

CHAPTER V

I DON'T exactly know why it is that the average man in search of a job turns instinctively towards the docks. Myself, at such times as I have been hard pressed, I have invariably veered towards the water-side; but in my own case this may perhaps be due to the fact that, through having spent a considerable time at sea in various capacities, I am more accustomed to ships and their vagaries than to most of the other places where employment of a lowly degree may happen to be offering.

Anyway, on this melancholy and exceedingly hot late afternoon, I found myself ultimately standing in that arid, depressing open space which at that time adjoined the wharves of the Baltimore and Carolina Steamship Company—one of those dismal open spaces that are characteristic, somehow, of dock-sides the world over. But until a year or so ago, the dock side scenery at Miami was even more than usually depressing. Towards the south, the wide, flat waste stretched away down the shore line, occasionally intersected by low sandhills and pits full of old tins. To the north the scenery was bounded by the gasometers of the Belcher Asphalt Company, and I challenge anybody to produce

any spectacle more hideous than the modern gasometer. Behind, standing up against the shimmering blue sky, were the office buildings of Miami; all of them, with the single exception of the graceful square tower of the News Building—destined to be twisted round on its base like a corkscrew in the great hurricane a year later—of a most singular ugliness.

As usual, every berth was filled. Outside in the harbour, a number of ships lay at anchor waiting to unload, and among them I could discern the ill-fated hulk belonging to the International Yacht Club. During the last six months of 1925 there was an average of thirty ships constantly in Miami harbour, either unloading or waiting to unload; and this despite the fact that the great passenger liners from New York did not come into the harbour at all, but transhipped their passengers into tenders in the open ocean.

I sat down to rest on a heap of cement-sacks in the shadow of a shed, and surveyed the possibilities. Right in front of me a small and villainous-looking Danish steamer was unloading barrels of paint; further along there was a more respectable coastal boat, and an odd assortment of barges. It was five o'clock, the time for the change of shifts, and men were coming off duty and going on again. Negroes and white men were working together quite indiscriminately—the colour line is not drawn nearly so firmly in Florida as it is in most of the other southern states. Certainly negroes are not allowed in the buses, and only in certain sections of the trams; but for all that there is no distinction between white and black when it comes to work. A pleasant circumstance, this, which I did not fail to

note as I sat gloomily regarding the scene of my future labours.

My main preoccupation at this time was a feeling of loathing for Florida, and an intense longing to get home again; and after a while it occurred to me that it might conceivably be possible to get a job of some sort on the Danish vessel—a job that would take me, at any rate, back to Europe and civilization. So spurring myself into action, I stood up and strolled as nonchalantly as possible across the wharf and up the narrow little sloping gangway marked “Business Only.”

A gigantic Dane was sitting on one of the hatches, and I offered him a cigarette. He accepted it in perfect silence, only with a lowering and suspicious look, and we both lit up. We smoked for a few minutes without remark, until I opened the conversation by asking him where the ship was bound after Miami.

The Dane made no reply for about ten seconds, and then said “Texas!” suddenly and very loudly. My heart sank. What on earth was the use of going to Texas—it was farther away than ever! Yet perhaps, after that, the little ship would be bound for home—I would find out, anyway. Further inquiries, however, elicited nothing whatever; for all the notice he was taking of me, the Dane might have been stone deaf. The remainder of this very pleasant, albeit one-sided, conversation was cut short by the appearance of a very evil-looking, very thin boss stevedore, who remarked “All youse bums git to hell out of here!” with such a menacing motion of his boot that I considered discretion to be most certainly the better part. I was, in fact, thoroughly put-out by the thin man; I have seldom, before or since, seen

any face that I have disliked quite so much on first sight. Quite unexpectedly, the Dane—to whom I had, after all, given a cigarette—nodded his head vigorously and said “Dot’s right!” and with an expressive wave of his arm indicated the wharf below and the way down to it. The possibilities of employment were clearly poor, and I could see no good purpose to be served by remaining. So I took the hint, and departed.

It was now almost dark, and under the friendly covering of the dusk I boarded the Baltimore vessel further up the pier and asked for the mate. He, again, was singularly unprepossessing, and had a lip which curled back in a perpetual snarl, like an exaggerated stage villain. He listened to me, however, when I asked for a job; and then, somewhat to my bewilderment, asked me whether I had “tin guts.” I had no idea what he meant, but the question was accompanied by a piercing look, and I thought best to answer in the affirmative. “S’right!” said the mate. “Hoick your stuff aboard by four bells—four bells, Four Bells, FOUR BELLS!” he added, his voice suddenly rising into a shout. “If you’re not aboard by four bells, I’ll knock your head into your pants!” He disappeared abruptly into a doorway, leaving me standing on the deck. For the moment I felt rather cheered, but for all that was not a little relieved to climb down the gangway on to the pier again, temporarily at least outside the mate’s somewhat eccentric radius.

I found a little hot-dog stand by the dock gates, and treated myself to a hamburger steak and a bottle of lemonade, which left me with fifty cents total capital in the world. Well, well. I was assured of free meals

for a day or so, anyway. After the hamburger was finished I came back to the wharf and sat down again on the sacks. It was seven o'clock, and a long line of men, a mixture of blacks and whites with blacks largely predominating, was queueing up at a sort of window in the shed behind me, being supplied with brass identification discs for the night shift of stevedoring. I fell to talking with one of them, and learned that the payment was fifty cents an hour, and that the companies would always take as many hands as they could get. My informant, a very depressed young man in a pair of dungaree trousers and a straw hat and nothing else whatever, not even a shirt, remarked that the work was like hell, but what else could a man do when he was down to it? I rather liked that young man; I hope that in the end things turned out as well for him as they afterwards did for me. The queue began to shuffle forward; and on a sudden impulse, remembering the particularly unpleasant mate who was going to knock my head into my pants if I didn't turn up on his boat by four bells, I dived off the cement sacks and joined up in its tail. After all, fifty cents an hour was something, anyway; and I was a fool to think of leaving Florida after less than a week. And what was I going to do when I arrived in Baltimore, at that? Would things be any better there than they were here? So that in five minutes or so I had been handed a brass ticket with a number on it, and was following the crowd into an immensely high shed lit by a string of arc-lamps swinging from its iron roof.

The shed was terrifically hot, and was piled full of great crates of merchandise reaching up to the girders.

In the middle of the floor a huge man, pouring with sweat, was shouting absolutely incomprehensible orders and galvanizing the men immediately nearest to him into a sort of inane activity. Suddenly he caught my eye, and with a whirlwind of extraordinarily violent language, which was immediately afterwards directed at someone else, ordered me either to get a truck or go to hell. In company with three or four negroes, perpetually grinning at each other, I found a truck behind a pile of cases, and wheeled it out into the open. I had never realized until that instant how extraordinarily heavy even an empty truck could be. At the lowest estimate, it must have weighed at least a hundredweight.

There was a ship moored to the wharf where we were, and two swing-doors open at its side showed the way into a gaping maw of a hold, filled with drums of cement and rolls of tarred roofing. Two wide boards, on an angle of about thirty degrees, led up to this entrance from the wharf. Our job, it appeared, was to push our trucks up this inclined plane into the hold, have three very heavy drums dumped on to them by other stevedores working inside, and then to bring them down the inclined plane again on to the wharf and into the shed. All this sounds very easy, and it seemed to me so until I began to try it. I then discovered that, in order to get the truck up the gang-plank at all, it was necessary to take a long run developing express speed, using the momentum so gained to carry the truck to the top of the incline. Any other method was impossible. Coming down, laden with an additional 200 pounds or so of cement, it was useless to try to restrain the truck at all; one came down the plank at breakneck speed, absolutely

out of control, but praying that one might just be able to hold on sufficiently strongly to prevent the whole thing from careering over the edge into the water.

All these manœuvres were carried out at top speed; and while the atmosphere of the shed was tropical, to say the least of it, the atmosphere in the hold, owing to the proximity of the boilers, was beyond description. After about five minutes, which seemed like at least five hours, everybody, whites and negroes alike, was pouring with perspiration and choking for breath. There was never the slightest slackening down, never a moment of rest. After the first ten minutes I was completely exhausted; blinded by sweat, dazed and gasping. But in some purely automatic way I somehow managed to carry on. Up and down, up and down we went, till I knew every crack and swing in that plank as a man knows the geography of his plate at a slow, contemplative dinner. Up the plank we went, into that stifling inferno of a hold. Bang! A fearful jolt of the wrists as the three drums of cement were dumped on to the truck; a straining and heaving to get under way, another jolt as we passed over the lip of the plank on the down grade, a mad, insane few seconds as we slid and ran, at top speed, down that murderous incline on to the wharf. Then swing round, walk a few paces, begin to run, and up the plank again; and so on, and on and on and on over countless centuries. The only variation was when some unfortunate, through not charging the plank fast enough, lost momentum before he reached the top and came slithering back again, staggering and cursing, on top of the next man charging up behind. At last, whether a year later or a century there was no means

of telling, came the shrill blast of a whistle like the call of an angel from heaven. Everybody where they stood dropped their trucks and collapsed down on them, utterly exhausted. For myself I was pretty well insensible; and I think that most of the others were too, even the niggers. I was glad to hear later that stevedoring in Miami was notoriously one of the worst jobs in America, so our exhaustion was not altogether without cause. I even heard a legend to the effect that Jack Dempsey, in the days before his fame, did his turn at the trucks and rejected the job on the grounds that prize-fighting was more suited to his delicate constitution. There were certainly a great many casualties on that first night, anyway, and I have ever since regarded it as a miracle that I was not among them.

When we had sufficiently recovered we lined up again, and there was an endless wait for our money to be delivered to us while two completely oblivious clerks on the farther side of the window discussed the prospects of the ball-game between the Pirates and the Senators. These extremely unpleasant young men, who were quite obviously keeping us waiting on purpose so that they might display their social superiority to the mere labourer, would I am quite certain have been lynched if they had not been well protected behind their iron bars. It is impossible to describe how infuriating was their slow, completely pointless conversation, droning on and on, while the exhausted, penniless, half-starved mob waited outside, fuming and cursing. My thick flannel trousers, I remember, were clinging round my legs as though they had been made of damp chiffon; my shirt had apparently entirely disappeared. And when at long last I came

out into the blessed night air again, clasping my precious one dollar and fifty cents in my fist, I certainly felt that I had earned my night's sleep at the New York Hotel, and my forty-cent breakfast.

With living on "hot dogs" and Chili Con Carne, a cheap and delectable dish obtainable at its very best at the little stall on Miami Beach which soon became my main rendezvous, I just managed by a great effort to keep body and soul together. But it was weary and disheartening work, and led nowhere—not even out of Florida, as I could save nothing. Added to which, I loathed working with negroes; and I soon decided that, whatever happened, I would *not* go on working on the docks. Who was I to be working on the docks with a lot of niggers, anyway? I had just eaten a particularly succulent hot dog, and had a particularly excellent swim, when I came to this decision; and as always after these exercises, I had momentarily a very high opinion of myself.

It was very early on the following morning, before sunrise, that I went by way of an endless bus route and an equally endless walk to the singularly uninspiring district of Hialeah, which is some distance to the north of Miami proper. I arrived there at 6.30, and after a long search succeeded in locating the "Block-Making Plant" which had been advertising for white labour that wanted to make big money. The block-making plant, which was devoted to the casting of cement blocks for house-building, consisted of a small iron shed containing an installation of tamping machinery, and several sand-pits. A number of the representatives of white labour were already hanging about when I arrived, and

after a time a sort of foreman appeared, also white, from a shed-like house among the trees several hundred yards away. The foreman was a depressed-looking man in horn-rimmed spectacles, but with great bulging muscles reminiscent of a professional weight-lifter. He looked at me for about half a minute without speaking, and then spat slowly and gave vent to the opinion that this work was no kid's work, and that canaries weren't wanted. I said, "Who's a canary?" and he said he'd tell the world *who* was a canary, and spat again and turned away, apparently giving his mind to other subjects. It appeared that the block-making was piece-work, and that for every block cast three cents were to be divided among the crew of five operatives. This was equivalent to a rate of about one dollar per hour per man; and though the actual work was not quite so desperately tough as were the night stevedoring shifts, it was nevertheless a dollar an hour well earned.

The other four men on our machine, being experienced hands, were put to the business of mixing the cement and throwing it, in great heaped shovelfuls, into the gaping mouth of the machine. To me it fell to shovel sand out of a large pit on to a plank scaffolding about the height of my shoulder, whence another man reshovelled it into a barrow and wheeled it along a board into the shed. To those who have never shovelled sand to the height of their shoulders, with long shovels, for five hours at a stretch, in the bottom of a shallow pit under a blazing tropical sun, I do not recommend the experiment. There were quite a number of casualties during the morning, which was the hottest I ever knew, even in Florida; and when the end of that interminable

five-hour shift came at last, there was only myself and one other original toiler remaining at our particular machine. He was a brawny, pleasant-faced, sunburned young man, who spat incessantly; and when together we sank down exhausted under the shadow of the tin roof, we shook hands solemnly and weakly and agreed that we were the two best men in the United States. Such is the brotherhood of toil. And when later, after a good deal of argument and a singularly mean attempt to "skin" us for the extra hour, we were handed the princely sum of five dollars in crinkling notes, I for one had seldom felt so proud before. The "boss," to my astonishment, had reappeared after a short retirement immaculately clad in a white linen suit and a pith helmet; shaved, silk-socked, and Riviera shod, the very glass of fashion. It appeared that he was not only the boss, but the owner of the whole company. And so back to Miami Beach in the early afternoon, and to bathe like a gentleman and to eat Chili Con Carne (not particularly like one) and watch some remarkable dancing on the sands by a troupe of amateur acrobats. And so the afternoon merged into the evening, and I swam far out, a long way from anywhere, and looked up at the stars and tried to imagine, for a little while, that I was back in England.

Owing to the fact that I had made five dollars on the previous day, I had three dollars in my pocket next morning; and I decided to squander those on one last desperate effort to improve the situation. I slept luxuriously late, and after a bathe and an unwontedly good breakfast put on my only good flannel suit and sallied once more into Miami and into the offices of the

"Herald." There was once again nothing doing; but the manager mentioned that he had heard that someone was wanted on the news staff out at Coral Gables, and it might be worth trying there. I didn't have the slightest faith in this suggestion; but as there was nothing else in the wind whatever I decided to risk squandering the ten cents tram fare even if only to see what the place was like. So at one o'clock on an afternoon as hot as any of the others—which is saying a very great deal—I passed for the first time through the great gateway of that astonishing city.

I will not in this chapter attempt to describe anything of my first impression of Coral Gables, which must still in many ways be unique among the cities of the world. It is sufficient to say here that I saw, as I passed through that gateway, that I had not so far had the remotest inkling of the enormous developments going on about me, and that I realized for the first time that there was, after all, something very big indeed behind all this Florida madness, and something that was not mere dollars and wind.

From the great hall of the Administration Building, singularly cool after the glaring sunlight outside, I was shown directly into the Holy of Holies devoted to Mr. J. P. Yoder, the Director of the News Department. Mr. J. P. Yoder's room was large and cool; and Mr Yoder himself, though in no particular hurry about anything, had about him that particular something that only belongs to a man who knows his business through and through, and is prepared to get on with it. And the fact that in this case his particular business happened to be my own, and something that I could talk about

with at least a little degree of experience behind me, suddenly brought back to me a feeling of confidence in myself that in these last few weeks had been all too far away from me.

"Well," said Mr. Yoder, "it's good to see you. What can I do for you?"

"You can give me a job, if you have one," I said.

"D'you know anything about anything?" he inquired mildly.

I had no particular answer ready for this, but the question apparently needed none.

"All right," said Mr. Yoder. "Just hoist the seat of your pants into that tin lizzie out the window there and have a drive round the city. You want to get to know the place. G'morning."

From that moment, my poverty-stricken and hand-to-mouth existence of the previous few weeks ended for good and all. There was no further conversation; but from the moment that I had set eyes on Mr. Yoder I had known instinctively that the tide had turned. And so it had. And I was soon to find that a boom is a much more pleasant thing if you happen to be sharing in it, even remotely.