

CHAPTER III

THERE are not very many taxis in Miami, but such as there are can usually be discovered somewhere in the neighbourhood of the station, and I was lucky enough to get one of them. As a matter of fact, as everyone who is able to afford to travel on wheels possesses at least one car of his own, there is not a great deal of necessity for them. I gave the driver—after loading my suit-cases on to the cab entirely unassisted—the name of an hotel that I had seen in a newspaper coming down in the train, and we drove off.

Within ten yards from the station we became embedded in a jam of traffic which would have made the worst congestion of London or New York child's play by comparison. Everything was completely immovable. Even on stepping out of the train, my ears had been assailed by a peculiar din whose source I could not definitely place, but its cause soon became evident. It is, or was, the custom in Miami for any driver of any vehicle which is held up for more than a few seconds to press his finger on his electric warning signal and keep it there, as a sort of general protest against the conditions and an advertisement of the fact that he is there, and

wants to get about his business. The mass effect of several hundreds of people all doing this simultaneously in a street already narrow and noisy enough, in all conscience, can better be imagined than described. The din was quite deafening, and it was not for at least ten minutes that we were able to move so much as a single foot. When for a second the jam in front of us loosened, my driver dashed forward with a loud shout into the middle of the *mêlée*, and at once collided, very violently, with a Ford-load of fat men immediately ahead. I was jolted heavily forward against the rear screen, and in the same instant saw that we had ripped part of the Ford's near-side mudguard right off its supports and badly damaged our own. To my amazement, nothing whatever happened along the lines of the usual scene that would have resulted anywhere else, even in America. The four fat business men, who had been badly jolted, turned round as one and expressed their views on the situation in singularly unpleasant language. The only remark I actually heard was from one of the rear passengers, who volunteered that he would tell the world (which he did) that my driver was a —————.

My own driver, with many embellishments, remarked that he'd say this was no place for ————— funerals; but to my astonishment nobody got out, or even attempted to ascertain the extent of the really quite considerable damage. A second later another gap in the traffic had presented itself, and the Ford, with a violent jerk, had crashed into it and collided with somebody else further in front and started a fresh argument. My own Jehu apparently thought no further of the matter, and never even glanced at the

remains of his own front mudguard, which was scarcely what it had been a few seconds ago. As a matter of fact, by the time I had been in Florida for a few days I had become quite used to these collisions, which were so constant and so unavoidable in the existing state of the traffic that unless the vehicles concerned were actually incapable of going on with their journeys nobody troubled about them at all. And a new car could always be had for the asking, anyway.

Though commonplace enough in the light of later experience, that first journey of mine from the station to the hotel seemed to me then an epic of adventure and mighty peril. After our encounter with the Ford we were again jammed for several minutes, with the deafening din of the sirens going on all round us as before; until, in fact, a sort of lighthouse tower just behind us suddenly emitted a piercing ringing sound like a demented electric bell and displayed a cryptic series of red, yellow and green lights. The driver jammed in his gears, and we all surged slowly forwards, with a good deal of bumping and shouting. A man suddenly appeared on the footboard, and with a genial smile thrust towards me a small sample-case containing a number of different coloured silk socks. I smiled deprecatingly, and waved him away; which, being apparently far less violent treatment than he was accustomed to receive, was sufficient inducement for him to open the door and come right inside.

"I haven't any money!" I bawled at him, above the din.

"They're only two dollars!" said the man. "A knock-out! Look at that texture, sir—I'll tell the

world it's the bee's knees!" And so, I have no doubt, it was. "I haven't any money!" I bawled again; and then, seeing that this was treatment obviously far too mild, I altered my tone and shouted "Get out!" and gave him a shove in the direction of the door. The man made some menacing remark which I couldn't hear, and pushed the sample-case directly under my nose. Suddenly I was furious with him, and saw red. The car, at the moment, was moving slowly through the crowd; but I jerked open the door and with a sudden heave ejected him and his sample-case out into the road. He hung on to the footboard for a moment, shouting and waving his case at me; but I shut the door, and a second later he had jumped off and with a sudden seraphic smile that quite bewildered me had boarded another car going in the opposite direction. Poor devil—I hope he made a fortune with his knock-out textures—he deserved one. The driver had taken no notice whatever of this somewhat violent scene, but had proceeded forwards by a series of jolts until he was now hopelessly blocked by a great locomotive that was drawn up, apparently permanently, right across the road. For several hundred yards to our rear, the motor-horns were going. . . .

I arrived at the hotel at last, and found, of course, that it was out of the question to get any sort of room at all. When I came out again, the driver and both my suit-cases had gone; but by the luck of Heaven he was honest, and had only gone a few hundred yards further down the road. It was impossible, as well as illegal, to draw up in that traffic. I rejoined the car, and he

drove me to some little hotel of his own choice where he said it might be possible for me to get in. And get in, by a miracle, I did; though only in a diminutive and stiflingly hot room like an attic right at the top of a very second-rate building, and at the price—without any extras whatever—of seven dollars a night for the bed. So that was that, and I had eleven dollars left in the wide world.

After a long and luxurious bath, during the course of which I dislodged such quantities of soot and filth from my person that I had twice to run out the water because it had become too black to see through, I put on a clean shirt and clean socks and clean everything else and ventured out into the street. After some consideration, I decided to wear a jacket; I had seen already that nobody else did so, but it is an embarrassing thing unless one is accustomed to it to come down into the lounge of an hotel filled with men and women and be dressed only in one's shirt-sleeves. I soon regretted my decision; within a few minutes I was pouring with perspiration, and had come rapidly home again to leave the offending garment behind. And then, having ascertained from the telephone book the addresses of the four local newspapers from which I hoped to begin the re-creation of my fortunes, I sallied forth into the streets once more to try my chances.

My first impression, as I wandered out into the blazing sunlight of that tropical afternoon into that bedlam that was Miami, was of utter confusion. Everywhere there was building going forward at express speed; and mingled with the perpetual screeching of the motor-horns a thousand automatic riveters poured

out their deafening music, a thousand drills and hammers and winches added to the insane chorus. Everywhere there was dust. Hatless, coatless men rushed about the blazing streets, their arms full of papers, perspiration pouring from their foreheads. Every shop seemed to be combined with a real-estate office; at every doorway crowds of young men were shouting and speech-making, thrusting forward papers and proclaiming to heaven the unsurpassed chances which they were offering to make a fortune. One had been prepared for real-estate madness; and here it was, *in excelsis*. Everybody in Miami was real-estate mad. Towering office buildings, almost entirely occupied by "realtors," were the scenes of indescribable enthusiasm and confusion. Everywhere there was hand-shaking, back-slapping, and general boosting. Everyone I saw seemed to be shaking hands, offering cigars, studying mysterious-looking diagrams of "desirable subdivisions." Business men—a phenomenon surely never before known in the world's history—could be seen at all the little street-corner cafés concluding what I felt sure to be big deals over a sarsaparilla or a sundæ.

I made my way to the offices of the "Miami Herald," that immense 128-page sheet that must surely have been a gold-mine for its proprietors, if ever there was one. At that time there were about 100 pages of advertising every day in the "Miami Herald," at an average of 750 dollars a page; you may make your own calculations. And this on a circulation of about 30,000, and with the expenses of news-getting reduced to a minimum, since the various publicity organizations attached to the larger "ideal cities" supplied all news

free that had the slightest bearing on their multifarious activities. There were certainly worse propositions than newspaper-owning in Miami; or owning anything else for that matter, at the time when I arrived there.

The editor of the "Miami Herald" saw me immediately, though I was quite unknown; but my hopes of gaining a leading position on his staff were quickly dashed. There was nothing doing. Nor, in fact, was there anything doing on any of the other three papers that I visited that afternoon; the newspaper business, despite its obviously bursting prosperity, seemed to be a singularly unfruitful source of occupation. This was not particularly encouraging. I had been more or less mixed up with newspapers all my life, and knew a certain amount about them; but my qualifications for any other sort of business were nebulous, to say the least of them. Still, I was treated with great cordiality everywhere, and told what a splendid fellow I was, and how glad everyone in Miami would be when they found out—as they never did—that I had come there. Incidentally, I was also informed that Miami was "One hell of a place"; it was also "The finest city, sir, in the U.S.A., and I don't mean mebbe"; and I was further asked that if I could point to a better, larger, more progressive, more idealistic city in any of the southern states, I should name it there and then. All of which was very pleasant, but not quite what I had wanted. I left my last port of call slightly depressed, and wandered along to the bay-front; where, across the water, the myriad lights of Miami Beach were already beginning to twinkle out across the marvellous stillness of Biscayne Bay.

Miami itself is now practically entirely a commercial

city; beyond one or two of the more old-established resort hotels built during the pre-boom period, it is devoted almost entirely in its down-town section to business alone. The amusement centre of the city has shifted to the astonishing and largely artificially-constructed island of Miami Beach, which is connected with the mainland by two great causeways, each four miles long, intersected by drawbridges to permit the passage of launches and fishing-boats.

In the gathering darkness, I set out on foot for the distant lights; and there on the causeway I waited for a quarter of an hour to cross to the footpath, while an endless procession of cars, all going in the same direction, flashed by me at well over forty miles an hour. All were being urged to greater speeds still by the "traffic cop" on point duty. The official speed-limit in Florida is forty-five miles an hour, and on the causeways at least it was quite disregarded. The traffic cop, who was formidably armed with an immense and conspicuous automatic pistol and jingling handcuffs, roared abuse at every car that passed, urging it to greater efforts and reminding the occupants that they were not at a funeral. The whole aim and ambition of the traffic cops was to increase the speed of the traffic on the causeways by every and any means, but mainly by the use of scathing and derisive comments on the various cars' capabilities. Practically everybody seemed to be wearing highly-coloured bathing costumes and little else. Young men and girls predominated, all looking extremely pleased with themselves and without a care in the world. And trudging on foot across the causeway in the gathering darkness, feeling rather depressed about things in general

and with a fair amount of legitimate doubt as to where, after to-morrow, would be the source of my next meal, I found it in my heart to envy them. It was all very well for *them*. . . .

It was a long walk across to Miami Beach, and nobody offered me a lift. I afterwards found that they never did, in Miami; they were too afraid of black-jackers and of other similar gentry. But, as I say, I only realized this later, and at the time I regarded it as a striking sidelight on the selfishness of the American nation. But the lights of some great hotel, shining out across the perfectly still and black waters of Biscayne Bay, were very attractive; and when, after the best part of an hour, I came near to the island itself there became audible the faint and very pleasant strains of a dance-orchestra, apparently performing in a very brilliantly-lit roof-garden that stood out like a coronet surmounting the black mass of the hotel tower.

Miami Beach is a singularly beautiful island, which until 1913-1914 was little less than a bog, inaccessible save by shallow-draft boats and later by a rickety wooden bridge. It was in those days that Dr. Edward E. Dammers, afterwards Mayor of the City of Coral Gables and my much-valued friend and general adviser, with great difficulty auctioned lots on the beach for 1,100 dollars apiece; lots which twelve years later were absolutely unobtainable for twenty-five and even thirty times that amount. It was not until the arrival of Carl G. Fisher of Indianapolis, one of the most remarkable figures in the whole Florida boom, that Miami Beach began to be developed into the resort *par excellence* that it afterwards became. Mr. Fisher, being a man of

rare imagination, great wealth and many ideas, conceived the truth that if Florida were to develop along the lines that were even already beginning to be faintly indicated, land on Miami Beach would be even more valuable through its ocean frontage than land on the mainland. So Mr. Fisher bought practically the whole of the island, and began to build not only roads and drains, bulkheads and bridges, but also to construct giant hotels at a time when there was absolutely no existing reason why there should be any hotels there at all. He cleared Miami Beach, and actually created a great deal of very beautiful and very valuable territory out of what had previously been waste lands and bogs. He dug canals and built tram lines, and was the moving spirit in the erection of the million-dollar causeway which, shortly after the war, connected his properties with the mainland. The result of this enterprise more than justified his wildest hopes. How much Mr. Fisher made out of Miami Beach could scarcely be estimated, even by himself; and in addition he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had created what was really in itself a very beautiful thing, and a very real and distinct addition to the pleasure resorts of America. At the time when I first arrived there Miami Beach was already an independent city, and contained not only scores of hotels and apartment houses, but also some of the most beautiful private houses in Florida. There were shops and restaurants there where only a few years ago there had been alligators and marshes; there were great hotels and electric power stations where before the war there had been only a few fishermen's huts and smugglers' jetties.

Considered purely as a pleasure resort, Miami Beach was at that time almost idyllic. Wide, golden beaches swept down to a crystal-clear sea that was always warm; behind them palm-groves and great sweeps of vivid green lawn stretched away towards brilliantly white Spanish houses half-hidden behind hibiscus and magnolia trees. Boulevards sixty feet wide with surfaces that put a billiard-table to shame led on and on into the entrancing forests, with now and again a graceful concrete bridge, dazzlingly white, spanning a canal or a lake. And always there was that endless procession of tall electric torches that at night-time made those country highways far more brilliant even than our own Piccadilly. Miami Beach was—and still is, in some ways—an earthly paradise; and even on that first stifling evening, when I approached it on foot, depressed and lonely, across the four hard miles of causeway, I recognized its wonder and felt within myself something of its beauty and of what Florida might mean to those who had the wealth to enjoy it in peace.

By following the tram lines, however, I managed to arrive at the most democratic and by far the least attractive section of the island, that section devoted to the usual more or less blatant amusements common to sea-shores the world over. A little line of glittering lights and busy cafés indicated the beginning of the sea-front; and the eternal "Yessir—She's My Baby" came wafted to my ears, accompanied by an enthusiastic human chorus, from the stained-glass cabinet enclosing an electric piano in the lighted entrance of an hotel. I went into one of the innumerable so-called casinos that front the beach; they are not casinos in our sense of

the word, but are generally a curious sort of a mixture of shops and bathing-pools and cafés, all jumbled up together. The beach itself, at this point, was covered with countless little stalls carrying on all manner of trades, particularly that devoted (even in the height of summer) to the sale of hamburger steaks and "hot dogs," which consist of a sausage and an onion cunningly disposed between the two halves of a bread roll. At one of these stands, afterwards destined to become a haven in times of stress, I indulged in this delicacy for the first time, and found it highly comforting. After another, my spirits and my optimism were so far restored that I decided to splash fifty cents on a bathe; and never were fifty cents spent to better advantage.

It was nine o'clock. The water, inky-black despite the blazing electric lamps that illuminated it far out to sea, was smooth and silky in a way that I, though a moderately experienced swimmer, have never known water to be anywhere else in the world. It was also quite extraordinarily warm; almost warmer, even, than the by no means chilly night air. I swam far out and lay back, looking up at the stars. After all, Florida was not such a bad place—it was rather wonderful! And to-morrow I would begin the grand business of making my fortune. If all these people here could keep their ends up, surely I could too! The stars were very big and very close; I splashed idly, and was covered with an extraordinarily beautiful phosphorescent shower. It was all very wonderful; I was drowsy and peaceful now, and quite—or almost quite—resigned to being where I was. . . . There was a splashing near me, coming closer—someone was swimming out my

way. I turned round; a cheerful-looking youth was flopping about in the water near me.

"Bully night!" he said. "Had any luck to-day?"

"Only just arrived," I said. "How's things down here—pretty good?"

"I'll say they are! Landed a coupla hundred bucks 'sfternoon on a block in Coral Gables—kid's play!" Somebody called him, a girl's voice, and he swam back again towards the shore. He had somehow rather disturbed my new-found equanimity. He had friends, he could make money . . . but could I? So I swam back, and taking a hideously-crowded and impossibly slow electric tram this time, rattled back to my hotel. There was a little electric fan in my room, with a diameter of about four inches; I started it, and it almost immediately became red-hot and burst into flames. . . . There was a cockroach running up the wall, and the sheets—despite the seven dollars a night—were none too clean. But I was too tired to mind. And so to bed, and to sleep; or at least, almost to sleep, as the heat and the stifling air and the mosquitoes, the roar of passing cars and the occasional snatches of "Yessir—She's My ——" were a little disturbing, somehow. And that was the end of my first day in Florida.