

Howells William Dean

**A Confession of St.
Augustine**



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William Dean Howells

A Confession of St. Augustine

PART I

WHEN we drove from the station up into the town, in the March of our first sojourn, and saw the palmettoes all along the streets, among the dim live-oaks and the shining magnolias, our doubting hearts lifted, and we said: "Yes, yes, it is all true! This is St. Augustine as advertised: the air, the sky, the wooden architecture of the 1870's and '80's, when St. Augustine flourished most, and the memory of that dear Constance Fenimore Woolson, who worshiped Florida past all Italy, was still sweet in our literature. Yes, it is all incredibly true!" Then, as we made our way to Mr. Hastings's beautiful masterpieces, the hotels Ponce de Leon and Alcazar, and took refuge in the Neo-Andalusian of the simpler hostelry from the Belated American of those obsolescent cottages, we gathered our faith and courage more and more about us, and gave ourselves to that charm of the place which has not yet failed us.

The charm is very complex, as a true charm always is, but the place is very simple, as a place which has taken time to grow always is. It is especially so if the place, like St. Augustine, has had its period of waning as well as waxing, and has gently lapsed from its climax. The heyday of its prosperity was in the years between the 1870's and '80's, when St. Augustine promised to be lastingly, as it was most fitly, the winter resort for the whole sneezing and coughing North. Then the Great Freeze blasted the oranges and hopes of all Upper Florida; then California flowered and fruited ahead; then the summer shores of Palm Beach and Miami took the primacy from California, and Florida was again the desire of our winter travel and sojourn, with a glory of motoring and dancing such as Florida never knew before, or can ever know, at St. Augustine. But the little city continued the metropolis of the mind and heart for such as did not care to shine with the luster of money; and those beautiful hotels remained without rivalry from the vast wooden caravansaries of the more tropical resorts, and still remain holding down their quarter of the local topography.

It is better, though, to own at once that the charm of St. Augustine derives nothing from any thing like grandeur in the domestic architecture of the past. In the Spanish city there were probably no dwellings of such stateliness as the three or four mansions of our own Colonial classic, which with their groves and gardens redeem the American town from the reproach of those deplorable 'seventies and 'eighties, when our eclectic architecture tried its 'prentice hand on so many of the cottages. The Spaniards had built themselves unassuming houses of coquina, always flush upon the sidewalks, and painted their coating of stucco in the buffs and blues and pinks of the Latin taste; and their dwellings never had the proportion of palaces, if one may imagine them from the few that remain. But when you leave Mr. Hastings's hotels, and keep along King Street eastward on the town plan, you are almost at once in the Plaza, which is the heart of every Spanish town, and which begins here with the fountained and palmettoed oblong inclosing what was once the Spanish governor's palace, or so said to be. It is now the American post-office and custom-house, but is inalienably dignified and venerable, with some galleried façades of the same period on one side, and a compendious reach of cheerful shops on the other. These are on King Street, and you must cross St. George Street (stretching crookedly northward with shops and hotels to the old city gate, and southward with embowered dwellings of divers architectural effects and intentions) before you are again at the Plaza, holding the same eastward course to the shining bay, and to the long bridge built on piers of palmetto logs after the fashion invented at York Harbor in Maine and followed in the Long Bridge at Boston. But the bridge from St. Augustine to Anastasia Island is longer than any other of its kind, even that over the Piscataqua at Portsmouth which it also excels in the enormity of its tolls, as you shall find when

you cross it to the snow-white billowing of the low northward sand-dunes and the thick gloom of the cedar and live-oak woods rising from the water to the southward in an illusion of uplands. All round the city where there are not stretches of palmetto scrub and pine woods, there is the far sweep of the salt-savannahs, with reed like grasses growing tall, and keeping their Spanish brown from November till March, and then slowly turning green, as it were insensibly, almost invisibly, after the use of vegetation in the South. In the waters around, hidden in the deeps or bristling from the shallows, grow the exhaustless ranks of the little oysters, which before the white man came to know their deliciousness left their shells by the million tons. These are still used in the construction of the beautiful shell roads of the country round, now replaced in the town by the harsh brick pavements which the municipality is so proud of and which really hold down the dust as the shells could not.

It is to be said in the praise of the municipality that it keeps these pavements swept blamelessly clean; and by night you may hear the negroes sweeping, doubly darkling over their surface, and softly gossiping together. Theirs are not the only black voices you hear, for their casual race seems to have no more stated hours for sleeping than for eating. Their mellow murmurs, especially when the nights are warm, rise in what seems perpetual joking, as if from their humorous pleasure at being alive together in the same amusing world; and if you have no worse conscience than the talkers, their voices will lull you again to the slumbers they have broken. It is as if a swarm of blackbirds, carrying news of the spring northward, had swept chuckling through the trees and fluttered the fans of the palms and the leaves of the magnolias with such comment in their course as would naturally occur to blackbirds.

By day these kindly colored folk did not seem to superabound as they do in Charleston, but this may have been because in the tourist season they are really outnumbered by the whites in St. Augustine. They have their own scattering quarters which they are not strictly kept to; they are segregated, but not concentrated, though their souls are saved in separate churches, and their minds informed in separate schools. They even have their own picture-theaters, but they are softly insinuated through the white population in all subordinate service, and I never knew the slightest unkindness of word or deed offered them. If there were any you would not know it from them; by day, at least, they are silent, and they seem always inoffensive, though very independent. You mostly know them as the drivers of the wood-colored surreys which still anticipate the elsewhere universal taxicabs, and as the disseminators of more or less unreliable information. They do not mean to deceive the stranger, and their own ignorance may have been first abused. As I heard them passing our gate in St. George Street (where we dwelt in the winter of our second sojourn at St. Augustine), and pointing out the objects of interest, I could have wished to share in both the illusion and delusion. Their race apparently rested content in its lowly employs, with seldom the hope or endeavor for higher things. In some cases which seemed few, it sometimes became propertied, and owned its usually decrepit cabins in and beyond the suburbs; but it was said that if any housing improved, and put on an air of prosperity it was not well regarded. This may have been the excuse of racial unthrift, and I have to urge, to the contrary the signal instance of a colored man living in a very comfortable house of his own in his own grounds, without molestation from any lowest or spitefullest white witness of his condition. He paid what seemed heavy interest to me, and taxes which seemed heavy to him, under the municipal government of St. Augustine which has lately changed to the commission form (a favorite experiment in the South as well as the West) without abatement of the rates, which remain of metropolitan proportions.

The colored people are by far for the most part entirely black, to the credit of both races, since intermarriage is abhorred both by the laws and customs, and they are of the prevailing plainness of their race. On the other hand, one might go very far and wide elsewhere without seeing so much outright beauty among the whites, and especially in the sex whose business it is to be beautiful, as in St. Augustine. Age is no handsomer there than in other places, and now and then country folks of the cadaverous cracker type appeared with the produce of their sandy fields or groves; but the beauty and grace of the young girls of city birth was extraordinarily great. Perhaps it was from my lifelong

fondness for the Spanish that I chose to think these divine creatures, so, slimly shaped and darkly fair, were of the Spanish race which for three hundred years ruled or misruled in St. Augustine. There was the like fineness in some of the men's faces which earned later into life than in the women's; but the Spaniards have left so little trace otherwise in the city, that they were probably those insular Spanish, the Minorcans, whose touching story is a minor strain in the romance of the city's life.

In all public places the American girl prevailed in the excess of fashion which it is her prerogative to exploit everywhere, with the helpless American father fettered to her high-heeled, sharp-toed little shoes, and the American mother distractedly struggling to keep up with her. This sovereign of our society did not appear very early in the winter, or indeed till after the turn of the year, when with a roar of cannon and a flutter of Hags (the Spanish colors romantically pre-eminent) the gates of the great Ponce de Leon Hotel were thrown open and the season was officially proclaimed. By that time the Alcazar was pretty well filled in lounge and *patio* by such fashion as had not waited so long as at the Ponce de Leon to come up from Palm Beach, or perhaps not even been there, or wished to be; these things are mysteries which one had better leave to the pictures and the letter-press of the Sunday editions. I myself was happiest in the looks of those hoarders and roomers who abounded in the Plaza from the small hotels and lodging-houses and intimidated my meek spirit less than the guests of the two great hotels which are not quite so much the last word in architecture as in fashion. They are the syllabing of the architect who won the commission for them while yet a student in the *École des Beaux Arts*, and pronounced it in accents which, though still so distinctive, are now a little archaic. People now do not want that series of drawing and dining-rooms which open from the inner *patio* of the Ponce de Leon; and if they did, they would not have the form fitly to inhabit them; their short skirts and their lounge-coats are not for such gracious interiors, but rather for the golf-links.

One heard of teas in the afternoons and of balls at night which filled these rooms, but, as I have owned, I am afraid of the great world, and am so eager to despise the pride of life when I think I see it that I make myself unhappy in the vision, and I would rather invite the reader to fly with me to the more congenial society of the Plaza. I will not even attempt to speak of the balls at the Ponce de Leon from the exclusion, too voluntary to know that it might have been involuntary, which I suffered. Any one could share the pleasure of the tango-teas in the most fashionable restaurants by simply coming to them and either dancing them or drinking them. The dancing was actually the affair of young couples who seemed to stray in from the street, and circled round between the tables in those rhythmical embraces of the dance to the harsh clatter of the band and the applause of those who preferred the tea form of tango. It was very strange, and a little periculous-looking, but practically it came to no more harm than the waltz did in its day when it alarmed the delicacy of Byron's muse a hundred years ago. Besides these tango-teas there were street dances at night promised by local associations, but mostly defeated by cold snaps from the North or West, which seized them as it were unawares, after the street had been roped off, and hung with lanterns, or flooded with moonlight. Where you expected a gay masquerade what you got was a couple or two in citizen's dress performing to the music of what sounded like a German band, but may have been German-American. Cordova Street was the favorite scene of such hilarities, but there are many other St. Augustine streets named after Spanish cities or provinces which I liked to walk through or drive through merely because they were called Saragossa, or Granada, or Barcelona, or Malaga, or the like, and brought their namesakes endearingly to mind.

One year I recall, however, when the kinder night caressed the scene with the tenderness of summer, and glowed upon the same southward space of Cordova Street where with the first hour of dusk the feet of the dancers began to whisper on the sanded asphalt. The new moon, with upward-tilted horns, swam in the blue above the palms of the Alcazar gardens and sank into its depths while the dance thickened in the mystical pace of the one-step and the music throbbed with the monotony of the barbaric time. It was such a scene as we might have looked down upon from some balcony in medieval Florence, where the youth of the city danced from street to street, and the children were allowed up to look on till all hours, as they were now in St. Augustine.

In St. Augustine the shops and theaters are open on Sunday, as in any continental European town, but the same may be said of the churches, which are abundantly frequented. The favorite dissipation of the local youth was apparently the ice-cream served at small tables in the drug-stores, where with the bane the antidote could be promptly supplied; but I should say, or almost say, that the favorite dissipation of the aliens of every age was the sail to the nearer and farther North Beaches. This could be afforded at twenty-five cents, which paid the sail both ways, and the transit of the sandy stretch of the island to the ocean shore in a horse-car drawn by a mule hitched at the side of the car, but did not include the roast oysters at the restaurants. If you wish to lose yourself in the sandy jungles of Anastasia Island you may cross by trolley-car on a pro rata payment of that supremely extortionate toll which I have already lamented. But I hope you do not wish to cross as yet, but will be willing to keep with me along the bay-front, either way you like, past some minor hotels and pleasant dwellings southward and the ruins of old Spanish houses and dwellings northward, when suddenly the fort of San Marco, now misnamed Marion, blocks your way with its mass, darkly but not gloomily Spanish, and incomparably monumental.

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