

Science Fiction

Looking for the Fountain

By Robert Silverberg


fictionwise *contemporary*



Fictionwise Publications

www.fictionwise.com

This ebook is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright ©1992 Agberg, LTD

First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, May 1992

NOTICE: This ebook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means to a person other than the original purchaser is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to fines and/or imprisonment. Fictionwise Publications offers a \$500 reward to anyone who provides information leading to the conviction of a person infringing on any Fictionwise ebook copyright.

COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

This ebook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.

My name is Francisco de Ortega and by the grace of God I am 89 years old and I have seen many a strange thing in my time, but nothing so strange as the Indian folk of the island called Florida, whose great dream it is to free the Holy Land from the Saracen conquerors that profane it.

It was fifty years ago that I encountered these marvelous people, when I sailed with his excellency the illustrious Don Juan Ponce de Leon on his famous and disastrous voyage in quest of what is wrongly called the Fountain of Youth. It was not a Fountain of Youth at all that he sought, but a Fountain of Manly Strength, which is somewhat a different thing. Trust me: I was

there, I saw and heard everything, I was by Don Juan Ponce's side when his fate overtook him. I know the complete truth of this endeavor and I mean to set it all down now so there will be no doubt; for I alone survive to tell the tale, and as God is my witness I will tell it truthfully now, here in my ninetieth year, all praises be to Him and to the Mother who bore Him.

* * * *

The matter of the Fountain, first.

Commonly, I know, it is called the Fountain of Youth. You will read that in many places, such as in the book about the New World which that Italian wrote who lived at Seville, Peter Martyr of Anghiera, where he says, "The governor of the Island of Boriquena, Juan Ponce de Leon, sent forth two caravels to seek the Islands of Boyuca in which the Indians affirmed there to be a

fountain or spring whose water is of such marvelous virtue, that when it is drunk it makes old men young again.”

This is true, so far as it goes. But when Peter Martyr talks of “making old men young again,” his words must be interpreted in a poetic way.

Perhaps long life is truly what that Fountain really provides, along with its other and more special virtue—who knows? For I have tasted of that Fountain's waters myself, and here I am nearly 90 years of age and still full of vigor, I who was born in the year of our Lord 1473, and how many others are still alive today who came into the world then, when Castile and Aragon still were separate kingdoms? But I tell you that what Don Juan Ponce was seeking was not strictly speaking a Fountain of Youth at all, but rather a Fountain that offered a benefit of a very much more intimate kind. For I was there, I saw and heard

everything. And they have cowardly tongues, those who say it was a Fountain of Youth, for it would seem that out of shame they choose not to speak honestly of the actual nature of the powers that the Fountain which we sought was supposed to confer.

It was when we were in the island of Hispaniola that we first heard of this wonderful Fountain, Don Juan Ponce and I. This was, I think, in the year 1504. Don Juan Ponce, a true nobleman and a man of high and elegant thoughts, was governor then in the province of Higüey of that island, which was ruled at that time by Don Nicolás de Ovando, successor to the great Admiral Cristóbal Colón. There was in Higüey then a certain Indian cacique or chieftain of remarkable strength and force, who was reputed to keep seven wives and to satisfy each and every one of them each night of the week. Don Juan Ponce was curious

about the great virility of this cacique, and one day he sent a certain Aurelio Herrera to visit him in his village.

“He does indeed have many wives,” said Herrera, “though whether there were five or seven or fifty-nine I could not say, for there were women surrounding all the time I was there, coming and going in such multitudes that I was unable to make a clear count, and swarms of children also, and from the looks of it the women were his wives and the children were his children.”

“And what sort of manner of man is this cacique?” asked Don Juan Ponce.

“Why,” said Herrera, “he is a very ordinary man, narrow of shoulders and shallow of chest, whom you would never think capable of such marvels of manhood, and he is past middle age besides. I remarked on this to him, and he said that when he was young he was easily exhausted and found the manly

exercises a heavy burden. But then he journeyed to Boyuca, which is an island to the north of Cuba that is also called Bimini, and there he drank of a spring that cures the debility of sex. Since then, he asserts, he has been able to give pleasure to any number of women in a night without the slightest fatigue."

I was there. I saw and heard everything. *El enflaquecimiento del sexo* was the phrase that Aurelio Herrera used, "the debility of sex." The eyes of Don Juan Ponce de Leon opened wide at this tale, and he turned to me and said, "We must go in search of this miraculous fountain some day, Francisco, for there will be great profit in the selling of its waters."

Do you see? Not a word had been spoken about long life, but "only about the curing of *el enflaquecimiento del sexo*. Nor was Don Juan Ponce in need of any such cure for himself, I assure you, for in the year 1504 he was just thirty years old, a lusty

and aggressive man of fiery and restless spirit, and red-haired as well, and you know what is said about the virility of red-haired men. As for me, I will not boast, but I will say only that since the age of thirteen I have rarely gone a single night without a woman's company, and have been married four times, on the fourth occasion to a woman fifty years younger than myself. And if you find yourself in the province of Valladolid where I live and come to pay a call on me I can show you young Diego Antonio de Ortega whom you would think was my great-grandson, and little Juana Maria de Ortega who could be my great-granddaughter, for the boy is seven and the girl is five, but in truth they are my own children, conceived when I was past eighty years of age; and I have had many other sons and daughters too, some of whom are old people now and some are dead.

So it was not to heal our own debilities that Don Juan Ponce and I longed to find this wonderful Fountain, for of such shameful debilities we had none at all, he and I. No, we yearned for the Fountain purely for the sake of the riches we might derive from it: for each year saw hundreds or perhaps thousands of men come from Spain to the New World to seek their fortunes, and some of these were older men who no doubt suffered from a certain *enflaquecimiento*. In Spain I understand they use the powdered horn of the unicorn to cure this malady, or the crushed shells of a certain insect, though I have never had need of such things myself. But those commodities are not to be found in the New World, and it was Don Juan Ponce's hope that great profit might be made by taking possession of Bimini and selling the waters of the Fountain to those who had need of such a remedy. This is the truth, whatever others may claim.

* * * *

But the pursuit of gold comes before everything, even the pursuit of miraculous Fountains of Manly Strength. We did not go at once in search of the Fountain because word came to Don Juan Ponce in Hispaniola that the neighboring island of Borinquen was rich in gold, and thereupon he applied to Governor Ovando for permission to go there and conquer it. Don Juan Ponce already somewhat knew that island, having seen its western coast briefly in 1493 when he was a gentleman volunteer in the fleet of Cristobal Colon, and its beauty had so moved him that he had resolved someday to return and make himself master of the place.

With one hundred men, he sailed over to this Borinquen in a small caravel, landing there on Midsummer Day, 1506, at the same bay he had visited earlier aboard the ship of the great

Admiral. Seeing us arrive with such force, the cacique of the region was wise enough to yield to the inevitable and we took possession with very little fighting.

So rich did the island prove to be that we put the marvelous Fountain of which we had previously heard completely out of our minds. Don Juan Ponce was made governor of Borinquen by royal appointment and for several years the natives remained peaceful and we were able to obtain a great quantity of gold indeed. This is the same island that Cristobal Colon called San Juan Bautista and which people today call Puerto Rico.

All would have been well for us there but for the stupidity of a certain captain of our forces, Cristobal de Sotomayor, who treated the natives so badly that they rose in rebellion against us. This was in the year of our Lord 1511. So we found ourselves at war; and Don Juan Ponce fought with all the great

valor for which he was renowned, doing tremendous destruction against our pagan enemies. We had among us at that time a certain dog, called Bercerillo, of red pelt and black eyes, who could tell simply by smell alone whether an Indian was friendly to us or hostile, and could understand the native speech as well; and the Indians were more afraid of ten Spaniards with this dog, than of one hundred without him. Don Juan Ponce rewarded Bercerillo's bravery and cleverness by giving the dog a full share of all the gold and slaves we captured, as though he were a crossbowman; but in the end the Indians killed him. I understand that a valiant pup of this Bercerillo, Leoncillo by name, went with Nunez de Balboa when he crossed the Isthmus of Panama and discovered the great ocean beyond.

During this time of our difficulties with the savages of Puerto Rico, Don Diego Colon, the son of the great Admiral, was able to

take advantage of the trouble and make himself governor of the island in the place of Don Juan Ponce. Don Juan Ponce thereupon returned to Spain and presented himself before King Ferdinand, and told him the tale of the fabulous Fountain that restores manly power. King Ferdinand, who was greatly impressed by Don Juan Ponce's lordly bearing and noble appearance, at once granted him a royal permit to seek and conquer the isle of Bimini where this Fountain was said to be. Whether this signifies that His Most Catholic Majesty was troubled by debilities of a sexual sort, I would not dare to say. But the king was at that time a man of sixty years and it would not be unimaginable that some difficulty of that kind had begun to perplex him.

Swiftly Don Juan Ponce returned to Puerto Rico with the good news of his royal appointment, and on the third day of March of

the year of our Lord 1513 we set forth from the Port of San German in three caravels to search for Bimini and its extraordinary Fountain.

I should say at this point that it was a matter of course that Don Juan Ponce should have asked me to take part in the quest for this Fountain. I am a man of Tervas de San Campos in the province of Valladolid, where Don Juan Ponce de Leon also was born less than one year after I was, and he and I played together as children and were friends all through our youth. As I have said, he first went to the New World in 1493, when he was nineteen years of age, as a gentleman aboard the ship of Admiral Cristobal Colon, and after settling in Hispaniola he wrote to me and told me of the great wealth of the New World and urged me to join him there. Which I did forthwith; and we were rarely separated from then until the day of his death.

Our flagship was the *Santiago*, with Diego Bermudez as its master—the brother to the man who discovered the isle of Bermuda—and the famous Anton de Alaminos as its pilot. We had two Indian pilots too, who knew the islands of that sea. Our second ship was the *Santa Maria de Consolacion*, with Juan Bono de Quexo as its captain, and the third was the *San Cristobal*. All of these vessels were purchased by Don Juan Ponce himself out of the riches he had laid by in the time when he was governor of Puerto Rico.

I have to tell you that there was not one priest in our company, not that we were ungodly men but only that it was not our commander's purpose on this voyage to bring the word of Jesus to the natives of Bimini. We did have some few women among us, including my own wife Beatriz, who had come out from Spain to be with me, and grateful I was to have her by my

side; and my wife's young sister Juana was aboard the ship also, that I could better look after her among these rough Spaniards of the New World.

Northward we went. After ten days we halted at the isle of San Salvador to scrape weeds from the bottom of one of our ships. Then we journeyed west-northwest, passing the isle of Ciguateo on Easter Sunday, and, continuing onward into waters that ran ever shallower, we caught sight on the second day of April of a large delightful island of great and surpassing beauty, all blooming and burgeoning with a great host of wildflowers whose delectable odors came wafting to us on the warm gentle breeze. We named this isle La Florida, because Easter is the season when things flower and so we call that time of year in our language Pascua Florida. And we said to one another at once, seeing so beautiful a place, that this island of Florida must

surely be the home of the wondrous Fountain that restores men to their fleshly powers and grants all their carnal desires to the fullest.

* * * *

Of the loveliness of Florida I could speak for a day and a night and a night and a day, and not exhaust its marvels. The shallowing green waters give way to white crests of foam that fall upon beaches paved hard with tiny shells; and when you look beyond the beach you see dunes and marshes, and beyond those a land altogether level, not so much as a hillock upon it, where glistening sluggish lagoons bordered brilliantly with rushes and sedges show the way to the mysterious forests of the interior.

Those forests! Palms and pines, and gnarled gray trees whose names are known only to God! Trees covered with snowy

beards! Trees whose leaves are like swords! Flowers everywhere, dizzying us with their perfume! We were stunned by the fragrance of jasmine and honeysuckle. We heard the enchanting songs of a myriad of birds. We stared in wonder at the bright blooms. We doffed our helmets and dropped to our knees to give thanks to God for having led us to this most beautiful of shores.

Don Juan Ponce was the first of us to make his way to land, carrying with him the banner of Castile and Leon. He thrust the royal standard into the soft sandy soil and in the name of God and Spain took possession of the place. This was at the mouth of a river which he named in honor of his patron, the blessed San Juan. Then, since there were no Indians thereabouts who might lead us to the Fountain, we returned to our vessels and continued along the coast of that place.

Though the sea looked gentle we found the currents unexpectedly strong, carrying us northward so swiftly that we feared we would never see Puerto Rico again. Therefore did Don Juan Ponce give orders for us to turn south; but although we had a fair following wind the current was so strong against us that we could make no headway, and at last we were compelled to anchor in a cove. Here we spent some days, with the ships straining against their cables; and during that time the little *San Cristobal* was swept out to sea and we lost sight of her altogether, though the day was bright and the weather fair. But within two days by God's grace she returned to us.

At this time we saw our first Indians, but they were far from friendly. Indeed they set upon us at once and two of our men were wounded by their little darts and arrows, which were tipped with sharp points made of bone. When night came we

were able to withdraw and sail on to another place that we called the Rio de la Cruz, where we collected wood and water; and here we were attacked again, by sixty Indians, but they were driven off. And so we continued for many days, until in latitude 28 degrees 15 minutes we did round a cape, which we called Cabo de los Corrientes on account of the powerful currents, which were stronger than the wind.

Here it was that we had the strangest part of our voyage, indeed the strangest thing I have ever seen in all my ninety years. Which is to say that we encountered at this time in this remote and hitherto unknown land the defenders of the Christian Faith, the sworn foes of the Saracens, the last sons of the Crusades, whose great dream it was, even now, to wrest the Holy Land of our Savior's birth from those infidel followers of Muhammad who seized it long ago and rule it today.

We suspected nothing of any of what awaited us when we dropped our anchors near an Indian town on the far side of Cabo de los Corrientes. Cautiously, for we had received such a hostile reception farther up the coast, we made our landfall a little way below the village and set about the task of filling our water casks and cutting firewood. While this work was being carried out we became aware that the Indians had left their village and had set out down the shore to encounter us, for we heard them singing and chanting even before we could see them; and we halted in our labors and made ourselves ready to deal with another attack.

After a short while the Indians appeared, still singing as they approached. Wonder of wonders, they were clothed, though all the previous natives that we had seen were naked, or nearly so, as these savages usually are. Even more marvelous was the

nature of their clothing, which was of a kind not very different from that which Christians wear, jerkins and doublets and tunics, and such things. And—marvel of marvel—every man of them wore upon his chest a white garment that bore the holy cross of Jesus painted brightly in red! We could not believe our eyes. But if we had any doubt that these were Christian men, it was eradicated altogether when we saw that in the midst of the procession came certain men wearing the dark robes of priests, who carried great wooden crosses held high aloft.

Were these indeed Indians? Surely not! Surely they must be Spaniards like ourselves! We might almost have been in Toledo, or Madrid, or Seville, and not on the shore of some strange land of the Indies! But indeed we saw without doubt now that the marchers were men of the sort that is native to the New World, with the ruddy skins and black hair and sharp features of their

kind, Christian though they might be in dress, and carrying the cross itself in their midst.

When they were close enough so that we could hear distinctly the words of their song, it sounded to some of us that they might be Latin words, though Latin of a somewhat barbarous kind. Could that be possible? We doubted the evidence of our ears. But then Pedro de Plasencia, who had studied for the priesthood before entering the military, crossed himself most vigorously and said to us in wonder, "Do you hear that? They are singing the *Gloria in excelsis Deo!*" And in truth we could tell that hymn was what they sang, now that Pedro de Plasencia had picked out the words of it for us. Does that sound strange to you, that Indians of an unknown isle should be singing in Latin? Yes, it is strange indeed. But doubt me at your peril. I was there; I saw and heard everything myself

"Surely," said Diego Bermudez, "there must have been Spaniards here before us, who have instructed these people in the way of God."

"That cannot be," said our pilot, Anton de Alaminos. "For I was with Cristobal Colon on his second voyage and have been on every voyage since of any note that has been made in these waters, and I can tell you that no white man has set foot on this shore before us."

"Then how came these Indians by their crosses and their holy hymns?" asked Diego Bermudez. "Is it a pure miracle of the saints, do you think?"

"Perhaps it is," said Don Juan Ponce de Leon, with some heat, for it looked as if there might be a quarrel between the master and the pilot. "Who can say? Be thankful that these folk are our

Christian friends and not our enemy, and leave off your useless speculations."

And in the courageous way that was his nature, Don Juan Ponce went forward and raised his arms to the Indians, and made the sign of the cross in the air, and called out to them, saying, "I am Don Juan Ponce de Leon of Valladolid in the land of Spain, and I greet you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." All of which he said clearly and loudly in his fine and beautiful Castilian, which he spoke with the greatest purity. But the Indians, who by now had halted in a straight line before us, showed no understanding in their eyes. Don Juan Ponce spoke again, once more in Spanish, saying that he greeted them also in the name of His Most Catholic Majesty King Ferdinand of Aragon and Castile. This too produced no sign that it had been understood.

One of the Indians then spoke. He was a man of great presence and bearing, who wore chains of gold about his chest and carried a sword of strange design at his side, the first sword I had ever seen a native of these islands to have. From these indications it was apparent that he was the cacique.

He spoke long and eloquently in a language that I suppose was his own, for none of us had ever heard it before, not even the two Indian pilots we had brought with us. Then he said a few words that had the sound and the ring of French or perhaps Catalan, though we had a few men of Barcelona among us who leaned close toward him and put their hands to their ears and even they could make no sense out of what they heard.

But then finally this grand cacique spoke words which we all could understand plainly, garbled and thick-tongued though his speaking of them was: for what he said was, and there could be

no doubt of it however barbarous his accent, "*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,*" and he made the sign of the cross over his chest as any good Christian man would do. To which Don Juan replied, "*Amen. Dominus vobiscum.*" Whereupon the cacique, exclaiming, "*Et cum spiritu tuo,*" went forthrightly to the side of Don Juan Ponce, and they embraced with great love, likewise as any Christian men might do, here on this remote beach in this strange and lovely land of Florida.

* * * *

They brought us then to their village and offered a great feast for us, with roasted fish and the meat of tortoises and sweet fruits of many mysterious kinds, and made us presents of the skins of animals. For our part we gave them such trinkets as we had carried with us, beads and bracelets and little copper daggers and the like, but of all the things we gave them they

were most eager to receive the simple figurines of Jesus on the cross that we offered them, and passed them around amongst themselves in wonder, showing such love for them as if they were made of the finest gold and studded with emeralds and rubies. And we said privately to each other that we must be dreaming, to have met with Indians in this land who were of such great devotion to the faith.

We tried to speak with them again in Spanish, but it was useless, and so too was speaking in any of the native tongues of Hispaniola or Puerto Rico that we knew. In their turn they addressed us in their own language, which might just as well have been the language of the people of the Moon for all we comprehended it, and also in that tantalizing other tongue which seemed almost to be French or Catalan. We could not make anything of that, try though we did. But Pedro de Plasencia, who

was the only one of us who could speak Latin out loud like a priest, sat down with the cacique after the meal and addressed him in that language. I mean not simply saying things like the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria, which any child can say, but speaking to him as if Latin was a real language with words and sentences of common meaning, the way it was long ago. To which the cacique answered, though he seemed to be framing his words with much difficulty; and Pedro answered him again, just as hesitatingly; and so they went on, talking to each other in a slow and halting way, far into the night, nodding and smiling most jubilantly whenever one of them reached some understanding of the other's words, while we looked on in astonishment, unable to fathom a word of what they were saying.

At last Pedro rose, looking pale and exhausted like a man who has carried a bull on his back for half a league, and came over to us where we were sitting in a circle.

“Well?” Don Juan Ponce demanded at once.

Pedro de Plasencia shook his head wearily. “It was all nonsense, what the cacique said. I understood nothing. Nothing at all! It was mere incomprehensible babble and no more than that.” And he picked up a leather sack of wine that lay near his feet and drank from it as though he had a thirst that no amount of drinking ever could quench.

“You appeared to comprehend, at times,” said Don Juan Ponce. “Or so it seemed to me as I watched you.”

“Nothing. Not a word. Let me sleep on it, and perhaps it will come clear to me in the morning.”

I thought Don Juan Ponce would pursue him on the matter. But Don Juan Ponce, though he was an impatient and high-tempered man, was also a man of great sagacity, and he knew better than to press Pedro further at a time when he seemed so troubled and fatigued. So he dismissed the company and we settled down in the huts that the Indians had given us for lodging, all except those of us who were posted as sentries during the night to guard against treachery.

I rose before dawn. But I saw that Don Juan Ponce and Pedro de Plasencia were already awake and had drawn apart from the rest of us and were talking most earnestly. After a time they returned, and Don Juan Ponce beckoned to me.

“Pedro has told me something of his conversation with the cacique,” he said.

“And what is it that you have learned?”

"That these Indians are indeed Christians."

"Yes, that seems to be the plain truth, strange though it seems," I said. "For they do carry the cross about, and sing the Gloria, and honor the Father and the Son."

"There is more." I waited.

He continued, "Unless Pedro much mistook what the cacique told him, the greatest hope in which these people live is that of wresting the Holy Land from the Saracen, and restoring it to good Christian pilgrims."

At that I burst out into such hearty laughter that Don Juan Ponce, for all his love of me, looked at me with eyes flashing with reproof. Yet I could not withhold my mirth, which poured from me like a river.

I said at last, when I had mastered myself, "But tell me, Don Juan, what would these savages know of the Holy Land, or of

Saracens, or any such thing? The Holy Land is thousands of leagues away, and has never been spoken of so much as once in this New World by any man, I think; nor does anyone speak of the Crusade any longer in this age, neither here nor at home."

"It is very strange, I agree," replied Don Juan Ponce. "Nevertheless, so Pedro swears, the cacique spoke to him of *Terra Sancta, Terra Sancta*, and of infidels, and the liberation of the city of Jerusalem."

"And how does it come to pass," I asked, "that they can know of such things, in this remote isle, where no white man has ever visited before?"

"Ah," said Don Juan Ponce, "that is the great mystery, is it not?"

* * * *

In time we came to understand the solution to this mystery, though the tale was muddled and confused, and emerged only after much travail, and long discussions between Pedro de Plasencia and the cacique of the Indians. I will tell you the essence of it, which was this:

Some three hundred years ago, or perhaps it was four hundred, while much of our beloved Spain still lay under the Moorish hand, a shipload of Frankish warriors set sail from the port of Genoa, or perhaps it was Marseilles, or some other city along the coast of Provence. This was in the time when men still went crusading, to make war for Jesus' sake in the Holy Land against the followers of Muhammad who occupied that place.

But the voyage of these Crusaders miscarried; for when they entered the great Mar Mediterraneo, thinking to go east they were forced west by terrible storms and contrary winds, and

swept helpless past our Spanish shores, past Almeria and Malaga and Tarifa, and through the narrow waist of the Estrecho de Gibraltar and out into the vastness of the Ocean Sea.

Here, having no sound knowledge as we in our time do of the size and shape of the African continent, they thought to turn south and then east below Egypt and make their voyage yet to the Holy Land. Of course this would be impossible, except by rounding the Buena Fortuna cape and traveling up past Arabia, a journey almost beyond our means to this day. But being unaware of that, these bold but hapless men made the attempt, coasting southerly and southerly and southerly, and the land of course not only not ending but indeed carrying them farther and farther outward into the Ocean Sea, until at last, no doubt weary and half dead of famine, they realized that they had traveled so far to the west that there was no hope of returning eastward

again, nor of turning north and making their way back into the Mediterraneo. So they yielded to the westerly winds that prevail near the Canary Isles, and allowed themselves to be blown clear across the sea to the Indies. And so after long arduous voyaging they made landfall in this isle we call Florida. Thus these men of three hundred years ago were the first discoverers of the New World, although I doubt very greatly that they comprehended what it was that they had achieved.

You must understand that we received few of these details from our Indian hosts: only the tale that men bound to Terra Sancta departing from a land in the east were blown off course some hundreds of years previous and were brought after arduous sailing to the isle of Florida and to this very village where our three caravals had made their landfall. All the rest did we conclude for ourselves, that they were Crusaders and so

forth, after much discussing of the matter and recourse to the scholarship that the finest men among us possessed.

And what befell these men of the Crusade, when they came to this Florida? Why, they offered themselves to the mercies of the villagers, who greeted them right honorably and took them to dwell amongst them, and married them to their daughters! And for their part the seafarers offered the word of Jesus to the people of the village and thereby gave them hope of Heaven; and taught these kindly savages the Latin tongue so well that it remained with them after a fashion hundreds of years afterward, and also some vestiges of the common speech that the seafaring men had had in their own native land.

But most of all did the strangers from the sea imbue in the villagers the holy desire to rid the birthplace of Jesus of the dread hand of the Mussulman; and ever, in years after, did the

Christian Indians of this Florida village long to put to sea, and cross the great ocean, and wield their bows and spears valiantly amidst the paynim enemy in the defense of the True Faith. Truly, how strange are the workings of God Almighty, how far beyond our comprehension, that He should make Crusaders out of the naked Indians in this far-off place!

You may ask what became of those European men who landed there, and whether we saw anyone who plainly might mark his descent from them. And I will tell you that those ancient Crusaders, who intermarried with the native women since they had brought none of their own, were wholly swallowed up by such intermarrying and were engulfed by the fullness of time. For they were only forty or fifty men among hundreds, and the passing centuries so diluted the strain of their race that not the least trace of it remained, and we saw no pale skin or fair hair or

blue eyes or other marks of European men here. But the ideas that they had fetched to this place did survive, that is, the practicing of the Catholic faith and the speaking of a debased and corrupt sort of Latin and the wearing of a kind of European clothes, and such. And I tell you it was passing strange to see these red savages in their surplices and cassocks, and in their white tunics bearing the great emblem of our creed, and other such ancient marks of our civilization, and to hear them chanting the *Kyrie eleison* and the *Confiteor* and the *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth* in that curious garbled way of theirs, like words spoken in a dream.

Nay, I have spoken untruthfully, for the men of that lost voyage did leave other remnants of themselves among the villagers beside our holy faith, which I have neglected to mention here, but which I will tell you of now.

For after we had been in that village several days, the cacique led us through the close humid forest along a tangled trail to a clearing nearby just to the north of the village, and here we saw certain tangible remains of the voyagers: a graveyard with grave markers of white limestone, and the rotting ribs and strakes and some of the keel of a seafaring vessel of an ancient design, and the foundation walls of a little wooden church. All of which things were as sad a sight as could be imagined, for the gravestones were so weathered and worn that although we could see the faint marks of names we could not read the names themselves, and 'the vessel was but a mere sorry remnant, a few miserable decaying timbers, and the church was only a pitiful fragment of a thing.

We stood amidst these sorry ruins and our hearts were struck into pieces by pity and grief for these brave men, so far from

home and lonely, who in this strange place had nevertheless contrived to plant the sacred tree of Christianity. And the noble Don Juan Ponce de Leon went down on his knees before the church and bowed his head and said, "Let us pray, my friends, for the souls of these men, as we hope that someday people will pray for ours."

* * * *

We spent some days amongst these people in feasting and prayer, and replenishing our stock of firewood and water. And then Don Juan Ponce gave new thought to the primary purpose of our voyage, which was, to find the miraculous Fountain that renews a man's energies. He called Pedro de Plasencia to his side and said, "Ask of the cacique, whether he knows such a Fountain."

“It will not be easy, describing such things in my poor Latin,” answered Pedro. “I had my Latin from the Church, Don Juan, and what I learned there is of little use here, and it was all so very long ago.”

“You must try, my friend. For only you of all our company has the power to speak with him and be understood.”

Whereupon Pedro went to the cacique; but I could see even at a distance that he was having great difficulties. For he would speak a few halting words, and then he would act out his meaning with gestures, like a clown upon a stage, and then he would speak again. There would be silence; and then the cacique would reply, and I would see Pedro leaning forward most intently, trying to catch the meaning of the curious Latin that the cacique spoke. They did draw pictures for each other also in the sand, and point to the sky and sweep their arms to

and fro, and do many another thing to convey to each other the sense of their words, and so it went, hour after hour.

At length Pedro de Plasencia returned to where we stood, and said, "There does appear to be a source of precious water that they cherish on this island, which they call the Blue Spring."

"And is this Blue Spring the Fountain for which we search?" Don Juan Ponce asked, all eagerness.

"Ah, of that I am not certain."

"Did you tell him that the water of it would allow a man to take his pleasure with women all day and all night, and never tire of it?"

"So I attempted to say."

"With many women, one after another?"

"These are Christian folk, Don Juan!"

"Yes, so they are. But they are Indians also. They would understand such a thing, just as any man of Estramadura or Galicia or Andalusia would understand such a thing, Christian though he be."

Pedro de Plasencia nodded. "I told him what I could, about the nature of the Fountain for which we search. And he listened, very close, and he said, Yes, yes, you are speaking of the Blue Spring."

"So he understood you, then?"

"He understood something of what I said, Don Juan, so I do firmly believe. But whether he understood it all, that is only for God to know."

I saw the color rise in Don Juan Ponce's face, and I knew that that restless choleric nature of his was coming to the fore, which

had always been his great driving force and also his most perilous failing.

He said to Pedro de Plasencia, "And will he take us to this Blue Spring of his, do you think?"

"I think he will," said Pedro. "But first he wishes to enact a treaty with us, as the price of transporting us thither."

"A treaty."

"A treaty, yes. He wants our aid and assistance."

"Ah," said Don Juan Ponce. "And how can we be of help to these people, do you think?"

"They want us to show them how to build seafaring ships," said Pedro. "So that they can sail across the Ocean Sea, and go to the rescue of the Holy Land, and free it from the paynim hordes."

* * * *

There was much more of back and forth, and forth and back, in these negotiations, until Pedro de Plasencia grew weary indeed, and there was not enough wine in our sacks to give him the rest he needed, so that we had to send a boat out to fetch more from one of our ships at anchor in the harbor. For it was a great burden upon him to conduct these conversations, he remembering only little patches of Church Latin from his boyhood, and the cacique speaking a language that could be called Latin only by great courtesy. I sat with them as they talked, on several occasions, and not for all my soul could I understand a thing that they said to each other. From time to time Pedro would lose his patience and speak out in Spanish, or the cacique would begin to speak in his savage tongue or else in that other language, somewhat like Provencal, which must have been what the seafaring Crusaders spoke amongst themselves.

But none of that added to the understanding between the two men, which I think was a very poor understanding indeed.

It became apparent after a time that Pedro had misheard the cacique's terms of treaty: what he wished us to do was not to teach them how to build ships but to give them one of ours in which to undertake their Crusade.

"It cannot be," replied Don Juan Ponce, when he had heard. "But tell him this, that I will undertake to purchase ships for him with my own funds, in Spain. Which I will surely do, after we have received the proceeds from the sale of the water from the Fountain."

"He wishes to know how many ships you will provide," said Pedro de Plasencia, after another conference.

"Two," said Don Juan Ponce. "No: three. Three fine caravels."

Which Pedro duly told the cacique; but his way of telling him was to point to our three ships in the harbor, which led the cacique into thinking that Don Juan Ponce meant to give him those three actual ships then and now, and that required more hours of conferring to repair. But at length all was agreed on both sides, and our journey toward the Blue Spring was begun.

The cacique himself accompanied us, and the three priests of the tribe, carrying the heavy wooden crosses that were their staffs of office, and perhaps two dozen of the young men and girls of the village. In our party there were ten men, Don Juan Ponce and Pedro and I, and seven ordinary seamen carrying barrels in which we meant to store the waters of the Fountain. My wife Beatriz and her sister Juana accompanied us also, for I never would let them be far from me.

Some of the ordinary seamen among us were rough men of Estramadura, who spoke jestingly and with great licentiousness of how often they would embrace the girls of the native village after they had drunk of the Fountain. I had to silence them, reminding them that my wife and her sister could overhear their words. Yet I wondered privately what effects the waters would have on my own manhood: not that it had ever been lacking in any aspect, but I, could not help asking myself if I would find it enhanced beyond its usual virtue, for such curiosity is but a natural thing to any man, as you must know.

We journeyed for two days, through hot close terrain where insects of great size buzzed among the flowers and birds of a thousand colors astounded our eyes. And at last we came to a place of bare white stone, flat like all other places in this isle of

Florida, where clear cool blue water gushed up out of the ground with wondrous force.

The cacique gestured grandly, with a great sweep of his arms.

“It is the Blue Spring,” said Pedro de Plasencia.

Our men would have rushed forward at once to lap up its waters like greedy dogs at a pond; but the cacique cried out, and Don Juan Ponce also in that moment ordered them to halt. There would be no unseemly haste here, he said. And it was just as well he did, for we very soon came to see that this spring was a holy place to the people of the village, and it would have been profaned by such an assault on it, to our possible detriment and peril.

The cacique came forward, with his priests beside him, and gestured to Don Juan Ponce to kneel and remove his helmet. Don Juan Ponce obeyed; and the cacique took his helmet from

him, and passed it to one of the priests, who filled it with water from the spring and poured it down over Don Juan Ponce's face and neck, so that Don Juan Ponce laughed out loud. The which laughter seemed to offend the Indians, for they showed looks of disapproval, and Don Juan Ponce at once grew silent.

The Indians spoke words which might almost have been Latin words, and there was much elevating of their crosses as the water was poured down over Don Juan Ponce, after which he was given the order to rise.

And then one by one we stepped forth, and the Indians did the same to each of us.

"It is very like a rite of holy baptism, is it not?" said Aurelio Herrera to me.

"Yes, very much like a baptism," I said to him.

And I began to wonder: How well have we been understood here? Is it a new access of manly strength that these Indians are conferring upon us, or rather the embrace of the Church? For surely there is nothing about this rite that speaks of anything else than a religious enterprise. But I kept silent, since it was not my place to speak.

When the villagers were done dousing us with water, and speaking words over us and elevating their crosses, which made me more sure than ever that we were being taken into the congregation of their faith, we were allowed to drink of the spring—they did the same—and to fill our barrels. Don Juan Ponce turned to me after we had drunk, and winked at me and said, “Well, old friend, this will serve us well in later years, will it not? For though we have no need of such invigoration now, you

and I, nevertheless time will have its work with us as it does with all men."

"If it does," I said, "why, then, we are fortified against it now indeed."

But in truth I felt no change within. The water was pure and cool and good, but it had seemed merely to be water to me, with no great magical qualities about it; and when I turned and looked upon my wife Beatriz, she seemed pleasing to me as she always had, but no more than that. Well, so be it, I thought; this may be the true Fountain or maybe it is not, and only time will tell; and we began our return to the village, carrying the casks of water with us; and the day of our return, Pedro de Plasencia drew up a grand treaty on a piece of bark from a tree, in which we pledged our sacred honor and our souls to do all in our power to supply this village with good Spanish ships so that the

villagers would be able to fulfill their pledge to liberate the Holy Land.

“Which we will surely do for them,” said Don Juan Ponce with great conviction. “For I mean to come back to this place as soon as I am able, with many ships of our own as well as the vessels I have promised them from Spain; and we will fill our holds with cask upon cask of this virtuous water from the Fountain, and replenish our fortunes anew by selling that water to those who need its miraculous power. Moreover we ourselves will benefit from its use in our declining days. And also we will bring this cacique some priests, who will correct him in his manner of practicing our faith, and guide him in his journey to Jerusalem. All of which I will swear by a great oath upon the Cross itself, in the presence of the cacique, so that he may have no doubt whatsoever of our kindly Christian purposes.”

* * * *

And so we departed, filled with great joy and no little wonder at all that we had seen and heard.

Well, and none of the brave intentions of Don Juan Ponce were fulfilled, as you surely must know, inasmuch as the valiant Don Juan Ponce de Leon never saw Spain again, nor did he live to enjoy the rejuvenations of his body that he hoped the water of the Fountain would bring him in his later years. For when we left the village of the Indian Crusaders, we continued on our way along the coast of the isle of Florida a little further in a southerly direction, seeking to catch favorable winds and currents that would carry us swiftly back to Puerto Rico; and on the 23rd of May we halted in a pleasing bay to gather wood and water—for we would not touch the water of our casks from the Fountain!—and to careen the *San Cristobal*, the hull of which was fouled

with barnacles. And as we did our work there, a party of Indians came forth out of the woods.

“Hail, brothers in Christ!” Don Juan Ponce called to them with great cheer, for the cacique had told him that his people had done wonderful things in bringing their neighbors into the embrace of Jesus, and he thought now that surely all the Indians of this isle had been converted to the True Faith by those Crusading men of long ago.

But he was wrong in that; for these Indians were no Christians at all, but only pagan savages like most of their kind, and they replied instantly to Don Juan Ponce's halloos with a volley of darts and arrows that struck five of us dead then and there before we were able to drive them off. And among those who took his mortal wound that day was the valiant and noble Don

Juan Ponce de Leon of Valladolid, in the thirty-ninth year of his life.

I knelt beside him on the beach in his last moments, and said the last words with him. And he looked up at me and smiled—for death had never been frightening to him—and he said to me, almost with his last breath, “There is only one thing that I regret, Francisco. And that is that I will never know, now, what powers the water of that Fountain would have conferred upon me, when I was old and greatly stricken with the frailty of my years.” With that he perished.

What more can I say? We made our doleful way back to Puerto Rico, and told our tale of Crusaders and Indians and cool blue waters. But we were met with laughter, and there were no purchasers for the contents of our casks, and our fortunes were greatly depleted. All praise be to God, I survived that dark time

and went on afterward to join the magnificent Hernando Cortes in his conquest of the land of Mexico, which today is called New Spain, and in the fullness of time I returned to my native province of Valladolid with much gold in my possession, and here I live in health and vigor to this day.

Often do I think of the isle of Florida and those Christian Indians we found there. It is fifty years since that time. In those fifty years the cacique and his people have rendered most of Florida into Christians by now, as we now know, and I tell you what is not generally known, that this expansion of their nation was brought about the better to support their Crusade against the Mussulman once the ships that Don Juan Ponce promised them had arrived.

So there is a great warlike Christian kingdom in Florida today, filling all that land and spreading over into adjacent isles,

against which we men of Spain so far have struggled in vain as we attempt to extend our sway to those regions. I think it was poor Don Juan Ponce de Leon, in his innocent quest for a miraculous Fountain, who without intending it caused them to become so fierce, by making them a promise which he could not fulfill, and leaving them thinking that they had been betrayed by false Christians. Better that they had remained forever in the isolation in which they lived when we found them, singing the *Gloria* and the *Credo* and the *Sanctus*, and waiting with Christian patience for the promised ships that are to take them to the reconquest of the Holy Land. But those ships did not come; and they see us now as traitors and enemies.

I often think also of the valiant Don Juan Ponce, and his quest for the wondrous Fountain. Was the Blue Spring indeed the Fountain of legend? I am not sure of that. It may be that those

Indians misunderstood what Pedro de Plasencia was requesting of them, and that they were simply offering us baptism—us, good Christians all our lives!—when what we sought was something quite different from that.

But if the Fountain was truly the one we sought, I feel great sorrow and pity for Don Juan Ponce. For though he drank of its waters, he died too soon to know of its effects. Whereas here I am, soon to be ninety years old, and the father of a boy of seven and a girl of five.

Was it the Fountain's virtue that has given me so long and robust a life, or have I simply enjoyed the favor of God? How can I say? Whichever it is, I am grateful; and if ever there is peace between us and the people of the isle of Florida, and you should find yourself in the vicinity of that place, you could do worse, I think, than to drink of that Blue Spring, which will do

you no harm and may perhaps bring you great benefit. If by chance you go to that place, seek out the Indians of the village nearby, and tell them that old Francisco de Ortega remembers them, and cherishes the memory, and more than once has said a Mass in their praise despite all the troubles they have caused his countrymen, for he knows that they are the last defenders of the Holy Land against the paynim infidels.

This is my story, and the story of Don Juan Ponce de Leon and the miraculous Fountain, which the ignorant call the Fountain of Youth, and of the Christian Indians of Florida who yearn to free the Holy Land. You may wonder about the veracity of these things, but I beg you, have no doubt on that score. All that I have told you is true. For I was there. I saw and heard everything.

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this story by going back to your bookshelf: [Click Here](#)