by the newspapers to be seventeen inches deep in the streets of Boston. His reverend air and his long black coat proclaimed him a clergyman past all possibility of doubt. He seemed to have got to heaven before death, the place was so attractive; but being still in a body terrestrial, he may have found the meat market rather distant, and mosquitoes and sand-flies sometimes a plague. As I walked up the beach, he drove by me in an open wagon with a hired man. They kept on till they came to a log which had been cast up by the sea, and evidently had been sighted from the house. The hired man lifted it into the wagon, and they drove back,—quite a stirring adventure, I imagined; an event to date from, at the very least.

The smaller cottages were nearly all empty at that season. At different times I made use

of many of them, when the sun was hot, or I had been long afoot. Once I was resting thus on a flight of front steps, when a three-seated carriage came down the beach and pulled up opposite. The driver wished to ask me a question, I thought; no doubt I looked very much at home. From the day I had entered Florida, every one I met had seemed to know me intuitively for a New Englander, and most of them—I could not imagine how—had divined that I came from Boston. It gratified me to believe that I was losing a little of my provincial manner, under the influence of more extended travel. But my pride had a sudden fall. The carriage stopped, as I said; but instead of inquiring the way, the driver alighted, and all the occupants of the carriage proceeded to do the same,—eight women, with baskets and sundries. It was time for me to be starting. I descended the steps, and pulled off my hat to the first comer, who turned out to be the proprietor of the establishment. With a gracious smile, she hoped they were "not frightening me away." She and her friends had come for a day's picnic at the cottage. Things being as they were (eight women), she could hardly invite me to share the festivities, and, with my best apology for the intrusion, I withdrew.

Of one building on the sand-hills I have peculiarly pleasant recollections. It was not a cottage, but had evidently been put up as a public resort; especially, as I inferred, for Sunday-school or parish picnics. It was furnished with a platform for speech-making (is there any foolishness that men will not commit on sea beaches and mountain tops?), and, what was more to my purpose, was open on three sides. I passed a good deal of time there, first and last, and once it sheltered me from a drenching shower of an hour or two. The lightning was vivid, and the rain fell in sheets. In the midst of the blackness and commotion, a single tern, ghostly white, flew past, and toward the close a bunch of sanderlings came down the edge of the breakers, still looking for something to eat. The only other living things in sight were two young fellows, who had improved the opportunity to try a dip in the surf. Their color indicated that they were not yet hardened to open-air bathing, and from their actions it was evident that they found the ocean cool. They were wet enough before they were done, but it was mostly with fresh water. Probably they took no harm; but I am moved to remark, in passing, that I sometimes wondered how generally physicians who order patients to Florida for the winter caution them against imprudent exposure. To me, who am no doctor, it seemed none too safe for young women with consumptive tendencies to be out sailing in open boats on winter evenings, no matter how warm the afternoon had been, while I saw one case where a surf bath taken by such an invalid was followed by a day of prostration and fever. "We who live here," said a resident, "don't think the water is warm enough yet; but

for these Northern folks it is a great thing to go into the surf in February, and you can't keep them out."

The rows of cottages of which I have spoken were in one sense a detriment to the beach; but on the whole, and in their present deserted condition, I found them an advantage. It was easy enough to walk away from them, if a man wanted the feeling of utter solitude (the beach extends from Matanzas Inlet to Mosquito Inlet, thirty-five miles, more or less); while at other times they not only furnished shadow and a seat, but, with the paths and little clearings behind them, were an attraction to many birds. Here I found my first Florida jays. They sat on the chimney-tops and ridgepoles, and I was rejoiced to discover that these unique and interesting creatures, one of the special objects of my journey South, were not only common, but to an extraordinary degree approachable. Their extreme confidence in man is one of their oddest characteristics. I heard from more than one person how easily and "in almost no time" they could be tamed, if indeed they needed taming. A resident of Hawks Park told me that they used to come into his house and stand upon the corners of the dinner table waiting for their share of the meal. When he was hoeing in the garden, they would perch on his hat, and stay there by the hour, unless he drove them off. He never did anything to tame them except to treat them kindly. When a brood was old enough to leave the nest, the parents brought the youngsters up to the doorstep as a matter of course.

The Florida jay, a bird of the scrub, is not to be confounded with the Florida blue jay (a smaller and less conspicuously crested duplicate of our common Northern bird), to which it bears little resemblance either in personal appearance or in voice. Seen from behind, its aspect is peculiarly striking; the head, wings, rump, and tail being dark blue, with an almost rectangular patch of gray set in the midst. Its beak is very stout, and its tail very long; and though it would attract attention anywhere, it is hardly to be called handsome or graceful. Its notes—such of them as I heard, that is—are mostly guttural, with little or nothing of the screaming quality which distinguishes the blue jay's voice. To my ear they were often suggestive of the Northern shrike.

On the 23d of February I was standing on the rear piazza of one of the cottages, when a jay flew into the oak and palmetto scrub close by. A second glance, and I saw that she was busy upon a nest. When she had gone, I moved nearer, and waited. She did not return, and I descended the steps and went to the edge of the thicket to inspect her work: a bulky affair,—nearly done, I thought,—loosely constructed of pretty large twigs. I had barely returned to the veranda before the bird appeared again. This time I was in a position to look squarely in

upon her. She had some difficulty in edging her way through the dense bushes with a long, branching stick in her bill; but she accomplished the feat, fitted the new material into its place, readjusted the other twigs a bit here and there, and then, as she rose to depart, she looked me suddenly in the face and stopped, as much as to say, "Well, well! Here's a pretty go! A man spying upon me!" I wondered whether she would throw up the work, but in another minute she was back again with another twig. The nest, I should have said, was about four feet from the ground, and perhaps twenty feet from the cottage. Four days later, I found her sitting upon it. She flew off as I came up, and I pushed into the scrub far enough to thrust my hand into the nest, which, to my disappointment, was empty. In fact, it was still far from completed; for on the 3d of March, when I paid it a farewell visit, its owner was still at work lining it with fine grass. At that time it was a comfortable-looking and really elaborate structure. Both the birds came to look at me as I stood on the piazza. They perched together on the top of a stake so narrow that there was scarcely room for their feet; and as they stood thus, side by side, one of them struck its beak several times against the beak of the other, as if in play. I wished them joy of their expected progeny, and was the more ready to believe they would have it for this little display of sportive sentimentality.

It was a distinguished company that frequented that row of narrow back yards on the edge of the sand-hills. As a new-comer, I found the jays (sometimes there were ten under my eye at once) the most entertaining members of it, but if I had been a dweller there for the summer, I should perhaps have altered my opinion; for the group contained four of the finest of Floridian songsters,—the mocking-bird, the brown thrasher, the cardinal grosbeak, and the Carolina wren. Rare morning and evening concerts those cottagers must have. And besides these there were catbirds, ground doves, red-eyed chewinks, white-eyed chewinks, a song sparrow (one of the few that I saw in Florida), savanna sparrows, myrtle birds, redpoll warblers, a phoebe, and two flickers. The last-named birds, by the way, are never backward about displaying their tender feelings. A treetop flirtation is their special delight (I hope my readers have all seen one; few things of the sort are better worth looking at), and here, in the absence of trees, they had taken to the ridgepole of a house.

More than once I remarked white-breasted swallows straggling northward along the line of sand-hills. They were in loose order, but the movement was plainly concerted, with all the look of a vernal migration. This swallow, the first of its family to arrive in New England, remains in Florida throughout the winter, but is known also to go as far south as Central America. The purple martins—which, so far as I am aware, do not winter in Florida—had

already begun to make their appearance. While crossing the bridge, February 22, I was surprised to notice two of them sitting upon a bird-box over the draw, which just then stood open for the passage of a tug-boat. The toll-gatherer told me they had come "from some place" eight or ten days before. His attention had been called to them by his cat, who was trying to get up to the box to bid them welcome. He believed that she discovered them within three minutes of their arrival. It seemed not unlikely. In its own way a cat is a pretty sharp ornithologist.

One or two cormorants were almost always about the river. Sometimes they sat upon stakes in a patriotic, spread-eagle (American eagle) attitude, as if drying their wings,—a curious sight till one became accustomed to it. Snakebirds and buzzards resort to the same device, but I cannot recall ever seeing any Northern bird thus engaged. From the south bridge I one morning saw, to my great satisfaction, a couple of white pelicans, the only ones that I found in Florida, though I was assured that within twenty years they had been common along the Halifax and Hillsborough rivers. My birds were flying up the river at a good height. The brown pelicans, on the other hand, made their daily pilgrimages just above the level of the water, as has been already described, and were never over the river, but off the beach.

All in all, there are few pleasanter walks in Florida, I believe, than the beach-round at Daytona, out by one bridge and back by the other. An old hotel-keeper—a rural Yankee, if one could tell anything by his look and speech—said to me in a burst of confidence, "Yes, we've got a climate, and that's about all we have got,—climate and sand." I could not entirely agree with him. For myself, I found not only fine days, but fine prospects. But there was no denying the sand.