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fiction

## Ponce de Leon

Ponce de Leon was a Portuguese adventurer who discovered the fountain of youth in the United States of America. Some people said his name meant punch the lion. Some people said his name meant pounce on the lion or pounce like a lion. Some thought it meant pounced on by a lion, but nobody wanted to talk about that, much.

Nobody really knew what his name meant, because there wasn't much English yet. A few people who lived on an island off the coast of France used English when they couldn't think of what to say in Portuguese or Spanish or French, but that was about all the English in use, because the United States hadn't been found yet.

People looked for the United States. Lief Erickson, Eric the Red, George Washington, Arthur Columbus, Robinson Caruso, and several others looked for it, but they hadn't found it yet, not any way they could really prove it was there.

Nobody knew what a lion was anyway, because Africa hadn't started much by then, either.

Anyway, Ponce de Leon went to Queen Isabella's court and arranged an interview. When his turn to talk to her came up, he said, "I just wondered if you would finance me for the purchase of two or three boats to cross the sea."

She said, "Why would you want to cross the sea?"

He said, "I want to look over there on the other side for the fountain of youth. I heard India's over there, but I have to go look to really know if it is."

She said, "Oh, the fountain of youth. Well, I don't know about that. Boats are expensive. Why don't you

look for it over here?"

Ponce said, "Well, I'm pretty sure it isn't over here, because everywhere I've been, all the people get old."

Queen Isabella had been pretending she was paying close attention to what Ponce said and looking right at him, and she was paying close attention to what he said, but she was looking just past him, at the mirror behind him, and she was noticing how many of her hairs were turning grey already. She wasn't even that used to being grown up, let alone ready to get old yet.

She curled a lock of her hair with a lot of grey in it between her thumb and her fingers, and she said, "Probably makes pretty good sense, to look for the fountain of youth. Sure, have a couple or three boats built."

Ponce said, "Well, if I thought there was all that much time, I wouldn't be so hot to find the fountain. What do you think if I buy some ready-mades?"

Isabella looked in the mirror again, and she thought more hair went grey just while they sat there and talked, so she said, "Sure. Go for it."

Isabella didn't think anybody else would be able to rule Portugal very well, so it would be better if she stayed around and did the job. Besides, she kept thinking there was a lot she hadn't had time to do yet. The older she got, the more she thought of to do but the less she could do. It made her mind spin around and around a lot of the time.

Ponce de Leon bought three pretty nice boats. He decided to go by sail, because the ocean is usually pretty windy. He named the biggest boat after the queen, since it was her money he was traveling on. Queenie, he called it.

The middle-sized boat, he called Santa Maria; I think that was because he hoped eventually to land at Santa Maria, California. Obviously, he didn't know his geography very well, because he was headed for the wrong coast, but that's the way a lot of the people

were back then, and that's pretty much the way they did things. Sometimes they didn't get completely ready. They just started off any old way.

The smallest boat, he called pinta, because if he found the fountain of youth, he was going to bring a pint back to Isabella, since it was her money he was traveling on, and in Portuguese, pint is pinta. She gave him forty fifty-gallon drums to fill for her and bring back, but the business about the pint was their little joke. Some of the people back then had a sense of humor, even if they didn't speak much English.

They sailed forty days and forty nights. Some of the crew wanted to anchor nights, for safety, and Ponce would have been willing, at first anyway, but they never had enough rope on the anchor for it to reach bottom, so they just had to keep on sailing. That was a good thing, because their food and water would have run out before they got there if they anchored every night and waited till after breakfast to start out again.

They sailed through a lot of sea serpent-type ocean, but every time a serpent looked like it would attack the boats, they had a guy there to exercise them. He'd jump up, hold up a caduceus, and yell "E=MC squared," and the serpent would go all weak. He'd do it again, and the serpent would just disappear, sink out of sight down into the deep blue sea.

When it was a line of dolphins or porpoises, instead of a serpent, nothing happened no matter what the guy yelled or held up, so that's how people first started to know dolphins and porpoises are intelligent mammals and not sea serpents like they thought at first, when they saw whole lines of them swimming and leaping into the air.

Years later, in history books, some people said the guy who exercised the serpents was Mervyn, the great magician. Part of the reason they said that was they said whenever he wasn't exercising serpents, all

he ever did was sleep, but they weren't there, so how would they know? I don't think anybody really knows who he was, or a lot of other people on the boats. Most of the people were extras, not in the main story, but just there to fill in space or to lift sails or take sails down and belay the avast MacDuff, all that kind of stuff.

After forty days and forty nights, they landed at Plymouth rock. It was called Plymouth rock, because the Plymouth Indian tribe met them there. Later on, there were cars named after those Indians, after they'd been dead a long time, because they gave corn, pumpkins and dead turkeys to Ponce de Leon and his people. But the cars were later on.

Ponce offered the Indians a whole chest full of beads and trinkets to trade for all their land. Ponce thought it was okay to call the people there Indians, because he didn't know where he was. He didn't know about native Americans or anything like that. He concentrated so hard about the fountain of youth, he didn't pay much attention to anything else. He didn't even know what politically correct meant, let alone was it.

The Indians he offered the beads to said, sure, why not? Go for it. They thought Ponce and his people were pretty dumb, but then, the Indians knew what was going to happen to that country, now that Europeans had landed, and Ponce didn't. Ponce didn't have any foresight. He didn't have any fore anything, because he spent all his time looking for stuff and didn't have time for love or marriage or kids or anything like that. He explored all over, because he didn't know or care about visions. He was among the first of rational men in a rational culture, definitely limited to the years he was alive.

Indians had visions of the future. They threw water on the rocks, rubbed bear grease in their hair, and jumped in the river. This gave them visions. Ponce de Leon didn't know about that, and he didn't have any

bear grease. He didn't even know about bears, yet. He was pretty focused on what he was doing, and most everything else just went by him like birds in a high wind.

The Portuguese got canoes from the Indians and hired on some of the Indians to paddle, for about 10 cents a day or 25 cents in promises. The Indians had a saying, "A dime of one or a silver dollar of another. It's all the same to me." They already knew the ex Europeans and railroads were coming.

They paddled up every river they could find, which was quite a few, because there were more of them, back then. There was more room for rivers, back then. There weren't highways and cars and skyscrapers yet.

They explored all the land next to the rivers. They saw deer, bears, elk, moose, eagles, hawks and geese, but they only knew the names for hawks and geese, because that's all they had in Portugal, so that's all they ever told anybody about.

They had a lot of adventures with Indians. One of their guides and paddlers was named Hiawatha. She was beautiful and young, but very strong.

Hiawatha's father was president of the tribe, and he didn't like these invaders in his land. He captured Ponce and tied him up. He got ready to cut his head off.

Ponce said, "Talk him out of it, Hiawatha."

She said, "Speak for yourself, Ponce." He said it again, and so did she. Ponce probably didn't know those Indians had a rule, ask something three times, and it can't be refused, as long as it isn't illegal or against the ten commandments.

It was probably just coincidence that he asked the third time, so she couldn't turn him down. She had to say, "Don't do it, Dad."

Her dad said, "I'm all set up for it honey," and he started to swing his sword.

Hiawatha threw herself across Ponce's neck and said, "Cut this Portuguese, cut me," so her dad had to stop

what he was doing and put the sword down, because he loved his daughter even if she did help the Europeans.

Well, they explored for forty days and forty nights. They drank from hundreds of rivers and streams, and they drank from thousands of springs, but they never found anything that made them young, so they sailed forty days and forty nights back to Portugal.

Queen Isabella was pretty mad, but there wasn't much she could do except threaten to cut Ponce's head off for him and stomp her foot and look at all her grey hair in the mirror. Ponce had already been pretty close to getting his head cut off once, so he wasn't too scared of that. He let Isabella stomp around and be mad until she threw him out of court, and he knew he'd be okay.

Ponce couldn't keep up the payments on the boats. He found gold when he was in the new world-- it was the same old world, but new to him-- but it wasn't what he was looking for, and it didn't make him young. He thought gold would take up a lot of room he had to save for water when they found the fountain of youth, so he left most of it there. When he knew he wasn't going to find the right kind of water, and he would have plenty of room for gold, it was too late to go back for it. Everybody was mad at him by that time, his crew and most of the Indians, and all the Portugese sailors just wanted to go home and forget the whole thing.

Isabella repossessed the boats and sold them to someone else, probably George Washington, who sailed to the new world and stayed there so he could be president.

When Ponce de Leon was 162 years old, he started thinking maybe he hadn't understood what a fountain of youth would do. He would have talked to Isabella about it, but she was long gone. He wondered which of the thousands of drinks he'd taken did the job.

He didn't know anyone influential any more. It goes that way for old people lots of times. They lose all the influence they had, even if they have something

sensible to say. Nobody listens to them. They finally get everything sorted out so they know what truth is, but everybody thinks their hair has turned grey and white, and their thoughts have, too. Ponce didn't want to go through all that again anyway, especially since he didn't have boats anymore, and he wasn't as enthusiastic about long hikes as he had been back when he explored everything. Hiawatha was bound to be long gone, so Ponce de Leon just knew what he knew and went on living.

Everybody was getting more scientific and modern. He knew they wouldn't believe him. He moved often enough so nobody knew him well and never asked, "Why is it you never get old and die?"

He didn't tell anybody what had happened.