

CONSTANCE WOOLSON

THE ANCIENT
CITY

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Содержание

IN TWO PARTS. – PART I	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	15

Constance Fenimore Woolson

The Ancient City

IN TWO PARTS. – PART I

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“The world is far away; the broad pine-barrens
Like deserts roll between;
Be then our mother – take us for thy children,
O dear St. Augustine!”

It was a party of eight, arranged by Aunt Diana. She is only my aunt by marriage, and she had with her a *bona fide* niece, Iris Carew, a gay school-girl of seventeen, while I, Niece Martha, as Aunt Diana always calls me, own to full forty years. Professor Macquoid went for two reasons – his lungs, and the pleasure of imparting information. It was generally understood that Professor Macquoid was engaged upon a Great Work. John Hoffman went for his own amusement; with us, because he happened to sail on the same steamer. He had spent several winters in Florida, hunting and fishing, and was in his way something of a Thoreau, without Thoreau’s love of isolation. Mr. Mokes went because Aunt Diana persuaded him, and Sara St. John because I made her. These, with Miss Sharp, Iris Carew’s governess, composed our party.

We left New York in a driving January snow-storm, and sailed three days over the stormy Atlantic, seeing no land from the winter desolation of Long Branch until we entered the beautiful harbors of Charleston and Savannah, a thousand miles to the south. The New York steamer went no farther; built to defy Fear, Lookout, and the terrible Hatteras, she left the safe, monotonous coast of Georgia and Upper Florida to a younger sister, that carried us on to the south over a summer sea, and at sunrise one balmy morning early in February entered the broad St. Johns, whose slow coffee-colored tropical tide, almost alone among rivers, flows due north for nearly its entire course of four hundred miles, a peculiarity expressed in its original name, given by the Indians, Il-la-ka – “It hath its own way, is alone, and contrary to every other.”

“The question is,” said Sara St. John, “is there any thing one ought to know about these banks?”

“‘Ye banks and bray-aas of bon-onny Doo-oon,’ ” chanted Iris, who, fresh as a rose-bud with the dew on it, stood at the bow, with the wind blowing her dark wavy hair back from her lovely face; as for her hat, it had long ago found itself discarded and tied to the railing for safe-keeping.

“The fresh-water shell heaps of the St. Johns River, East Florida,” began the Professor, “should be – should be somewhere about here.” He peered around, but could see nothing with his near-sighted eyes.

“Iris,” called Aunt Diana through the closed blinds of her state-room, “pray put on your hat. Miss Sharp! Where is Miss Sharp?”

“Here,” answered the governess, emerging reluctantly from the cabin, muffled in a brown veil. Sunrise enthusiasm came hard to her; she knew that hers was not the beauty that shines at dawn, and she had a great longing for her matutinal coffee. Miss Sharp’s eyes were faintly blue, she had the smallest quantity of the blondest hair disposed in two ringlets on each side of her face, a shadowy little figure, indistinct features, and a complexion that turned aguish on the slightest provocation. Nevertheless, equal to the emergency, she immediately superintended the tying down of Iris’s little

round hat, and then, with her heelless prunella gaiters fully revealed by the strong wind, and her lisle-threaded hands struggling to repress the fluttering veil, she stood prepared to do her duty by the fresh-water shell heaps or any other geological formation. John Hoffman was walking up and down smoking a Bohemian-looking pipe. "There is only one item, Miss St. John, in all the twenty-five miles between the mouth of the river and Jacksonville," he said, pausing a moment near the bench where Sara and I sat as usual together. "That headland opposite is St. Johns Bluff, the site of old Fort Caroline, where, in 1564, a colony of French Huguenots established themselves, and one year later were massacred, men, women, and children, by the cut-throat Menendez, who took the trouble to justify his deed by an inscription hung up over the bodies of his victims, 'No por Franceses, sino por Luteranos' – 'Not as Frenchmen, but as Lutherans.' It is a comfort to the unregenerate mind to know that three years later a Frenchman sailed over and took his turn at a massacre, politely putting up a second inscription, 'Not as Spaniards, but as traitors, thieves, and murderers.' "

"That was certainly poetic justice," I said. "Who would imagine that such a drama had been enacted on that innocent hillside? What terrible days they were!"

"Terrible, perhaps, but at least far more earnest as well as more picturesque than our commonplace era," said Sara, with her indifferent air. She was generally either indifferent or defiant, and Aunt Diana regarded her with disfavor as "a young person who wrote for the magazines." Sara was twenty-eight years old, a woman with pale cheeks, weary eyes, a slight frown on her forehead, clear-cut features, and a quantity of pale golden hair drawn rigidly back and braided close around the head with small regard for fashion's changes. I had met her in a city boarding-house, and, liking her in spite of herself, we grew into friendship; and although her proud independence would accept nothing from me save liking, I was sometimes able to persuade her into a journey, which she always enjoyed notwithstanding the inevitable descriptive article which she declared lurked behind every bush and waved a banner of proof-sheets at her from every sunshiny hill.

At Jacksonville the St. Johns bends to the south on its long course through the chain of lakes and swamps that leads to the mysterious Okeechobee land, a *terra*, or rather *aqua incognita*, given over to alligators and unending lies. The last phrase was added by Miss Sharp, who laboriously wrote down the Okeechobee stories current on the St. Johns, about buried cities, ruins of temples on islands, rusty convent bells, and the like, only to have them all demolished by the stern researches of the Professor. The Professor was not romantic.

"A buried city on the brim
Of Okeechobee was to him
A lie, and nothing more!"

We found Jacksonville a thriving, uninteresting brick-and-mortar town, with two large hotels, from whence issued other tourists and invalids, with whom we sailed up the river as far as Enterprise, and then on a smaller steamer up the wild, beautiful Ocklawaha, coming back down the St. Johns again as far as Toco, where, with the clear consciences of tourists who have seen every thing on the river, we took the mule train across the fifteen miles to the sea, arriving toward sunset at the shed and bonfire which form the railroad *dépôt* of St. Augustine. This shed has never been seen open. What it contains no one knows; but it has a platform where passengers are allowed to stand before their turn comes to climb into the omnibus. The bonfire is lighted by the waiting darkies as a protection against the evening damps. But they builded better than they knew, those innocent contrabands; their blazing fire only mildly typifies the hilarious joy of the Ancient City over the coming of its annual victim, the gold-bearing Northern tourist.

"But where is the town?" demanded Aunt Diana.

"'Cross de ribber, mistis. De omnibuster waitin'," replied a colored official, armed with a bugle. John Hoffman, having given directions as to his trunks, started off on foot through the thicket, with

an evening cigar for company. Aunt Diana, however, never allowed desertion from her camp, whether of regulars or volunteers. She had her eye upon Mokes; she knew he was safe; so she called after the retreating figure, "Mr. Hoffman! Mr. Hoffman! We shall not know where to go without you."

"St. Augustine Hotel," replied Hoffman, over his shoulder.

"But you?"

"Oh, *I* never ride in that omnibus;" and the tall figure disappeared among the trees. He was gone; but Mokes remained, eyes and all. Mokes had large eyes; in fact very large, and pale green; but his fortune was large also, and Aunt Diana had a prophetic soul. Was not Iris her dear sister's child? So she marshaled us into the omnibus, which started off across the thicket, through the ever-present and never-mended mud hole, and out into a straight road leading toward the town through the deep white sand, which, logged over with the red legs of the saw-palmetto, forms the cheerful soil of Eastern Florida. The road was built on a causeway over a river and its attendant salt marshes; on the east side we could see two flags and the two spires of the city rising above the green.

"What river is this?" asked Aunt Diana, as we rolled over a red bridge.

"The San Sebastian," replied Miss Sharp, reading slowly from her guide-book in the fading light. " 'After three hours and one-half of this torture the exhausted tourist finds himself at the San Sebastian River, where a miserable ferry conveys him, more dead than alive, to the city of St. Augustine.' "

"But here is no ferry," I said.

"The 'exhausted tourist,' however, is here," observed Sara, wearily.

"The guide-book is at least so far correct that we may reasonably conclude this to be the St. Sebastian – so called, I presume, from the mythical saint of that name," remarked the Professor, peering out over his spectacles.

"Allow me," said Miss Sharp, eagerly producing a second small volume from her basket. "This saint was, I believe, thrown into a well – no, that isn't it. He was cast into a dungeon, and rescued by – by flying dragons – "

"Oh no, Miss Sharp," said Iris, as the baffled governess wrestled with the fine print. "Sebastian was the one noted for his arrows; don't you remember the picture in my hand-book?"

Leaving the causeway, the omnibus entered the town through a gate of foliage, great pride-of-India-trees mingling their branches over the street for some distance, forming a green arched way whose vista made beautiful the entrance to the Ancient City, like the shaded pathway that led to the lovely land of Beulah in the old pictures of *Pilgrim's Progress*. On each side we could see a residence back among the trees – one of stone, large and massive, with an orange grove behind, the golden fruit gleaming through the glossy foliage, and protected by a picturesque hedge of Spanish-bayonets; the other a wide house surrounded by piazzas overhung with ivy and honeysuckle, a garden filled with roses and every variety of flower, gray moss drooping from the trees at the gate, and a roof painted in broad stripes which conveyed a charming suggestion of coolness, as though it were no roof at all, but only a fresh linen awning over the whole, suited to the tropical climate. Sara said this, and added that she was sure there were hammocks there too, hanging somewhere in shady places.

"Really, very meritorious," remarked Aunt Diana, inspecting the houses through her glasses, and bestowing upon them, as it were, her metropolitan benediction.

In the mean while the colored official was gayly sounding his bugle, and our omnibus rolled into the heart of the city – a small square, adorned with a monument. We noticed the upturned faces of the people as we passed; they were all counting. "One, two, three – only seven in all," said a young girl, with the beautiful hopeless hectic on her cheek. "One, two – seven, only seven," said a gentleman leaning on the railing near the post-office, with the weary invalid attitude we knew so well, having seen it all along the St. Johns. We learned afterward that one of the daily occupations of the invalids of St. Augustine is to watch this omnibus come in, and count the passengers, invariably announcing the number with a triumphant "only," as much as to say, "Aha! old town!" thus avenging themselves for

their enforced stay. It makes no difference how many come; the number may be up in the hundreds, but still the invalids bring out their “only,” as though they had confidently expected thousands.

“Oh, the water, the blue water!” cried Iris, as we turned down toward the harbor. “Shall I not sail upon you, water? Yea, many a time will I!”

“Are you fond of aquatic excursions, Mr. Mokes?” inquired Aunt Diana, taking out her vinaigrette. “What an overpowering marshy odor!”

“Oh, the dear salt, the delicious salt breath of the sea!” murmured Sara, leaning out with a tinge of color in her cheeks.

No, Mokes was not fond of aquatic excursions in the sort of craft they had about here: if he had his yacht, now!

“Voilà,” exclaimed Iris, “an officer! ‘Ah, ah, que j’aime un militaire, j’aime un militaire, j’aime un – ’”

“Iris,” interrupted Aunt Di, “pray do not sing here in the street.”

“Oh, aunt, you stopped me right on the top note,” said Iris, glancing down the street after the uniform.

Arrived at the hotel, Aunt Diana began inspecting rooms. Sara wished to go to one of the boarding-houses, and John Hoffman, who met us on the piazza, proposed his. “I have staid there several times,” he said. “The Sabre-boy waits on the table, and a wild crane lives in the back-yard.”

“The crane, by all means,” said Sara, gathering together her possessions. I preferred to be with Sara; so the three of us left the hotel for Hospital Street, passing on our way Artillery Lane, both names belonging to the British occupancy of the venerable little city.

“This is the Plaza,” said John, as we crossed the little square; “the monument was erected in 1812, in honor of the adoption of a Spanish constitution. The Spanish constitution, as might have been expected, died young; but St. Augustine, unwilling to lose its only ornament for any such small matter as a revolution away over in Spain, compromised by taking out the inscribed tablets and keeping the monument. They have since been restored as curiosities. Castelar ought to come over and see them.”

The house on Hospital Street was a large white mansion, built of coquina, with a peaked roof and overhanging balcony. We knocked, and a tall colored youth opened the door.

“The ‘Sabre,’” said John, gravely introducing him.

“Why ‘Sabre?’” I said, as we waited for our hostess in the pleasant parlor, adorned with gray moss and tufted grasses; “to what language does the word belong?”

“Child language,” replied John. “There was a little girl here last year, who, out of the inscrutable mysteries of a child’s mind, evolved the fancy for calling him ‘the Sabre-boy.’ Why, nobody knew. His real name is Willfrid, but gradually we all fell into the child’s fancy, until every body called him the Sabre-boy, and he himself gravely accepted the title.”

A tap at the window startled us. “The crane,” said John, throwing open the blind. “He too has come to have a look at you.”

An immense gray bird, standing nearly five feet high on his stilt-like legs, peered solemnly at us for some moments, and then stalked away with what seemed very like a sniff of disdain.

“He does not like our looks,” said Sara.

“He takes his time; not for him any of the light friendships of an hour,” replied John. “Cranie is a bird of unlimited aspirations, and both literary and æsthetic tastes; he has been discovered turning over with his bill the leaves of Tennyson’s poems left lying on the window-sill; he invariably plucks the finest roses in the garden; and he has been seen walking on the sea-wall alone in the moonlight, meditating, no doubt, on the vanities of mankind, with whom he is compelled reluctantly to associate.”

“Do you hear the sound of the breakers, Martha?” said Sara, waking me up in the middle of the night. We had the balconied room up stairs, and the sound of the distant surf came in through the open window in the intense stillness of the night. “It makes me feel young again,” murmured my companion; but I fell asleep and heard no more.

Before breakfast, which is always late in Florida, John Hoffman took us to see a wonderful rose-tree.

“You must have sprays of bloom by the side of your coffee-cups,” he said, “and then you will realize that you are really ‘away down upon the Suwannee Ribber.’ ”

“Do you mean to tell me that the Suwannee is in ambush somewhere about here?” began Sara, in her lead-pencil voice. She always declared that her voice took a scratching tone when she asked a manuscript question.

“Not directly here, seeing that it flows into the Gulf of Mexico, but it is in Florida, and therefore will do for melodious comparisons. You will hear that song often enough, Miss St. John; it is the invariable resource of all the Northern sailing parties on the inlet by moonlight. What the Suwannee means by keeping itself hidden away over in the western part of the State I can not imagine. I am sure we Northerners for years have mentioned that ‘dar’s whar our hearts am turning ebber,’ in every key known to music.”

“The tune has a sweet melody of its own,” I said. “Nilsson herself sang it as an encore last winter.”

We walked out St. George Street, the principal avenue of the Ancient City, with the proud width of fifteen feet; other streets turning off to the right and the left were not more than ten and twelve feet wide. The old Spaniards built their coquina houses close together, directly upon the narrow streets, so that from their overhanging balconies on opposite sides they could shake hands with each other if so disposed. I do not think they were so disposed; probably they were more disposed to stab each other, if all accounts are true; but the balconies were near enough for either purpose. They had gardens, too, those old Dons, gardens full of fig, orange, guava, and pomegranate trees, adorned with fountains and flowers; but the garden was behind the house, and any portion of it on the street was jealously guarded by a stone wall almost as high as the house. These walls remain even now the most marked feature of the St. Augustine streets.

“What singular ideas!” I said. “One would suppose that broad shaded streets and houses set far back among trees would be the natural resource of this tropical climate.”

“On the contrary, Miss Martha, the Spaniards thought that their narrow walled-in streets would act like so many flues to suck in every current of air, while their overhanging balconies would cast a more reliable shade than any tree.”

“There is something in that,” said Sara. “What a beautiful garden!”

“Yes; that is the most picturesque garden in St. Augustine, in my opinion,” said John. “Notice those two trees; they are date-palms. Later in the spring the star-jasmine covers the back of the house with such a profusion of flowers that it becomes necessary to close the windows to keep out the overpowering sweetness. That little street at the corner is Treasury Street, and part of the walls and arches of this house belonged to the old Spanish Treasury Buildings.”

A few blocks beyond, and the houses grew smaller; little streets with odd names branched off – St. Hypolita, Cuna, Spanish, and Tolomato – all closely built up, and inhabited by a dark-eyed, olive-skinned people, who regarded us with calm superiority as we passed.

“All this quarter is Minorca Town,” said John, “and these people are the descendants of the colonists brought from the Greek islands, from Corsica, and Minorca, in 1767, by a speculative Englishman, Dr. Turnbull. Originally there were fourteen hundred of them, and Turnbull settled them on a tract of land sixty miles south of here, near Mosquito Inlet, where, bound by indentures, they remained nine years cultivating indigo and sugar, and then rising against the tyranny of their governor, they mutinied and came here in a body. Land was assigned to them, and they built up all this north quarter, where their descendants now live, as you see, in tranquil content, with no more idea of work, as a Northerner understands the word, than so many oysters in their own bay.”

“The Greek islands, did you say?” asked Sara. “Is it possible that I see before me any of the relatives of Sappho, she of ‘the Isles of Greece – the Isles of Greece?’ ”

“Maybe,” said John. “You will see some dark almond-shaped eyes, now and then a classical nose, often a mass of Oriental black hair; but unfortunately, so far, I have never seen the attractions united in the same person. Sometimes, however, on Sunday afternoons, you will meet young girls walking together on the Shell Road, with roses in their glossy hair, and as their dark eyes meet yours, you are reminded of Italy.”

“I have never been in Italy,” said Sara, shortly.

The reflection of an inward smile crossed John Hoffman’s face.

“But where is the rose-tree?” I said.

“Here, madam. Do you see that little shop with the open window? Notice the old man sitting within at the forge. He is a fine old Spanish gentleman and lock-smith, and my very good friend. Señor Oliveros, may we see the rose-tree?”

The old man looked up from some delicate piece of mechanism, and, with a smile on his fine old face, waved us toward the little garden behind the shop. There it stood, the pride of St. Augustine, a rose-tree fifteen feet high, seventeen feet in circumference, with a trunk measuring fifteen inches around and five inches through, “La Sylphide,” yielding annually more than four thousand beautiful creamy roses.

“What a wealth of bloom!” said Sara, bending toward a loaded branch.

“‘La Sylphide,’ like other sylphs, is at her best when only half opened,” said John, selecting with careful deliberation a perfect rose just quivering between bud and blossom, and offering it to Sara.

“No; I prefer this one,” she answered, turning aside to pluck a *passée* flower that fell to petals in her hand. An hour later I saw the perfect rose in Iris Carew’s hair.

“Niece Martha,” said Aunt Diana energetically, appearing in my room immediately after breakfast, “I do not approve of this division of our party; it is not what we planned.”

“What can I do, aunt? Sara ought not to pay hotel prices – ”

“I am not speaking of Miss St. John; she can stay here if she pleases, of course, but you must come to us.”

“Sara might not like to be left alone, aunt. To be sure,” I continued, not without a grain of malice, “Mr. Hoffman is here, so she need not, he too lonely, but – ”

“John Hoffman *here*?”

“Yes; we came here at his recommendation.”

Aunt Di bit her lips in high vexation; next to Mokes she prized John, who, although a person of most refractory and fatiguing ways, was yet possessed of undoubted Knickerbocker antecedents. She meditated a moment.

“On the whole you are right, Niece Martha,” she said, coming to surface again; “but we shall, of course, keep together as much as possible. For this morning I have planned a visit to the old Spanish fort; Captain Carlyle will accompany us.”

“And who is Captain Carlyle?”

“A young officer stationed here; he introduced himself to the Professor last evening, and afterward mistook me for Mrs. Van Auden, of Thirty-fourth Street. It seems he knows her very well,” continued Aunt Di, with a swallow of satisfaction. (Ah, wise young Captain! Mrs. Van Auden’s handsome face was at least ten years younger than Aunt Diana’s.)

“I saw Iris glancing after a uniform last night as we came around the Plaza,” I said, smiling.

But Aunt Di was true to her colors, and never saw or heard any thing detrimental to her cause.

It was a lovely February morning; the telegraph reported zero weather in New York, but here the thermometer stood at seventy, with a fresh sea-breeze. We stepped up on to the sea-wall at the Basin, where the sail-boats were starting out with pleasure parties for the North Beach. Iris had her Captain; Aunt Diana followed closely arm in arm with Mokes; Miss Sharp, jubilant, had captured the Professor; Sara and I were together as usual, leaving John Hoffman to bring up the rear with his morning cigar.

“The material of this wall,” began the Professor, rapping it with his cane, “is that singular conglomerate called coquina, which is quarried yonder on Anastasia Island; but the coping is, as you will perceive, granite.”

“How delightful to meet the dear old New England stone down here!” exclaimed Miss Sharp, tapping the granite with an enthusiastic gaiter.

“The wall was completed in 1842 at a cost of one hundred thousand dollars, having been built by the United States government,” continued the Professor.

“And why, nobody knows,” added John, from behind.

“To keep the town from washing away, I suppose,” said Sara.

“Of course; but why should the United States government concern itself over the washing away of this ancient little village with its eighteen hundred inhabitants, when it leaves cities with their thousands unaided? The one dock has, as you see, fallen down; a coasting schooner once a month or so is all the commerce, and yet here is a wall nearly a mile in length, stretching across the whole eastern front of the town, as though vast wealth lay behind.”

“The town may grow,” I said.

“It will never be any thing more than a winter resort, Miss Martha.”

“At any rate, the wall is charming to walk upon,” said Iris, dancing along on her high-heeled boots; “it must be lovely here by moonlight.”

“It is,” replied the Captain, with a glance of his blue eyes. He was a marvel of beauty, this young soldier, with his tall, well-knit, graceful form, his wavy golden hair, and blonde mustache sweeping over a mouth of child-like sweetness. He had a cleft in his chin like the young Antinous that he was, while a bold profile and commanding air relieved the otherwise almost too great loveliness of a face which invariably attracted all eyes. Spoiled? Of course he was; what else could you expect? But he was kind-hearted by nature, and endowed with a vast fund of gallantry that carried him along gayly on the topmost wave.

“There is a new moon this very night, I think,” observed Aunt Diana, suggestively, to Mokes.

But Mokes “never could walk here after dark; dizzy, you know – might fall in.”

“Oh, massive old ruin!” cried Iris, as we drew near the fort; “how grand and gray and dignified you look! Have you a name, venerable friend?”

“This interesting relic of Spanish domination was called San Juan de Pinos – ” began the governess, hastily finding the place in her guide-book.

“Oh no, Miss Sharp,” interrupted Aunt Diana, who had noticed with disapprobation the clinging of the lisle-thread glove to the Professor’s lank but learned arm. “You are mistaken again; it is called Fort Marion.”

“It used to be San Marco,” said John.

“I vote for San Marco; Marion is commonplace,” decided Iris, sweeping away the other names with a wave of her dainty little glove.

“A magnificent specimen of the defensive art of two centuries ago,” began the Professor, taking up a position on the water-battery, and beginning to point out with his cane. “It is built, you will observe, in a square or trapezium – ”

“Let us go up and have a dance on the top,” said Iris.

“This is very instructive,” murmured Aunt Diana, moving nearer to her niece. “Miss Sharp, pray call your pupil’s attention to this remarkable relic.” For Mokes had seated himself sulkily on one of the veteran cannon which frowned over the harbor like toothless old watch-dogs. There was no objection to an army Antinous as a picturesque adjunct, Aunt Diana thought; but it was well known that there was very little gold in the service outside of the buttons, while here at hand was a Cræsus, a genuine live Cræsus, sitting sulky and neglected on his cannon!

“Oh, certainly,” said Miss Sharp, coming to the rescue. “Iris, my child, you observe that it is in the form of a trapezoid – ”

“Trapezium,” said the Professor – “trapezium, Miss Sharp, if you please.”

“That daring young man on a – ” chanted the Captain under his breath, as if in confidence to the southeast tower.

“In the salient angles of the bastions are four turrets or bartizans,” continued the Professor.

“Oh yes; how interesting!” ejaculated the governess, claspings her lisle-threads together. “Partisans!”

“Bar-ti-zans,” repeated the Professor, with cutting distinctness. “The moat, as you will notice, is fortified by an internal barrier, and there is an outer wall also which extends around the whole, following its various flexuses. By close observation we shall probably be able to trace the lines of the abatis, scarp, counterscarp, and fraise, all belonging to the period of mediæval fortification.”

“The Great Work is evidently to the fore now,” whispered Sara, as we sat together on a second cannon.

“The lunette, now, is considered quite a curiosity,” said the Captain, briskly breaking in. “Miss Carew, allow me to show it to you.”

“Lunette!” said the Professor, with lofty scorn.

“That is what we call it down here, Sir,” replied Antinous, carelessly. “Miss Iris, there, is an odd little stairway there – ”

“Lunette!” repeated the Professor again. “But that is an example of the lamentable ignorance of the age. Why, that is a barbican, the only remaining specimen in the country, and, indeed, hard to be excelled in Europe itself.”

“I have heard it described as a demi-lune,” I remarked, bringing forward my one item, the item I had been preserving for days. (I try to have ready a few little pellets of information; I find it is expected, now that I am forty years old.) The Professor took off his tall silk hat and wiped his forehead despairingly. “Demi-lune!” he repeated – “demi-lune! The man who said that must be a – ”

“Demi-lunatic,” suggested John. “Forgive me, Miss Martha; it isn’t mine, it’s quoted.”

We crossed a little draw-bridge, and passed through the ruined outwork, barbican, lune, or demi-lune, whichever it was. Iris and the Captain had disappeared. At the second draw-bridge we came face to face with the main entrance, surmounted by a tablet bearing an inscription and the Spanish coat of arms.

“It seems to be two dragons, two houses for the dragons, and a supply of mutton hung up below,” said Sara, irreverently making game of the royal insignia of Spain. “Oh dear!” she sighed in an under-tone, “I ought to have all this written down.”

“Here are the main facts, Miss St. John,” said John Hoffman, taking out his notebook. “I collected them several years ago out of piles of authorities; they are authentic skeletons as far as they go, and you can fill them out with as many adjectives, fancies, and exclamation points as you please.” He walked on, joining the others in the inner court-yard, where the Professor, the old sergeant in charge, the piles of cannon-balls, and all the ruined doorways were engaging in a wild mêlée of information. Left alone, Sara and I read as follows: “Fort here as far back as 1565. Enlarged several times, and finally finished much as it now stands in 1755. The Appalachian Indians worked on it sixty years; also Mexican convicts. The inscription over the entrance says that the fort was finished when Ferdinand Sixth was King of Spain, and Heredia Governor of Florida. It has been many times attacked, twice besieged, never taken. Occupied in 1862 by the Fourth New Hampshire regiment.”

We had read so far when Aunt Diana came out through the sally-port. “Have you seen Iris?” she asked. “The sergeant is going to show us the window through which the Coochy escaped.”

“The Coochy?”

“A cat, I believe; some kind of a wild-cat,” said Aunt Diana, vaguely, as her anxious eyes scanned every inch of the moat and outworks in search of the vanished niece. At length she spied a floating blue ribbon. “There they are, back in that – in that illumined thing.”

“Oh, Aunt Di! Why, that is the demi-lune.”

“Well, whatever it is, do call Iris down directly.”

I went after the delinquents, discovering after some search the little stone stairway, nicely masked by an innocent-looking wall, where was a second stone tablet containing the two dragons, their two houses, and the supply of mutton hung up below. There on the topmost grassy stair were the two young people, and had it not been for that floating blue ribbon, there they might have remained in ambush all the morning.

“Come down,” I cried, looking up, laughingly, from the foot of the stair – “come down, Iris. Aunt Di wishes you to see the escaped cat.”

“I don’t care about cats,” pouted Iris, slowly descending. “I am glad he escaped. Let him go; I do not want to see him.”

“Iris,” began Aunt Di, “pray what has occupied you all this time?”

“The study of fortifications, aunt; you have no idea how interesting it is – that demi-lune.”

“Many persons have found it so,” observed John.

“We could not quite decide whether it was, after all, a demi-lune or a barbican,” pursued Iris.

“Many persons have found the same difficulty; indeed, visit after visit has been necessary to decide the question, and even then it has been left unsettled,” said John, gravely.

Following Aunt Diana, we all went into a vaulted chamber lighted by a small high-up window, or rather embrasure, in the heavy stone wall.

“Through that window the distinguished Seminole chieftain Coa-coo-chee, that is for to say, the Wild-cat, made his celebrated escape by starving himself to an atomy, squirming up, and squeezing through,” announced the sergeant, who stood in front as torch-bearer.

“Then it wasn’t a cat, after all,” said Iris.

“Only in a Pickwickian sense,” said John.

“Now *I* thought all the while it was Osceola,” said Sara, wearily.

“The Seminole war – ” began the Professor.

“Captain, I am sure you know all about these things,” said Iris; “pray tell me who was this Caloochy.”

“Well,” said Antinous, hesitating, “I believe he was the son of – son of King Philip, and he had something to do with the Dade massacre.”

“King Philip? Oh yes, now I know,” said Iris. “Chapter twenty-seven, verse five: ‘Philip, while hiding at Mount Hope, was heard to exclaim, Alas, I am the last of the Wampanoags! Now indeed am I ready to die.’ ”

“Oh no, Iris dear,” said Miss Sharp, hastily correcting; “that was the New England chieftain. This Philip was a Seminole – Philip of the Withlacoochee.”

“Osceola is in it somewhere, I feel convinced,” persisted Sara; “he is always turning up when least expected, like the immortal Pontiac of the West. There is something about the Caloosahatchee too.”

“Are you not thinking of the distinguished chieftains Holatoochee and Taholoochee, and the river Chattahoochee?” suggested John.

“For my part, I can’t think of any thing but the chorus of that classical song, *The Ham-fat Man*, ‘with a hoochee-koochee-koochee,’ you know,” whispered the Captain to Iris.

“Don’t I!” she answered. “I have a small brother who adores that melody, and plays it continually on his banjo.”

The next thing, of course, was the secret dungeon, and we crossed the court-yard, where the broad stone way led up to the ramparts, occupied during the late war by the tents of the United States soldiers, who preferred these breezy quarters to the dark chambers below. We passed the old chapel with its portico, inner altar, and niches for holy-water; the hall of justice. The furnace for heating shot was outside, and the southeast turret still held the frame-work for the bell which once rang out the hours over the water.

Standing in the gloomy subterranean dungeon, we listened to the old sergeant's story – the fissure, the discovery of the walled-up entrance, the iron cage, and the human bones.

"Oh, do come out," I said. "Your picturesque Spaniards, Sara, are too much for me."

"But who were the bones, I wonder?" mused Iris.

"Yes," said Aunt Diana, "who were they? Mr. Mokes, what do *you* think?"

Mokes thought "they were rascals of some kind, you know – thieves, perhaps."

"Huguenots," from John.

"Recreant priests," from myself.

"The architect of the fort, imprisoned that the secrets of its construction might die with him," suggested Miss Sharp.

"A prince of the blood royal, inconvenient to have around, and therefore sent over here to be out of the way," said Iris.

"For my part, I feel convinced that the bones were the mortal remains of 'Casper Hauser,' the 'Man with the Iron Mask,' and 'Have we a Bourbon among us,' " said Sara. Mokes looked at her. He never was quite sure whether she was simply strong-minded or a little out of her head. He did not know now, but decided to move a little farther away from her vicinity.

The Professor had left us some time before, and as we came out through the sally-port we saw him down in the moat in company with the fiddler-crabs, an ancient horse, and two small darkies.

"I have discovered the line of the counterscarp!" he cried, excitedly. "This is undoubtedly the talus of the covered way. If we walk slowly all around we may find other interesting evidences."

But there was mud in the moat, not to speak of the fiddlers, whose peculiarity is that you never can tell which way they are going – I don't believe they know themselves; and so our party declined the interesting evidences with thanks, and passing the demi-lune again, went down to the sea-wall. Miss Sharp looked back hesitatingly; but Aunt Diana had her eye upon her, and she gave it up.

In the afternoon all the party excepting myself went over to the North Beach in a sail-boat. I went down to the Basin to see them off. "*Osceola*" was painted on the stern of the boat. "Of course!" said Sara. She longed to look out over the broad ocean once more, otherwise she would hardly have consented to go without me. The boat glided out on the blue inlet, and Miss Sharp grasped the professor's arm as the mainsail swung round and the graceful little craft tilted far over in the fresh breeze.

"If you are frightened, Miss Sharp, pray change seats with me," I heard Aunt Diana say. The Captain was not there, but Mokes was; and John Hoffman was lying at ease on the little deck at the stern, watching the flying clouds. The boat courtesied herself away over the blue, and, left alone, I wandered off down the sea-wall, finding at the south end the United States Barracks, a large building with broad piazzas overlooking the water, and a little green parade-ground in front, like an oasis in the omnipresent sand. At the north end of the wall floated the flag of old San Marco, here at the south end floated the flag of the barracks, and the two marked the limits of the Ancient City. The post is called St. Francis, as the foundations of the building formed part of the old Franciscan monastery which was erected here more than two centuries ago. Turning, I came to a narrow street where stood a monument to the Confederate dead – a broken shaft carved in coquina. Little St. Augustine had its forty-four names inscribed here, and while I was reading them over a shadow fell on the tablet, and, turning, I saw an old negro, who, leaning on a cane, had paused behind me. "Good afternoon, uncle," I said. "Did you know the soldiers whose names are here?"

"Yas, I knowed 'em; my ole woman took car' ob some ob dem when dey was babies."

"The war made great changes for your people, uncle."

"Yas, we's free now. I tank de Lord dat day de news come dat my chil'en's free."

"But you yourself, uncle? It did not make so much difference to you?" I said, noticing the age and infirmity of the old man. But straightening his bent body, and raising his whitened head with a proud happiness in his old eyes, he answered,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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