

BOOM IN PARADISE



MAN-MADE PARADISE—MIAMI BEACH ISLAND

BOOM IN PARADISE

BY

T. H. WEIGALL



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It may perhaps be desirable to add that I am in no way connected with any commercial or other organization in Florida.

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INTRODUCTION

BY BURTON RASCOE

THE Florida land boom, although it followed the general pattern of inflation and collapse that has characterized all money-mad mass manias, was unique in one respect. It was the only one that was founded upon an aesthetic ideal. All other booms and bubbles had their inception in schemes to get rich quick. There was, to be sure, a vague and incidental hint of aesthetics in the Dutch tulip craze and even after it had run its course the bulbs continued to bloom to the floral glory of the areas affected by the epidemic; but the people who bought and sold tulips in that most astounding frenzy were animated not by a love of beauty but by a love of lucre. All other booms, save that of Florida, have had their origin in grandiose schemes to turn small capital into quick profits.

The Florida land boom had its beginning in a vision of beauty. The man chiefly responsible for the sudden widespread interest in Florida land values—an interest that soon attracted a horde of large and small speculators, adventurers, schemers, camp-followers and plain, ordinary suckers—had quite honestly believed that Florida could be made a paradise on earth and had set about converting the swamps and marshes and sandy flatlands around Coral Gables into a perfect city, the capital and metropolis of a visible and tangible heaven. There was nothing slipshod, hasty or mercenary in his plans. Swamps were drained, artificial lagoons created, rolling hills built up to vary the flat monotony; houses were made to conform to a strict standard of architectural beauty; shrubs and flowers, palms and verdure were as definite a part of the whole scheme as perfect sanitation, a plentiful supply of wholesome water and wide, paved and tree-lined avenues.

This man was George Merrick, the son of a Nonconformist preacher who had left the winter winds of Cape Cod to save the life of his dying wife and on horseback and with a wagon and team had trudged the long, arduous journey to Florida, carrying with him his family and his chattels. The Reverend Solomon Merrick had staked out a 160 acres claim near the village of Miami and started a fruit farm called Coral Gables. The farm prospered and by the time George Merrick reached early manhood he was able to go to Columbia University. There he made the beginning of a literary career by winning a prize offered by the New York Herald in 1912 for the best short story of the year. American literature, however, was destined never to know what further promise there was in George Merrick, for he was soon called back to Florida to administer the estate of his father who had suddenly died.

He had not long been home before he became possessed, like all saints, madmen and geniuses, with a fixed idea. That idea, which occupied his mind, energy and resources for many years, was of establishing an earthly Paradise on the very spot where his father had dreamed of a Heavenly one. The idea bore fruit abundantly. Others caught the glamor of his scheme. The thousands of acres he had patiently acquired soared in value. His credit became virtually unlimited. The Magic City arose, as George Merrick had planned, upon the sands of Coral Gables.

Then the land rush began. Thousands upon thousands of people, attracted by the stories of wealth made over-night began the hopeful trek to Florida. In cities and towns men sold out their small shops; on western prairies and New England hillsides families disposed of their holdings; waiters, clerks, salesmen, writers, lawyers, mechanics and medicine men, all fevered by a dream of wealth, formed an astounding cavalcade of teams and trains and motor cars, dribbling from all parts of the Union into the glutted highways of Florida. Sanity fled the scene; Tom o' Bedlam was the uncrowned king; caution and common sense were out of hand and out of mind. Folly was rife to wreck George Merrick's half-realized dream of an earthly Paradise.

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Into this magnificent and preposterous scene there drifted a talented, naïf and impecunious journalist, propelled by no weightier motive than to earn his bed and board. He was broke, without a job or friends in a strange and alien country (he was an Englishman by birth). He was totally unsuited to trade or salesmanship or the intricacies of finance. His first job was that of selling, on commission, memberships in a mythical yacht club. His next (he declined an offer to sell silk stockings on the streets) was that of a stevedore on the docks of Miami. His next and last was that of a member of the vast army of press-agents who were feeding the fires of the vast inflation with an incendiary vocabulary of superlatives. Aloof at first and disinterested, unaffected by the mania manifested all about him, he was caught finally by the contagion. He invested his savings—and lost. The collapse caught him. He went away from Florida no richer than he had arrived there, save only in experience.

This experience is a wealth, for T. H. Weigall is an artist. He is the historian of the Florida land boom, the most colorful and fantastic mass-mania the country has ever known. There is a charming diffidence in Mr. Weigall as a historian; never does he affect a superiority to his material. His is a record of a personal adventure as an obscure player in that rich Babylonian spectacle, who, nevertheless absorbed and ordered in his memory the incredible details of what was going on about him.

"Boom in Paradise" is a delightful, slyly humorous parable. It is a parable of the eternal sucker whose name is legion and who makes all booms and is always caught in them. I do not use the word "sucker" as a term of opprobrium. All of us are suckers who are not earth-bound and merely money-grubbing. "Life," writes Sir Walter Raleigh (the don, not the courtier) "is an infinitely subtle game, delightful to watch, giving glimpses here and there of the underlying causes of things, luring on the gamblers who believe they have discovered a winning system, fortifying them in their folly by granting them a short run of luck, and

then, by a turn of the wheel, overthrowing and mocking their calculations."

Any boom and collapse is a paradigm of this infinitely subtle game. An intensified paradigm. There is the hope that leads one on in life, the idea that gives purpose to the hope, the self-confidence that leads one to believe that where so many others have succeeded one is a fool not to try. There is, in the first flush of success, the tendency to enlarge the aim, to make the goal more ambitious, to regard as piddling the first modest intention. Then there is the over-reaching, the fatal reliance on the run of luck. And then the defeat. But in the run of luck, however brief, there is excitement and adventure and hope and faith.

Mr. Weigall has made all this apparent to us in an absorbing and distinguished book. It is a valuable record, set down without malice or irony or contemptuous satire, by a writer who is engagingly modest yet sure, with an artist's sureness, of his effects.