

The Wrong Side of the Tapestry



(excerpts from *Palmetto Leaves* pages 26-39)

The book, Palmetto Leaves, was published in 1872. The author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was living in Mandarin, Florida (near Jacksonville). In this excerpt, she compares tourist expectations of Florida with the true nature of the state.

It is not to be denied that full half of the tourists and travelers that come to Florida return intensely disappointed, and even disguised. Why? Evidently because Florida, like a piece of embroidery, has two sides to it, --one side all tag-rag and thrums, without order or position; and the other side showing flowers and arabesques and brilliant coloring. Both these sides exist. Both are undeniable, undisputed facts not only in the case of Florida, but of every place and thing under the sun. There is a right side and a wrong side to everything.

Now, tourists and travelers generally come with their heads full of certain romantic ideas of waving palms, orange-groves, flowers, and fruit, all bursting forth in tropical abundance; and, in consequence, they go through Florida with

disappointment at every step. If the banks of the St. John's were covered with orange-groves, if they blossomed every month in the year, if they were always loaded with fruit, if pine-apples and bananas grew wild, if the flowers hung in festoons from tree to tree, if the ground were enameled with them all winter long, so that you saw nothing else, then they would begin to be satisfied.

But, in point of fact, they find, in approaching Florida, a dead sandy level, with patches behind them of rough coarse grass, and tall pine-trees, whose tops are so far in the air that they seem to cast no shade, and a little scrubby underbrush. The few houses to be seen along the railroad are the forlornest of huts. The cattle that stray about are thin and poverty-stricken, and look as if they were in the last tottering stages of starvation.

Meanwhile, we caution everybody coming to Florida, Don't hope for too much. Because you hear that roses and callas blossom in the open air all winter, and flowers abound in the woods, don't expect to find an eternal summer. Prepare yourself to see a great deal that looks rough and desolate and coarse; prepare yourself for some chilly days and nights; and, whatever else you neglect to bring with you, bring the resolution, strong and solid, always to make the best of things.

The great charm, after all, of this life, is its outdoorness. To be able to spend your winter out of doors, even though some days be cold; to be able to sit with windows open; to hear birds daily; to eat fruit from trees, and pick flowers from hedges, all winter long, —is about the whole of the story. This you can do; and this is why Florida is life and health to the invalid.

We get every year quantities of letters from persons of small fortunes, asking our advice whether they had better move to Florida. For our part, we never advise people to move anywhere. As a general rule, it is the person who feels the inconvenience of a present position, so as to want to move, who will feel the inconvenience of a future one. Florida has a lovely winter; but it has also three formidable summer months. July, August, and September, when the heat is excessive, and the liabilities of new settlers to sickness so great, that we should never wish to take responsibility of bringing anybody here. It is true that a very comfortable number of people do live through them; but still it is not a joke, by any means, to move to a new country. The first colony in New England lost just half its members in the first six months. The rich bottomlands around Cincinnati proved graves to many a family before they were brought under cultivation.

But Florida is peculiarly adapted to the needs of people who can afford two houses, and want a refuge from the drain that winter makes on the health. As people now have summer-houses at Nahant or Rye, so they might, as a small expense, have winter-houses in Florida, and come here and be at home. That is the great charm, —to be at home. A house here can be simple and inexpensive, and yet very charming. Already, around us a pretty group of winter-house is rising; and we look forward to the time when there shall be many more; when, all along the shore of the St. John's, cottages and villas shall look out from the green trees.



Harriet Beecher Stowe's house in Mandarin, FL.