



# *A Florida Sketch-Book*

by Bradford Torrey



## **Chapter 9: A Florida Shrine**

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All pilgrims to Tallahassee visit the Murat place. It is one of the most conveniently accessible of those “points of interest” with which guide-books so anxiously, and with so much propriety, concern themselves. What a tourist prays for is something to see. If I had ever been a tourist in Boston, no doubt I should before now have surveyed the world from the top of the Bunker Hill monument. In Tallahassee, at all events, I went to the Murat estate. In fact, I went more than once; but I remember especially my first visit, which had a livelier sentimental interest than the others because I was then under the agreeable delusion that the Prince himself had lived there. The guide-book told me so, vouchsafing also the information that after building the

house he “interested himself actively in local affairs, became a naturalized citizen, and served successively as postmaster, alderman, and mayor”—a model immigrant, surely, though it is rather the way of immigrants, perhaps, not to refuse political responsibilities.

Naturally, I remembered these things as I stood in front of “the big house”—a story-and-a-half cottage—amid the flowering shrubs. Here lived once the son of the King of Naples; himself a Prince, and—worthy son of a worthy sire—alderman and then mayor of the city of Tallahassee. Thus did an uncompromising democrat pay court to the shades of Royalty, while a mocking-bird sang from a fringe-bush by the gate, and an oriole flew madly from tree to tree in pursuit of a fair creature of the reluctant sex.

The inconsistency, if such it was, was quickly punished. For, alas! When I spoke of my morning’s pilgrimage to an old resident of the town, he told me that Murat never lived in the house, nor anywhere else in Tallahassee, and of course was never its postmaster, alderman,



or mayor. The Princess, he said, built the house after her husband's death, and lived there, a widow. I appealed to the guide-book. My informant sneered,—politely,—and brought me a still older Tallahasseean, Judge ——, whose venerable name I am sorry to have forgotten, and that indisputable citizen confirmed all that his neighbor had said. For once, the guide-book compiler must have been misinformed.

The question, happily, was one of no great consequence. If the Prince had never lived in the house, the Princess had; and she, by all accounts (and I make certain her husband would have said the same), was the worthier person of the two. And even if neither of them had lived there, if my sentiment had been all wasted (but there was no question of tears), the place itself was sightly, the house was old, and the way thither a pleasant one—first down the hill in a zigzag course to the vicinity of the railway station, then by a winding country road through the valley past a few negro cabins, and up the slope on the farther side. Prince Murat, or no Prince Murat, I should love to travel that road to-day, instead of sitting before a Massachusetts fire, with the ground deep under snow, and the air full of thirty or forty degrees of frost.

In the front yard of one of the cabins opposite the car-wheel foundry, and near the station, as I now remember, a middle-aged negress was cutting up an oak log. She swung the axe with vigor and precision, and the chips flew; but I could not help saying, "You ought to make the man do that."

She answered on the instant. "I would," she said, "if I had a man to make."

"I'm sure you would," I thought. Her tongue was as sharp as her axe.

Ought I to have ventured a word in her behalf, I wonder, when a man of her own color, and a pretty near neighbor, told me with admirable naivete the story of his bereavement and his hopes? His wife had died a year before, he said, and so far, though he had not let the grass grow under his feet, he had found no one to take her place. He still meant to do so, if he could. He was only seventy-four years old, and it was not good for a man to be alone. He seemed a gentle spirit, and I withheld all mention of the stalwart and manless wood-cutter. I hope he went farther, and fared better. So youthful as he was, surely there was no occasion for haste.

When I had skirted a cotton-field—the crop just out of the ground—and a bit of wood on the right, and a swamp with a splendid display of white water-lilies on the left, and had begun to ascend the gentle slope, I met a man of considerably more than seventy-four years.



“Can you tell me just where the Murat place is?” I inquired.

He grinned broadly, and thought he could. He was one of the old Murat servants, as his father had been before him. “I was borned on to him,” he said, speaking of the Prince. Murat was “a gentleman, sah.” That was a statement which it seemed impossible for him to repeat often enough. He spoke from a slave’s point of view. Murat was a good master. The old man had heard him say that he kept servants “for the like of the thing.” He didn’t abuse them. He “never was for barbarizing a poor colored person at all.” Whipping? Oh, yes. “He didn’t miss your fault. No, sah, he didn’t miss your fault.” But his servants never were “ironed.” He “didn’t believe in barbarousment.”

The old man was thankful to be free; but to his mind emancipation had not made everything heavenly. The younger set of negroes (“my people” was his word) were on the wrong road. They had “sold their birthright,” though exactly what he meant by that remark I did not gather. “They ain’t got no sense,” he declared, “and what sense they has got don’t do ‘em no good.”

I told him finally that I was from the North. “Oh, I knows it,” he exclaimed, “I knows it;” and he beamed with delight. How did he know, I inquired. “Oh, I knows it. I can see it in you. Anybody would know it that had any jedgment at all. You’s a perfect gentleman, sah.” He was too old to be quarreled with, and I swallowed the compliment.

I tore myself away, or he might have run on till night—about his old master and mistress, the division of the estate, an abusive overseer (“he was a perfect dog, sah!”), and sundry other things. He had lived a long time, and had nothing to do now but to recall the past and tell it over. So it will be with us, if we live so long. May we find once in a while a patient listener.

This patriarch’s unfavorable opinion as to the prospects of the colored people was shared by my hopeful young widower before mentioned, who expressed himself quite as emphatically. He was brought up among white people (“I’s been taughted a heap,” he said), and believed that the salvation of the blacks lay in their recognition of white supremacy. But he was less perspicacious than the older man. He was one of the very few persons whom I met at the South who did not recognize me at sight as a Yankee. “Are you a legislator-man?” he asked, at the end of our talk. The legislature was in session on the hill. But perhaps, after all, he only meant to flatter me.

If I am long on the way, it is because, as I love always to have it, the going and coming were the better part of the pilgrimage. The estate itself is beautifully situated, with far-away horizons; but it has fallen into great neglect, while the house, almost in ruins, and occupied

by colored people, is to Northern eyes hardly more than a larger cabin. It put me in mind of the question of a Western gentleman whom I met at St. Augustine. He had come to Florida against his will, the weather and the doctor having combined against him, and was looking at everything through very blue spectacles. "Have you seen any of those fine old country mansions," he asked, "about which we read so often in descriptions of Southern, life?" He had been on the lookout for them, he averred, ever since he left home, and had yet to find the first one; and from his tone it was evident that he thought the Southern idea of a "fine old mansion" must be different from his.

The Murat house, certainly, was never a palace, except as love may have made it so. But it was old; people had lived in it, and died in it; those who once owned it, whose name and memory still clung to it, were now in narrower houses; and it was easy for the visitor—for one visitor, at least—to fall into pensive meditation. I strolled about the grounds; stood between the last year's cotton-rows, while a Carolina wren poured out his soul from an oleander bush near by; admired the confidence of a pair of shrikes, who had made a nest in a honeysuckle vine in the front yard; listened to the sweet music of mocking-birds, cardinals, and orchard orioles; watched the martins circling above the trees; thought of the Princess, and smiled at the black children who thrust their heads out of the windows of her "big house;" and then, with a sprig of honeysuckle for a keepsake, I started slowly homeward.

The sun by this time was straight overhead, but my umbrella saved me from absolute discomfort, while birds furnished here and there an agreeable diversion. I recall in particular some white-crowned sparrows, the first ones I had seen in Florida. At a bend in the road opposite the water-lily swamp, while I was cooling myself in the shade of a friendly pine-tree,—enjoying at the same time a fence overrun with Cherokee roses,—a man and his little boy came along in a wagon. The man seemed really disappointed when I told him that I was going into town, instead of coming from it. It was pretty warm weather for walking, and he had meant to offer me a lift. He was a Scandinavian, who had been for some years in Florida. He owned a good farm not far from the Murat estate, which latter he had been urged to buy; but he thought a man wasn't any better off for owning too much land. He talked of his crops, his children, the climate, and so on, all in a cheerful strain, pleasant to hear. If the pessimists are right,—which may I be kept from believing,—the optimists are certainly more comfortable to live with, though it be only for ten minutes under a roadside shade-tree.

When I reached the street-car track at the foot of the hill, the one car which plies back and forth through the city was in its place, with the driver beside it, but no mules.



“Are you going to start directly?” I asked.

“Yes, sah,” he answered; and then, looking toward the stable, he shouted in a peremptory voice, “Do about, there! Do about!”

“What does that mean?” said I. “Hurry up?”

“Yes, sah, that’s it. ‘Tain’t everybody that wants to be hurried up; so we tells ‘em, ‘Do about!’”

Half a minute afterwards two very neatly dressed little colored boys stepped upon the rear platform.

“Where you goin’?” said the driver. “Uptown?”

They said they were.

“Well, come inside. Stay out there, and you’ll git hurt and cost this dried-up company more money than you’s wuth.”

They dropped into seats by the rear door. He motioned them to the front corner. “Sit down there,” he said, “right there.” They obeyed, and as he turned away he added, what I found more and more to be true, as I saw more of him, “I ain’t de boss, but I’s got right smart to say.”

Then, he whistled to the mules, flourished his whip, and to a persistent accompaniment of whacks and whistles we went crawling up the hill.

