

BOOM IN PARADISE

CHAPTER I

IT was on the 12th of August, 1925, that I arrived for the first time in the city of New York. It was a swelteringly hot evening, and the dirt and soot of the Pennsylvania Railroad had already made me familiar with American soil. I had crossed the Atlantic in a cargo-boat that had landed me at Philadelphia on that very afternoon; and, although I had planned to spend the night there, the lure of New York had proved too strong for me, and I had taken a taxi straight from the docks and caught the first available train. I had never been in the United States before; everything seemed strange and wonderful, and from the moment of landing I had been caught up by that curious sense of exhilaration that never left me during the whole of the time that I was there. I have since met a good many other people who have been affected by their first contact with America in the same way, though possibly not quite to the same extent. And, in my own case, the feeling was perhaps heightened by the fact that I knew nobody, had practically no money, and had in fact no particular reason to be there at all except that I wanted to be. So I tipped everybody extravagantly, took the best seat I could get in the Pullman, and as the train roared through

the gathering darkness across the plains of New Jersey I lay back and was content.

New York in August is like London in August, only a great deal hotter and even more empty, if possible, of all such people as can afford to get away. It is not until Labour Day, in the first week of September, that they all pour back again in a single body to resume the round of toil. In my own case, the result of this was that I found the process of taking New York by storm not quite so easy as it might have been if I had been able to get into touch with one or two of the few people to whom I had come armed with letters of introduction. I would have to wait for Labour Day. And for Labour Day, owing to certain financial stringencies of a very delicate nature, I was simply not able to wait, whether I wanted to or no; and apart from that, three weeks in August under those sweltering skies doing nothing whatever was not a particularly attractive prospect, even to the rawest tourist.

My decision to leave New York and plunge into the Florida land boom was made suddenly one evening, when I was sitting alone in the stalls of the Ziegfeld Follies, very foolishly dissipating while yet I could what small capital still remained to me. A particularly attractive song was being sung by a particularly attractive lady, who was dressed for the occasion in black tights, a species of green waistcoat, and an immense black hat with a green feather in it. In description this costume sounds completely revolting, but as a matter of fact, in practice it was rather the reverse. The song in question dealt with the various delights of the Bam-Bam-Bammy Shore, and was sung with much feeling; being followed,

immediately afterwards, by a lime-lit drop scene representing "Biscayne Bay, Florida—The Eternal Summer Paradise, Where Work Is No More." For some reason or other, this very blatant scene made a strong impression on me; and when a little later that highly-popular and gum-chewing comedian, Mr. Will Rogers, proceeded to tell an endless string of semi-humorous stories dealing with the fortunes that were being made in Florida and with his own laments that he was unable, by the force of his domestic ties, to go there himself, I suddenly and quite fatuously decided that there, if anywhere, might my own depleted fortunes be rehabilitated. It would be amusing to go there, anyway, and as I had no ties whatever there was nothing to stop me. I didn't know in the least what Florida was like, or scarcely even where it was; but I had just sufficient cash left, if I were to leave immediately, to pay my fare there by the cheapest possible route and still arrive with about twenty dollars in hand. So why not? And probably an inconspicuous speck of humanity like myself, drifting aimlessly about in the United States of America, would have a better chance of making something out of a boom than out of more conservative and legitimate conditions. So that in thinking it all over I saw very little of the rest of the performance, and was even left unmoved when the eternal Mr. Will Rogers reappeared for his tenth encore, still chewing, and waving a lasso round a bevy of beautiful girls clustered together for no very obvious reason in the form of a gigantic lotus flower.

It was late when I came out of the theatre, and the first thing that caught my eye on my way home was the

great illuminated sky-sign at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street, displaying an incredible tropical paradise with immense, brilliantly-lit castles towering among the stars and voluptuously-attired semi-Eastern, semi-Italian ladies and gallants drifting in the foreground in spacious gondolas. It is difficult to describe, but there is something about the atmosphere of New York, and for that matter about the whole of America, that makes even the most inane advertisement immensely more significant and real than it could possibly be on this side of the Atlantic. To me, at least, this particular advertisement spoke as it was designed to do of romance and riches beyond dreams; of the glamour of the blue seas, of all the sybaritic luxury of the south. And a little further on, before I reached my rooms, I was assailed by a large notice in the window of a real-estate dealer, proclaiming the solemn truth that One Good Investment Beats a Lifetime of Toil. I was impressed; and the more so as there was a special reference to Florida underneath, and an authenticated story of a young man who had made 500,000 dollars there in four weeks by a judicious judgment of land values. "Say! YOU can do what George Cusack, Jr., did!" said the advertisement. . . . Well, why couldn't I? Judging from his photograph (*inset*) George Cusack, Jr., was practically half-witted, anyway.

The newspapers, every day, had been full of semi-sneering accounts of the Florida activities; accounts which had in them, so it seemed to me, something of a jealousy which rather discounted their general tone of assuming that most of whatever was happening in that mysterious bedlam down south was utterly futile,

utterly bottomless. At any rate, I thought, there was *something* happening, so much was certain; and better for anything to happen than nothing. So it was that next morning, having counted my money and found that I had left the sum of ninety-three dollars, I made my way with a high heart to the offices of the Clyde Steamship Company in the fatuous hope of being able to book an immediate passage to Miami.

My entrance into that office—or more accurately my approach to that office, since there were seething crowds outside as well as in—was really my first indication of the unbelievable extent to which the boom had already developed. I arrived at the office early in the morning, when it had only been opened half an hour or so; but the passenger department was already blocked by a struggling mass of humanity, and outside the doors a crowd scarcely less large and scarcely less struggling was clamouring for admittance. Over the doorway, glinting in the hot sunshine of a New York morning, hung a singularly attractive advertisement representing a white ship rounding a white headland, with shimmering blue water in the foreground and in the distance the dreaming towers and spires of the Magic City. There must be *something* in all this; no matter how much the boom was a puffed-up affair, there must be *something*, at least, behind it all! I was foolishly and very considerably stirred, and plunged with a will into the pushing and heaving crowd of men, women and children surging round the door. Ultimately, after about half an hour, I succeeded in getting sufficiently close to the counter to learn from the shouted conversations and arguments of people ahead of me in the queues that it

would be altogether impossible to book a passage, even a single berth, for at least a month.

"Guy like you wanna go stick on de pier-head wid ya grips," volunteered a seedy-looking man in a brown suit and a very small bowler. He seemed depressed, and, like me, had given up the struggle. "Guy like you wanna wait dere, an' jest buzz on to de hooker when nobody ain't looking—see? Guy like you wanna spray de bucks aboit, so's nobody won't play hell." My adviser wandered away, with a sudden vicious adjustment of his bowler, performed with both hands simultaneously, that nearly parted the rim from the crown. I can't imagine where he came from or what he was doing; I never saw anybody so unlike a boomster in my life. I have no doubt his advice was sound; but seeing that under the circumstances it was out of the question for me to "spray de bucks aboit," let alone to wait indefinitely on a New York wharf while time slipped by and I grew poorer every hour, I decided to abandon the Clyde Line and try the railroad. Already my blood was up; and what I had seen that morning had alone been enough to convince me that the boom was something pretty big, and that if I didn't get down to Florida soon the whole of America would be there before me. So I pushed free of the crowd and across to the offices of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and by great good luck succeeded in booking a ticket by the southern express for the very next day. The deed was done.

It was on an unbelievably hot afternoon, when New York boiled and seethed like a devil's cauldron, that I found myself struggling through the gates of the Pennsylvania Terminal and, complete with two suit-cases,

taking up a corner seat in the "day coach" for Miami. The train was completely full, and even in that immense booking hall at the approach to the platform the struggling, surging crowds that were pouring down towards the Magic South seemed to have engulfed the ordinary business of the station. I was two hours early, and needed to be; as only a little while after my arrival, the gates on to the platform were resolutely closed against all but the Olympian holders of reserved Pullmans.

The seat which I had managed to secure for myself turned out to be extraordinarily uncomfortable, and apparently almost on fire from the heat of the sun that had been beating down on it in the shunting yards all day. But I was terrifically pleased with it; I had begun to feel, even already, some remote infection of that almost holy exaltation characteristic of the true Floridian. I felt moved, almost already, to defend the claims of Florida with my bare fists. Florida *was* the finest country in the world—the freest, the most wonderful, the most opportunity giving! Miami *was* the Magic City! And there was I, southwards bound on an August afternoon to make my fortune.

The interior economy of the "day coach" is designed along the lines of the seating accommodation of the Inner Circle; and I, for one, never want to travel 1,500 miles on the Inner Circle again. Not in the tropics, anyway. And after Manhattan Transfer, when our angry-looking little electric locomotive was changed for a gargantuan machine like a battle-cruiser, bellowing and belching smoke, I came to the conclusion that if this were "The Most Luxurious Manner of Travel Yet Devised by the Human Race," then the Human

Race hadn't progressed very far. Within half a minute, I was completely covered with peculiarly filthy soot. I banged down the window, but within another half-minute discovered that the heat was so unbearable that it had to be opened again. Another deluge of grime convinced me that it would have to be closed again; and this opening and closing process continued during the whole interminable forty-seven hours between the respective paradises of the north and the south.

In the seat opposite to me was an old man with a bag of tools, smoking an endless series of cigars without the slightest intermission. Apropos of my request for a match, he remarked that he was a native of Belfast, had previously been in the horse-killing business on the west coast, was now a plumber, and was going to Florida with the intention of making two thousand dollars to buy a lunch-room in Chicago. He also remarked that a dollar was a dollar and a cent a cent, whichever way you looked at it, and relapsed into contemplative silence. From time to time, a depressed-looking porter wandered down the compartment with a basket of chocolate and pink lemonade, occasionally saying "Good eats, Gents!" in a low voice of which nobody took the slightest notice. Incredibly hot though it had been in New York, with the approach of evening it grew hotter still. Night drew on; a small child at the far end of the carriage was vigorously sick, and was as vigorously reprimanded in voluble Italian. Ever since we had started, its parents had been eating sausages out of a greasy newspaper.

In the middle of the night, when we were passing through Richmond, Virginia, I left the carriage to take some air out on the platform. A cheerful young man

from one of the Pullmans fell into conversation with me; he said he was a member of the Cuban Legation in New York, and as a special favour would put me on to a lunch-room in Chicago that was going at two thousand dollars. I declined with thanks, but was rather flattered at being taken already for a budding financier. When I returned to the carriage, the old man with the tools had slumped over both seats; I didn't like to wake him. I took another seat, and was shortly joined by a pale, unhealthy-looking young man in cotton knee-breeches. He told me his idea was to make two thousand dollars in Miami and then buy a lunch-room in Chicago. He had been in Miami before, had this young man; and when he found that I had not, he was gloomily willing to give me full details. Yes, he himself had made money there, it seemed; but it was as easy to lose it as to make it, and a guy stood no chance at all if he didn't square the other guys—vaguely and menacingly, this. I didn't like the young man very much; and apart from his confidence about the Chicago lunch-room he was secretive as to his own affairs, which in America is rarely a wholesome sign. "What you want to do," said the young man, "is to buy a block of land off a crook boy, and insure the title. Then give him the low-down to sell it to somebody else as well, and make the date earlier. See? That's how all the boys are making the dough down there. I'll say it's a cinch!" he added, with a faint display of unpleasant enthusiasm. Early dawn was approaching; I fell into an uneasy coma, cramped and perspiring.

The young man in cotton knee-breeches had gone when I woke up, and had been replaced by another man

in cotton knee-breeches, eating a fish garnished with milk-chocolate and lemonade. Immediately on seeing that I was awake, he asked me whether I was going down to Florida to invest there. I said I had no money, but hoped ultimately to make two thousand dollars and buy a lunch-room in Chicago. I was learning my way about, you see. He nodded his head sagely, and produced a bottle of whisky.

"Yes, sir!" he said. "I'll tell the world that's the way to whack the bucks into a pile!" He offered me a drink, disdaining concealment. The old man with the tools appeared from nowhere, smoking a cigar, and offered to assist in the celebrations. He took a long and solemn pull from the bottle, and afterwards remarked that when he was in the horse-killing game on the west coast you could get that dope for a buck and a half. "You can't now, I'll say," said the other, slightly annoyed. He held the bottle up to the light, put it back in his pocket, and went off to clean his teeth in the smoking-room.

The day dragged interminably on. Outside, the dried-up cotton fields shimmered in the heat; inside, men with open shirts read yesterday's papers and rubbed yesterday's beards. A peculiarly penetrating odour was developing, partly due to the Italians having deposited all their sausage-skins under the seats. In the late afternoon we rolled into Savannah, and ate ice-creams, slightly mingled with soot but for all that very welcome, out of cardboard boxes. Later still, after dark, there were the first signs of Jacksonville; everybody began to get uneasy and restless, and to peer out of the windows at passing lights. At nine o'clock we drew into the

station, and were in a complete bedlam. It was our first taste of Florida. Hundreds of men were pushing about in all directions, carrying papers and shouting; above the din of voices and escaping steam immense loud-speakers were bellowing out the names of the departing trains. Tampa—St. Augustine—Miami—magic names! A man in a sort of pulpit outside the refreshment-room was apparently making a speech about something, but his voice failed to carry and nobody had time to listen to him, anyway. The heat was stifling, even worse than it had been in the train. But for all the confusion and noise there was, undeniably, something in the air; the first breath of the boom and of Miami, three hundred and fifty miles to the south. Quite unaccountably, I began to forget the troubles and discomforts of the journey and to feel glad that I had come. When finally the train started again I didn't feel in the least inclined to sleep; I wanted to walk about and talk to people, and tell them how much money I was going to make.

We roared on and on, down through the scented darkness. The moon rose, and there were our first palm-trees, standing out palely against the blue-black sky. I forgot about the soot and the filth and the heat—they didn't mean anything any more. I lay back in the seat and closed my eyes, seeing again those wonderful castles in the air at Forty-Second Street, and the Bam-Bam-Bammy shore. At the far end of the carriage the Italian was saying something about a lunch-room in Chicago. . . . "Good eats, Gents!" . . .

I was awake very early next morning, but the sun was already glaring down on the dead-flat wastes, covered

with brown grass and pine-trees. Here and there a small house, usually of white coral rock with a red-tiled roof, stood out among the trees; in the distance, parallel to the line, a dead-straight ribbon of road threaded its way south. An endless procession of cars was passing all going in the same direction—towards Miami. So far as I could see, everyone was in their shirt-sleeves; I watched the cars for about a quarter of an hour, and did not see so much as a single jacket. Our train was going very slowly now. All along beside us there were gangs of labourers, white men and negroes mixed indiscriminately, toiling away at laying extra rails. Everything was simply shimmering in the heat; it was intense. I found my way into the smoking-room, already crowded, and managed after a good deal of pushing to achieve a hurried wash with luke-warm water and a session of a second or so with the public hair-brush. The hardier spirits, in spite of the eccentric motions of the train, were trying to shave; but my own hardihood, a revolting outcrop of black bristles nevertheless, scarcely went as far as that. Being already heartily sick of lemonade and chocolate, I decided to take a block out of my capital and went to the dining-car, for the first time in two days, to take breakfast.

Whatever complaints may be made against the American railways in most other respects, it must certainly be admitted that their dining-cars are far and away ahead of ours. Apart from the fact that the negro who served us was perspiring to an extent I had never seen before in any human being, the meal and the service were beyond reproach. Everything, also, was iced; and iced grape-fruit, iced coffee, and iced peaches

and cream were as an oasis in the desert after the tepid "good eats." The people in the dining-car were a strange assortment, all fresh faces to me, being the aristocratic inhabitants of the Pullmans. They seemed to comprise most races and nationalities under the sun, and were as hard-looking a lot as ever I saw. I confess that my spirits sank slightly as I realized that, in my efforts to make a fortune, I was going to be up against, say, that dark-visaged Jew over there, so obviously accustomed to dealing with money from the day of his birth; or that pale-faced, bespectacled young man like a prematurely successful company director. They all looked as though they knew so infinitely much more about the business than I did myself. But after the grape-fruit I had revived somewhat, and after the peaches and cream even the discovery that my hand came away blackened from contact with my carefully-washed face was scarcely enough to put me out of conceit with myself. Who was I, anyway, that I was not as good as these? So that I paid the bill, which I could ill afford, and wandered back to the smoking compartment for another wash, with an opinion of myself and my capabilities as great as I had had even in those fatuous few moments after coming out of the Ziegfeld Follies.

The main road, the great Dixie Highway, was running nearer to the line now, and I was able to make out in more detail the incredible assortment of humanity that, in Ford and Rolls-Royce, on bicycle and on foot, was pouring down towards Miami, now scarcely over the horizon. Most of these equipages had the family goods roped on to the rear; camp beds, washing-stands,

even the conventional parrot of caricature were greatly in evidence. Every few miles along the road now there was some great gateway, surrounded by flowering trees, wide approaches, and groups of standard lamps, leading off towards one or other of the innumerable ideal cities of which I had heard so much. Through these gateways there was generally a straight and apparently perfect road leading away into nothing; there were very few buildings that could be seen from the railway. But the gateways to paradise were themselves impressive enough; and they succeeded—so far had I already come under the influence of the Florida mania—in conveying a strangely alluring impression of richness and hospitality and unbounded opportunity. Outside most of them there were little booths, and occasionally men sitting behind trestle tables, covered with papers, under great umbrellas, with a car or so drawn up close by under the shade of the pine trees.

The train rounded a curve, and we were suddenly in a settlement. We jerked and bumped to a standstill at a sort of open space, apparently doing duty for a station; and there, all around us, had sprung up from nowhere a motley assortment of young men and maidens, old men (but no old women) and middle-aged men, none of them wearing jackets and only a few of them wearing hats. We were in West Palm Beach, the metropolis and business centre for the island of Palm Beach, the most famous and fashionable resort in the United States. There were a few buildings in the background, and a huge assortment of cars; a few young men were running about with papers, but most of them seemed to have nothing particular to do. There were

quite a number of large racing automobiles, most of them occupied by extremely pretty and smartly-dressed girls under brightly-coloured parasols; it was quite an attractive sight. There was white everywhere—white walls, white dresses, white sand. Boys were selling papers and ice-cream and fruit, but there was nothing of the wild confusion that there had been in Jacksonville. Everyone seemed very friendly, and so far as I could make out everybody was talking to everybody else quite indiscriminately. A good many people left the train; among them, I was relieved to see, my dark-visaged Jewish rival. The whole atmosphere of West Palm Beach was quite different from anything that I had expected. There was nothing whatever to see, not even the ocean; there was a crowd of pleasant people laughing and talking and driving off to nowhere in particular in high-powered cars, but there was nothing of that wild excitement that I had been led to anticipate. Curiously enough, during the later occasions on which I was at Palm Beach I always noticed this same thing—that, although that community was enjoying all the fruits of the boom, and although even as in Miami great fortunes were being made there within a few days, there was never anything of that frenzied “boosting” and general delirium that is the civic characteristic of the more southern city. Palm Beach prides itself on being a centre of the American aristocracy; and certainly, of all the places I ever saw in Florida, it was the most self-controlled and the least blatant.

The train was off again, and now we were wending our way through a different sort of scenery; an unending series of perfectly flat subdivisions, with perfectly straight

streets lined with electric lamps leading down towards a perfectly blue sea a mile or so away on our left, and here and there quite considerable little collections of houses in the prevailing glaring white and red, with occasionally a big hotel, semi-completed. The Dixie Highway had changed sides now, and on our right the cars were still pouring by, with the passengers in their back seats pulling about among their luggage and preparing for the end of their journey. The numbers of the triumphal archways and the ornamental concrete bridges had become legion now, and everywhere vistas of the inevitable "White Way Lights" stretched away over the grass-covered flats. And soon—or at least after an hour or so, for our train was moving very cautiously over the newly-laid metals—we were actually coming very slowly into the outskirts of Miami, with the bell tolling interminably on the engine far ahead and automobiles drawn up at the level crossings. Away in the distance, the outlines of larger buildings than any we had seen for the last several hundred miles loomed up towards us through the haze.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Crash! With many jolts and jerks, with many groans and grindings, the train was drawing to a stop. I leaned out of the window; and there, a few hundred yards ahead and waiting for us, was the immense crowd that was always waiting for those car-loads of gullible northerners that were disgorged every few hours into Miami Central Station. As we drew in, they swarmed round the carriages like a hive of angry bees; most of them shouting, all of them sweating, all of them coatless and carrying great bundles of papers. All the men were wearing cotton

knee-breeches, and all were purple in the face with heat and excitement. There were no women. The scene, so utterly unlike Palm Beach of a few hours previously, was far more what I had anticipated of the Florida boom, but also in some subtle way infinitely more repulsive and less romantic. There was an enormous crowd surging about the wooden sheds that formed the station; there must have been at least several thousands. I allowed most of the rest of the passengers, who were already shoving and pushing round the exits, to get out first ; and then, taking down my two suit-cases and—great heavens!—my overcoat, I struggled out through the press and stood for the first time, surrounded and unnoticed, in the Magic City of Florida, the city of millionaires, the Mecca of half the world. My trials and tribulations were about to begin; and it was two o'clock on the hottest, dustiest, most glaring afternoon I had ever known. I had exactly twenty dollars in the world.