

CHAPTER IV

IT was in the lounge of the Alta Vista Hotel on the following morning that I met Mr. Cyrus P. Morton. Mr. Morton had advertised in the "Miami Herald" that he wanted four smart men for a membership drive in connection with the International Yacht Club, and I had applied early—to be exact, shortly before eight a.m. But Mr. Morton was already up, and was sitting at his desk in his shirt-sleeves, very busy over nothing in particular and with a great many papers, as is the way of the 100 per cent, hell-bent young business man of America. He was a very enthusiastic young man, was Mr. Morton; dark-haired and clear-eyed, and with a happy, confidential smile that would have sold anybody anything.

Mr. Morton was delighted to see me, and offered me a cigar as we sat down. I was, apparently, exactly the man that he had been wanting to meet; there was big money for everybody in the International Yacht Club, but a few men like myself were wanted to help get it out. The International Yacht Club had, in fact, purchased a hulk from the United States Government, and proposed to have this hulk towed to Miami and converted into a luxurious floating club-house, fitted with

every conceivable equipment for the delectation of members. There would be a dance-orchestra, a ball-room, forty bedrooms, a promenade deck, a restaurant, and a great many other things besides. The club, while not definitely restricted to any one class, was to be socially exclusive; and to give it a start, life memberships were to be sold for the sum of 250 dollars cash.

"It's a cinch," said Mr. Morton. "Let me tell you, sir, the idea's a knock-out. And when I say that you boys will get a commission of thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents for every membership you sell, why, I'm talking the straight truth and I'm talking big money. Yessir—I'm talking like J. Pierpoint Rockerbilt, and I don't mean mebbe. There's no reason why a boy like you shouldn't sell twenty memberships a day—and what's that? I'll say it's 750 bucks a day, 5,250 bucks a week, or on a conservative basis twenty thousand bucks a month. English, I take it?—yessir, Cyrus can tell the breed! Well, I'll put it square, as one straight guy to another—how does four thousand pounds a month strike you, and you your own boss?"

I need scarcely say that four thousand pounds a month, which Mr. Morton's winning smile almost made me feel that I had in my pockets already, struck me exceedingly hard. I had already begun to feel again that the Florida boom was all, and more than all, that it had been painted by Mr. Will Rogers; and Mr. Morton's glowing descriptions of the incredible luxuries that would be available aboard the converted hulk had made me seriously consider whether, out of the first few thousand that I made, I wouldn't spend 250 dollars on a life-membership for myself. So that ten minutes later, armed with a

copious supply of visiting cards and an immense document setting forth the social exclusiveness, the practical advantages, and the unlimited financial possibilities of the International Yacht Club, I sallied forth into the streets of Miami at a salary of £50,000 a year.

When one has had no experience of salesmanship whatever, it is not quite so easy as it appears to make a beginning. I decided, after drinking a glass of ice-water and looking at the guests in the lounge of my hotel, that I wouldn't just go up to any casual stranger that happened to look gullible, but would ring up (for instance) every doctor mentioned in the telephone book, would say that I had heard that he was likely to be interested in the International Yacht Club, and would he care to see a member of the membership committee? It would be no lie; for Mr. Morton, you see, had appointed me to that august body in actual fact. So armed with a battery of nickels from the cigar counter, I entered the telephone booth and began the making of my fortune.

"What's that?" said Dr. Humperdinck. "Some guy gave you my name, did he? *What* guy, hey? What? You don't know? Don't know, hell! I wouldn't join your bum club, not for 250 cents!" I hung up the receiver, rather flurried; it appeared that thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents had gone from my fortune already. And Dr. Dicksee, whom I tried next, was scarcely more encouraging. "You're only the four hundred and nineteenth bum that's asked me that this morning," said Dr. Dicksee cheerfully. "I told the last one I'd screw his neck; and I'd screw yours, if you weren't at the other end of a wire. G'bye."

It was stifflingly hot in the booth; the hottest place in Florida I should imagine, which was saying a good deal. And after I had tried Dr. Dent and Dr. Buckstone, and made a complete failure with both of them, I came out streaming with perspiration to consider the situation further. The method of attack seemed to be wrong somehow; things didn't seem to be going with quite the swing that I had expected. Perhaps these medical men didn't like being called on the telephone—that might be it! So suiting the action to the thought, I wandered out into the street again, mopping my forehead, to push aimlessly through the jostling crowds on the pavement until I should see the next doctor's plate in an office entrance.

The office of Dr. Kemp looked inviting enough, and I took fresh heart as I went up the stairs, preparing my speech. "Good morning, Dr. Kemp. I'm sorry to trouble you, but your name has been handed in to the membership committee of the International Yacht Club, and we thought you might be interested. . . ." That was how it was going to go. "Here are some of the particulars—a life membership costs only 250 dollars, you see. . . ." Somehow I felt fairly sure that the tide was going to turn with Dr. Kemp. And when I opened the door of the office, and a smart-looking nurse came out to see me, I felt certain that I was on the right track at last.

"The doc's in there—last door on the right," said the nurse. "Go right in—he'd like to see you."

So I went along the passage and knocked, and heard the doctor's voice asking me to come in.

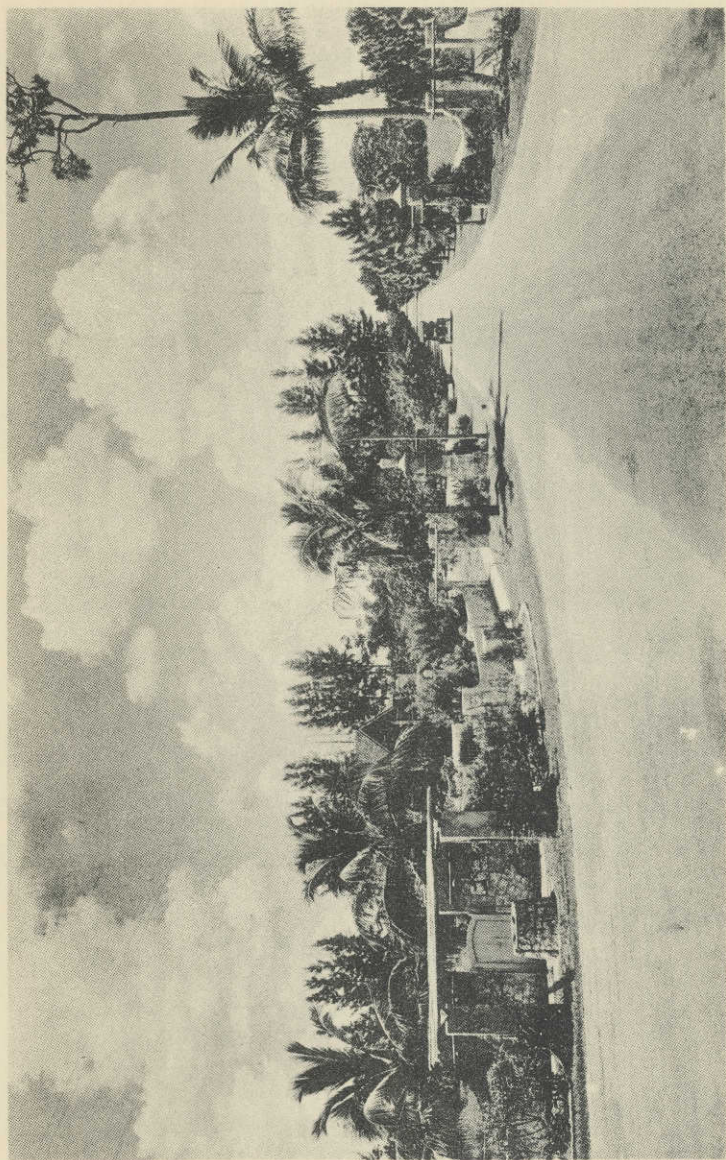
Dr. Kemp was a cheerful, stockily-built little man, an

Irishman I think, who radiated geniality. You could see at once that he had a large practice. He was, in fact, at that very moment engaged in what appeared to be a very ticklish operation, involving the spilling of a good deal of blood, on the eye of a patient sitting before the window in a sort of dentist's chair. To cool his nerves while he worked, the doctor was smoking a cigarette, and would now and again spit with unerring precision into the waste-paper basket. A nurse standing near held a bundle of instruments, which she handed to him as he required them.

"Don't mind me!" said Dr. Kemp. "Go right ahead. Want to sell something, do you? . . . Steady there, I'm not going to hurt you! Gimme the forceps, Sister. . . . It's no good trying to sell anything to the old doctor, I'll tell you right away. He's been stung too often before by you guys, and he don't have a cent, no-how."

"The membership committee of the International Yacht Club——" I began.

Dr. Kemp roared with laughter, looking up at the ceiling and shouting with mirth. "Yo! Ho! Ho!" said Dr. Kemp. "So *that's* it, is it? No, *sir*—I'll tell the world you don't catch the old doc there! See here—I'll tell *you* something. You get thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents if you sell me a ticket—that so, hey? Ha, ha! The old doc knew it, right enough! I'd sooner hand you the rake-off right away than get one of those —— tickets, and so I would, sooner than lose 250 bucks! Steady, steady, *steady!* No need to play hell, brother!" (This to the unfortunate patient,



A FLORIDA ROADWAY

who showed signs of stirring under the instruments.) Dr. Kemp spat, with extraordinary precision, into a small brass cuspidor in the far corner of the surgery, and resumed his work. "No, sir, there's nothing doing here. It's the egg-heads you want in your line, not old Doc Kemp!"

So that was that; and by this time it was beginning to be driven home to me that it wasn't quite so easy to make £4,000 a month as Mr. Morton had indicated. And so out again to wander the streets of Miami, going into any likely-looking office and coming out again quite invariably with a very lowered opinion of myself and a gradually growing conviction that the Florida boom wasn't all that it seemed. And yet there was money everywhere—that was so obvious. The only catch was that I myself, apparently, couldn't get hold of any of it. In the stiflingly hot evening I took a tram over to Miami Beach, and once again refreshed myself with a swim in that wonderful silky-warm water. Often enough, in the darker days of my time in Florida, I had need to go to the ocean for comfort, and it never failed me. The bathing in Florida is surely the best in the world; far superior, even, to the bathing in the Manly surf near Sydney, Australia, which is the next best that I know, and which is supposed to be as good as any. Even the warm waters of Durban, in the marvellous swimming-baths of which town I have spent many a happy hour, can scarcely compare with the luxury of sea-bathing in Florida.

Coming back along Fifth Street, Miami Beach, I stopped before a bright little office window which displayed the sign of Mr. W. F. Brown, architect. Mr.

W. F. Brown himself, in knee-breeches and shirt-sleeves, could be discerned within, seated at a table covered with plans. Acting on a sudden inspiration, I opened the door and went inside.

"Hullo!" said Mr. Brown. "And what can I do for you? Build you a house—a dam' *good* house—or do you want to sell *me* something, hey? Sit down and tell me all about it."

I liked Mr. W. F. Brown. He was an Englishman, judging by his accent, an accent only slightly affected by several years of residence in the Magic South. I decided not to attempt any of the tricky artifices of the super-salesman, and went straight to the point.

"As a matter of fact, I want to sell you a life-membership in the International Yacht Club for 250 dollars," I said. "I honestly think it's a good thing"—and I did too, at the time. "I'll get fifteen per cent commission if I do, and I don't mind telling you I could do with it. How about joining?"

Mr. Brown sighed; and then, to my utter amazement, he opened a drawer in his desk and produced a cheque-book. I stared at him, fascinated; I could scarcely believe my eyes.

"The fatal thing about this town is that you can't know what's good and what isn't," said Mr. Brown. "The odds are, of course, that this club of yours is a swindle—no, it's all right, I know *you* think it isn't, but you haven't been over here long enough to know. As I say, it's probably a swindle; on the other hand, perhaps it isn't, and even if it is I may be able to resell at a profit before it's found out. On the whole, I think it's worth it. How much did you say—two-fifty?"

He wrote out a cheque, and tossed it across to me. "There you are—go and get drunk on it. I've made so much money the last six months that I don't know what to do with it, anyway."

As Mr. Brown signed his name I could almost, I swear, see a halo glowing about his head. It was a wonderful moment. And if by any remote chance it should ever happen that these lines should meet his eye, I should like to tell him in all sincerity that I did *not* know that the International Yacht Club was not all that it had been painted as being; nor did I know that, a few weeks later, Mr. Morton's hulk was to be quietly towed away again to some destination unknown, or that Mr. Morton himself was suddenly to disappear from his offices in the Alta Vista Hotel, never to be seen again by mortal eye. I did not, I repeat, know any of these things; and it is some balm to a guilty conscience to know that Mr. Brown, even at the moment of signing his name along the dotted line, knew far better than I did how likely they were to happen. I hope he disposed of his life-membership—which was, incidentally, "transferable"—before the crash came. We talked afterwards for a few minutes, when the cheque was safely in my pocket, and it transpired that my rescuer was a retired Scotland Yard detective, one of the few Englishmen that I ever met during the whole of my Florida wanderings. So that it was perhaps not so remarkable that he was able to see through the deficiencies of the International Yacht Club more easily than I, a Floridian of only some thirty-six hours' standing.

I returned home triumphantly to my hotel that night,
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and slept the sleep of the just; but, to cut a long story short, I may say now that I never again succeeded, during the next few days when I was devoting all the skill as a salesman which I possessed towards the selling of life-memberships, in disposing of a single one more of them. I was a complete failure. At the end of four days I gave up the attempt, thoroughly discouraged, and convinced that I could never, in the current phrase, sell a dollar for ten cents. There is some special attribute necessary to the successful salesman, and that attribute I myself most certainly do not possess. At the end of the week I handed in my papers to Mr. Morton, who was more genial than ever; he couldn't, he declared, understand my bad luck, as the club was booming. Later, when I went into the Alta Vista Hotel on other business, I noticed that his office in the lobby had gone; and the dismal story of how the hulk had been towed away in the dead of night, while life-members of the International Yacht Club, all unknowing, slept the sleep of honest men, had become one of the standing jokes of Miami. But I repeat that while I was a member of the membership committee I had full confidence in Mr. Morton, and had no idea whatever that these things would be happening.

During the next few days I managed to live on this one wretched commission, but was unable, as I have said, further to increase it. On the last of these days, when it had become quite obvious to me that the International Yacht Club was, so far as I was concerned, a perfectly hopeless money-making proposition, I answered an advertisement in the "Miami Herald" which proclaimed that four well-educated men, accustomed to

clerical work, were needed to fill important and well-paid positions with a large and reputable manufacturing firm. A street address was given, and I called there early on the morning of the day that the advertisement appeared.

An extraordinarily self-possessed little man, with a made-up bow tie and pronounced bottle-shoulders covered by a striped zephyr shirt, rose from behind a desk as I entered and greeted me warmly.

"Sit down, sir!" said this diminutive individual, to whom I had suddenly and immediately taken an intense dislike. "Right in that Morris chair, where I can see you." He paused for a moment, regarding me searchingly. With great pomp he then announced, "You'll do—you're hired, from now on!"

I was extremely irritated, and my gorge rose. Despite the well-worn proverb, even beggars can be choosers to the extent of not being "hired" if they don't want to be.

"What do you mean, I'm hired?" I said. "Who says I'm hired, anyway? What are you offering? The only job I'm taking is a pretty good one."

Mr. Clegg, which a gilded card propped on his desk proclaimed to be my patron's name, was not in the least disconcerted. He laughed softly, and said:

"You'll do—you'll do—I like a man of spirit!" in a way that made me want to screw his neck, even as Dr. Dicksee had wanted to screw the neck of the unfortunate representative of the International Yacht Club. "You'll take what I'm offering all right, when you see what it is!" said Mr. Clegg.

"I haven't all the morning to waste," I said. "What is it, anyway?"

“Look at this!” said Mr. Clegg. He dived into a drawer behind his desk, and produced, with an air of quiet triumph, an imitation leather folio. “Look at this, sir!” he repeated. He opened it slowly, and disclosed a perfectly flat row of sample silk stockings—the identical display that had been shoved under my nose in the taxi on my first day in Miami. “Our Junior Sample Case—I’ll say it’s a knock-out!” said Mr. Clegg. He held it up to the light, with almost holy reverence. “Our firm, sir, will give you one of these Junior Samples, the best in the trade, right away. After thirty days’ trial, we’ll give you a Senior Sample, in silver gilt—think of *that*, sir! All you have to do is to sell this re-markable hose to your friends, and we hand you over ten per cent on delivery of the cash. What do you think of that for a straight, four-square, honest-to-God business proposition? There isn’t another proposition like that being offered in the trade to-day, I’ll give you my solemn.”

I don’t think I had ever before been so ridiculously angry. It was a trivial and fatuous matter enough, but it cut me to the quick.

“Do you mean to tell me,” I said, “that you’ve had the insolence to advertise all this nonsense about a clerical training and a good education, to get men in here to tell them to sell silk stockings in the streets? What are you talking about?”

“Groomed for a managerial position from the start!” said Mr. Clegg. “I’m a successful man, though I say it; and before I’m through I’m going to be more successful still. And you’ll be the same way, starting from the bottom like I did. I tell you, sir, these hose here

are the best proposition in the U.S.A., and that means in the world. You stand by us, and we'll stand by you. There's more openings for a he-man in this game than in any of this real-estate bunk—remember that!"

I am afraid that I was too angry to make proper use of my opportunities for withering scorn. I stood up, and reached for my hat; and, with a glance that was meant to shrivel the wretched Mr. Clegg where he sat, I banged out of the office.

I am only relating this incident to show that in Miami at that time it was practically useless to answer any advertisement that had not directly to do with real-estate. Beyond real-estate and hotels, there were practically no openings whatever for the "clerical, well-educated man." I have since heard from any number of people who had answered advertisements even more glowingly worded than this that they all amounted to the same thing—selling some speciality on a commission basis. I don't know how it strikes others, but it has always seemed to me that this particular profession, though no doubt a perfectly honourable one, is somehow particularly unattractive. Out in the streets in the dazzling sunshine, my anger abated a little; and by the time I had walked a few blocks I even permitted myself to laugh a little at the absurdity of the whole episode, and at the contemptible self-satisfaction of the ineffable Mr. Clegg. What a ludicrous business it all was! And I thought suddenly of my father, and of several other people that I knew, and amused myself by speculating as to what they would have thought if they had suddenly come upon me hawking ladies' silk stockings, even in the dazzling

setting of a Junior Sample Case, about the streets of Miami.

Swimming that evening at Miami Beach, I reviewed the situation. It was not a very encouraging one. I had forty-one dollars in cash as my total capital in all the world, and of that there were thirty-five dollars due for my hotel bill, to be paid on the following morning. I had therefore the precise sum of six dollars, and I was alone on the continent of America. Furthermore, in this land of millionaires, I was apparently one of the few people congenitally incapable of earning a living. The prospect was a depressing one; and action, immediate and practical action, was essential. And coming out of that silky-warm water feeling more optimistic, for no particular reason, than I had done for some time, I faced the prospect of manual labour fairly and squarely and arrived at the conclusion that there was nothing else for it. At that time I loathed Miami, heartily and absolutely; but without making at least a little money there was no way to get out of it.

It was when I was munching a "hot dog," sitting on the sand under an arc-light with my back resting against the end of a coffee-stall, that I pulled out an old notebook that I always carried and began to scribble a somewhat venomous essay dealing with life in Florida generally, as seen up to then through somewhat jaundiced eyes. I was rather pleased with the result, in that it had let off a certain amount of steam; and later on that same evening I posted it away to a friend of mine on a London newspaper, asking him to make what use he could of it. Little did I know what unpleasant complications this outburst was later to bring in its

trail, and how greatly I should regret that I had ever written it.

It was within a hundred yards of the well-remembered Miami Beach office of Mr. W. F. Brown, my saviour of a few days earlier, that I had another inspiration in walking into the brightly-lit little entrance hall of the New York Hotel, a remarkably small and compact establishment of no particular pretensions, and not even boasting a dining-room in its equipment. I felt, somehow, that the New York Hotel was what I had been wanting; and I was right.

The minimum rates of the hotel proved to be three dollars a night, which was of course beyond me; but after a little conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Walter J. Reid, Props., it transpired that I could be accommodated with a cot-bed on one of the upper landings for seven dollars a week—the cheapest rate, I think, that anyone within ten miles of Miami can ever have obtained. There was no accommodation whatever apart from the bed, and I had to dress and undress in full view of a much-used passage; but as nobody seemed to mind about this, I was the last person to object. So on the following morning, with a total capital of two dollars and twenty-five cents after paying for the necessary taxi across the causeway, I found myself settled in this remarkably comfortable little hotel and looking for work. It was incredibly hot; and even a swim, in the glittering blue sea of midday, scarcely cooled me down. It was late afternoon before, clad in an old pair of flannel trousers and an older flannel shirt, I tramped off in the direction of Miami City to begin my career as a manual labourer.