

CHAPTER VII

I HAD never driven a Ford car before, had no experience of right-handed traffic, and had no idea where any of the roads from the Administration Building might lead me; but, as I say, I felt instinctively that the tide had turned in my favour, and I had no misgivings. Passing out of Mr. Yoder's office I had stopped for a moment at the desk of his second in command, a dark-haired newspaper-man from Washington named McGuire, and had been hailed as an old friend. Within two minutes, it seemed that I had been unquestioningly accepted as a part of the Coral Gables organization. Everybody was extraordinarily friendly, and although I still knew only two people by sight I was already beginning to feel that I had lived there for years. Mr. McGuire proposed a drink, and we went out together into the blazing sunshine and across the road to the drug-store opposite. My host ordered two iced milkshakes, and we sat down at a little iron table by the window. I was utterly content, and indeed my only trouble in the world now was that I had not the wherewithal to pay for a repeat order of drinks.

I had still only the vaguest idea of what the whole Coral Gables organization might mean, and no idea

whatever of the functions of the department of it which it appeared that I had joined, or of the work which I would be supposed to undertake. Mr. McGuire, however, was full of information and only too ready to give me all the help he could. He himself had only been in Coral Gables some two months, but he had already become imbued with that strangely fanatical enthusiasm for everything connected with it that Mr. Merrick had somehow managed to instil throughout his whole gigantic staff. Mr. McGuire had no doubt whatever that Coral Gables was among the wonders of the world; he simply took it for granted as an established fact. And, as he talked, I could feel creeping over me that curious prickling sensation that I had only known a few times in my life before—when I had first seen Venice, when I had stood in the bows of a little cargo-steamer off the North Island of New Zealand and had heard the bos'n beside me remark that that was a dirty sea over there and he didn't like the looks of it, when I had come back to London after two years' exile abroad and had seen again that great friendly dome of St. Paul's floating above the early-morning mist. This, I knew, was the beginning of an adventure; this was a moment that I would never forget so long as I lived. Already I could feel that I had been inoculated with the Florida mania, and I made no effort to resist that glow that I could feel creeping through my veins. That great white road outside the window had become a magic highway stretching into the unknown, and even the much-battered tin lizzie blistering in the sun had about it some strange, exciting glamour for which no mere reason could account.

In spite of all this seething inside me, I could listen to Mr. McGuire easily enough, and drank in all that he was telling me. Coral Gables, it appeared, in common with a few others of the larger "ideal cities" which its example had brought into being, controlled a private news organization of its own, the object of which was to distribute to the Press generally any items of general interest with which Coral Gables itself could be in any way associated. Everybody of the slightest importance who happened to be in Florida was interviewed, and provided that the City were so much as mentioned the result was broadcast throughout the United States. Every new development in its vast building schemes was officially "announced" under the signature of George E. Merrick, and was available to every newspaper in America on the same day. Magazine articles, pamphlets, photographic services, and every other conceivable form of publicity were available gratis and in overflowing measure to anyone and everyone who was able to make the slightest use of them. The local newspapers had agreed to give the Publicity Department an entirely free hand, so that the reporting of all activities taking place within the city boundaries was entirely within its own control. As a result, incidentally, these were described with a fullness and exuberance, albeit with a certain amount of excusable bias, that made the daily Press a good deal more readable than it could possibly have been otherwise, even if perhaps on occasions a trifle more misleading. The only difficulty was that as each of the four daily newspapers in Miami had to be supplied with a separately-written account of every happening in a style suitable to its own particular type, it was necessary

to run at least double shifts of reporters practically everywhere. In addition, Coral Gables had now reached such proportions that what was going on there had become quite legitimately of general news interest, with the result that the office was inundated with requests for information from newspapers and magazines all over America. The flood of "special representatives" was also growing larger every day, and these had naturally to be entertained and shown round the city in a style befitting their importance in the scheme of things. "The sun shines out of those guys," said Mr. McGuire. "And if you take my advice you'll never forget it, not for a split second."

I offered him another drink; he hesitated and finally refused, and the black moment passed. The glare outside was blinding now, and the seat of the tin lizzie almost too hot to touch.

"Can you manage her?" asked Mr. McGuire. "The starter don't work, and the handle's gone—I'd best walk her off for you."

I climbed in, Mr. McGuire shoved behind, and the thing started violently forward, apparently at full speed. Instinctively I trod hard on both pedals, with the result that with a frightful concussion I shot into low gear. I had not the remotest idea what to do next, especially as the whole mechanism, apparently under some fearful and unnatural strain, was heaving and jolting underneath me as though at any moment it might burst asunder; but by some miracle the wheels kept turning, I rounded a corner ahead, and careered off down the road on an approximately straight course.

By the time that I had more or less managed to get

the hang of the controls I was completely lost. I was driving down a very beautiful wide road beside a canal, lined with palm trees. On my left there was what appeared to be a very fine golf course, stretching for at least a mile, and a little further on there was a green close to the road. I know very little about golf, but the sight of this green somehow reminded me of the third hole at Sunningdale, where I had happened to have been playing a round on the day before I left England; and the idea suddenly struck me that I might make some capital out of this, and write a general sporting article on the leading golf courses of the world, with that of Coral Gables incidentally among them.

The club-house was a little further on, and I pulled up the Ford under a tree, taking care to keep the engine running. It was an extremely attractive building, surrounded by wide lawns and brightly-flowering shrubs, and with a flat-roof garden where one could see strings of coloured lamps suspended between ornamental trees. I went inside and asked for the secretary, who in spite of his idyllic surroundings and the heat of the early afternoon I found to be surrounded by papers, sleeves rolled-up to the elbows, and dictating into a dictaphone at top speed.

"My name's Dutton," said the secretary, momentarily covering the mouthpiece with his hand. "Just sit down and look at the pictures while I settle this guy, will you?" He went on with his dictation while I stared round the walls, which certainly presented a remarkable appearance enough, and one which I should have thought to be quite out of keeping with a golf club. They were entirely plastered with signed photographs

of theatrical celebrities and orchestra leaders, with a gigantic portrait of Mr. Paul Whiteman occupying a place of honour on the desk. All this was very mystifying, but the explanation—although I did not discover it until several days later—was a very simple one. For Mr. Dutton, who was only incidentally the secretary of the Coral Gables Country Club, was also the Recreational Director of the whole city, and as such controlled still another aspect of that gigantic publicity organization of which I was now a part. Mr. Dutton's chief function, in short, was to see to it that practically every leading theatrical, musical, or athletic star in the United States was induced to visit Coral Gables, and was given such a reception as could never be forgotten. The question of money was a secondary consideration. The great idea was to get the people he wanted down there, at any cost; and once there, their own individual press-agents would do the rest. For would not all their messages detailing the tumultuous receptions accorded their employers be sent out under the Coral Gables date-line? And all this, too, in addition to the very real advantage to the city of having always available the best entertainment that the United States could produce.

Mr. Dutton was, he said, extremely glad to see me, and expressed himself as enthusiastically in favour of the golf-course article, though I could see that he thought the idea too small to waste much time over. However, he told me all I wanted to know, asked me to have dinner with him at the Country Club any time I liked, and saw me to the door. The engine of the Ford was still running, but the whole car was enveloped in a great cloud of steam that was hissing and roaring from a vent

somewhere under the radiator. However, I managed to get under way, and bumped off down the road to the accompaniment of a series of loud and unaccountable explosions somewhere in the rear. A man passing in the roadway shouted at me and gesticulated wildly, but I took no notice. Probably, I thought, I was on fire; but I couldn't risk stopping the engine now. I had no idea where I was, and the trouble now was that I couldn't slow down to ask the way, because immediately I put out the clutch the engine stopped dead and could only be restarted by letting it in again with a bang before the car had stopped moving. So I drove on and on, with more and more steam belching out under my feet and with the intermittent explosions at the stern increasing in frequency and in shattering intensity. But I was serenely happy; nothing mattered now. I knew that I had in my head the materials for a really good story; and all around me there was Coral Gables, the most marvellous city in the world, and the place where I was without question to make my fortune.

It was nearly five o'clock before I at last caught sight of the roof of the Administration Building, away over a clearing to my left. The cloud of steam had gone by this time, as I suppose my water had all boiled away, but those appalling explosions in the silencer still continued as I pulled at last into the kerb. Mr. McGuire was still at his desk, and I told him what I had been doing.

"I'll say she's a right good bus!" said Mr. McGuire, with real enthusiasm. "Hell! She hasn't been driven as far as that these four years. Who'd have a Lincoln, anyway?"

I had a wash, and wrote out my story about the golf-courses while it was still fresh. I knew very little about any other golf-courses at all, but by keeping to vague generalities and drawing largely on my imagination I managed to work out something that at least gave the impression that I knew more than I did. Mr. J. P. Yoder appeared just as I was finishing, and asked what I was doing. I told him, and he took the sheets back into his office. And suddenly I felt that the whole thing was rotten, that in a few minutes he would come out again very angry and tell me to get out, and that I should have to begin all over again. I went down the passage to look for some ice-water, and had a long drink out of one of the paper envelopes that did duty for cups. As I came back past Mr. Yoder's office I could hear him shouting something, very loudly; it was all over. Mr. McGuire winked at me as I came over; and producing a bottle of tomato sauce, observed darkly that the label didn't always tell the whole story, and if I'd come into the lavatory with him he'd show me the view. He removed the stopper, and sniffed the contents appreciatively.

"What's up in there?" I asked, as nonchalantly as I could, indicating the direction of the private office, from which Mr. Yoder could still be heard in full blast. "Any trouble?"

"Good God, no!" said Mr. McGuire. "The old boy's only putting your dope on the wire to Pittsburg, and the line's bad." He pulled out the bottle again, and looked at it almost lovingly. "Hell!" said Mr. McGuire. "I guess it's about time for one."

And so it was.

I had good news that night for Mr. and Mrs. Walter J. Reid, Props., of the New York Hotel. I don't think they had quite known what to make of me until now. But I was so bursting with enthusiasm by the time that I arrived back that I made some excuse to go through into the little back parlour where they were having their supper and to mention as casually as possible that I had been taken on to the news staff at Coral Gables. They were impressed, and Mrs. Walter J. Reid remarked that she supposed I'd be wanting another room now. This brought the conversation to a head, as I not only didn't want another room, but couldn't even pay for such an apology for one as I had, as pay-day at Coral Gables was not for another ten days. As I had up to now been posing as a somewhat eccentric capitalist who was doing all sorts of odd jobs just for the fun of the thing, this request for extended credit struck slightly cold; but after only a slight hesitation, the Props. remarked that they supposed that it would be all right. They then offered me a slice of cold tongue and a cup of coffee, which I was glad enough to accept, and we sat talking together over the remains of the meal and told each other our plans for the making of our fortunes. Mr. Reid, it appeared, had made over eighty thousand dollars in the course of the last six months; a statement which I accepted with a grain of salt at the time, but which I afterwards had every reason to believe to be literally true. He ran a small real-estate office in conjunction with the hotel, and a kindly and short-sighted brother-in-law universally known as "Art" had recently driven down from California to give him a hand with it. "Art" was not an unqualified success in his new capacity, and

the office was never quite the same after he took it over. He was an amusing and very likeable character, but I gathered the impression that he did not take very long somehow to let slip through his fingers most of the money that the others had made before his arrival.

For the next few weeks I was very fully occupied indeed in learning everything I could about my new business. With my finances finally settled by a loan of twenty dollars from one of my news friends at the office, I had no longer a care in the world. All my troubles were behind me. The work was extraordinarily interesting, and never the same for five minutes at a time; I was making an enormous number of new friends, and was beginning to see a side of Florida life that in my first few weeks there I had not even known to have existed. The alarm-clock beside my bed went off every morning at a quarter to six, and I would walk sleepily along the passage to the window at the far end to look out on the beginnings of another day no less clear and brilliant than the day before or the day to come. The beach was only a few yards away, and by seven o'clock I would have swum, bathed and dressed, and be out waiting for the first street car to take me across the causeway to Miami. At the end of this journey I would breakfast at a little restaurant looking out over the water, and catch one of the special charabancs for Coral Gables employees that departed from various points in the city at twenty minutes to eight. From eight o'clock until further notice I would be on the job, which theoretically finished about six o'clock, but in my own case at least was never really ended at all. At first I usually managed to get back to Miami Beach for

dinner, but as time went on and I began to know more and more people I seemed nearly always to be dining at the Coral Gables Country Club or the Casa Loma Hotel (the Biltmore was not then completed) and either dancing or working afterwards, or both, until any hour the next morning. There seemed to be an unlimited number of staff cars, and I generally had the use of one or other of them, even if only of the mulish tin lizzie of my first day's travels. I hardly ever slept for more than two or three hours, but there was an electricity in the air that somehow made sleep seem too futile a thing to bother about, and during the whole time that I was in Florida I never had a day's illness. It was an astonishing change-over from the privations of my first arrival.

Most of my work consisted at first in interviewing various allegedly prominent visitors to the city, in drawing up great manifestos announcing fresh building schemes, and in writing stirring accounts of local activities for the columns of the "Miami Herald." After a little while, however, I was promoted to the position of writing special articles in answer to the requests of magazine-editors from all over America, and to the unearthing and writing-up of fresh aspects of Coral Gables publicity that happened to strike me personally. It was astonishingly interesting work, and I revelled in it. I had a car of my own now, as much money as I liked to draw for incidental expenses, the highest salary I had ever had in my life, and an almost completely free hand. So long as the stories came pouring in, columns a day, nobody minded about anything. And through it all there was that conviction to which I had now

completely succumbed, that conviction that Coral Gables was a portent unique among the cities of the earth, and that I myself was at least playing a part, no matter how insignificant a one, in carrying that gigantic enterprise to its conclusion.

Looking back on those days now, the extent to which one's sense of proportion must have been blunted seems almost incredible. I saw nothing particularly ludicrous, for instance, in that most common sight in Miami in the evening—a charabanc loaded with “realtors” in straw hats and cotton suits, parading slowly through the town to the music of the saxophone, its occupants standing on the seats and bellowing out the attractions of the particular speciality which they happened at that moment to be booming. And yet perhaps the most fantastic part of it all was that these same realtors might quite possibly have been offering you an investment which, as a speculation at least, was really a good one. If a rough-looking character were to sidle up to you in Piccadilly and, breathing whisky into your face, were confidentially to offer you a half-share in a block of land in Park Lane, you would probably hand him over to the nearest policeman. When in Miami—as often enough—some similar incident occurred, your whisky-laden informant might quite likely have been offering you a really good thing. For those who were all out to make money, it was not safe to ignore anything. And although it was almost impossible for anyone not absolutely steeped in local knowledge to make certain of what was a genuine investment and what was a complete fraud, I should say that it was probably true that up to the time that I left Florida more money had been

made out of these hole-and-corner deals with casual acquaintances than had ever been lost in them.

To look back once again, it seems now impossible that one could ever have been stirred to the depths of one's soul by those paid lecturers with leather throats and angels' tongues who often enough spoke ten hours a day for weeks at a time, with tears trembling in their voices to the end. I had a good deal to do with these lecturers; I knew exactly what they were paid, and in theory I had no illusions about them at all. But once they started speaking, I was lost. I suppose I was slightly mad; we all were. But I think that most people who have lived for any time in America will know what I mean.

I don't suppose that these lecturers can ever have reaped such a rich harvest as they did during the Florida boom. There were all kinds among them—some employed by the state organizations, some by the private companies, some merely free lances who would talk about anything for ten dollars an hour. Others, again, were genuinely carried away by that semi-religious enthusiasm for the south and all connected with it that sent them forth, quite disinterestedly, in the spirit of fanatical missionaries. There has always been a tremendous amount of talk in America, but during the height of the Florida boom there must have been more than there had ever been before, or is ever likely to be again. It was a common sight, at any wayside barbecue on the Dixie Highway, to see some purple-faced orator mounted on the back seat of his car under the blazing sun bellowing of the land of hope to an awestruck audience standing round him in the white dust. Orators

such as these sometimes did not belong to any of the classes that I have mentioned, but to that quite separate and not inconsiderable class whose sole object was to find an excuse for "telling the world" of their own financial successes. I can particularly call to mind one of these; a man who, without the exercise of any qualities whatever except a sublime self-conceit, had succeeded as a result of the boom in being presented with a considerable quantity of money. This particular orator was for ever going on lecture-tours of the surrounding states, and his speeches were invariably devoted in their entirety to long lists of the number of automobiles that he was able to maintain, the number of "homes" that he had bought, and general observations to the effect that it didn't matter a curse in hell to him, these days, how much he spent. This particular genius paid enormous sums to have the simple words "Mr. —, rumoured to be among the wealthiest men in Florida . . ." inserted in as many local papers as possible, and as many times as they could be induced to take the bait. He had all these notices cut out, and pasted into an enormous scrap-book that must have represented the expenditure of thousands of dollars. Personally, I should have thought that whatever satisfaction one might feel in seeing one's name in print would be more than discounted by the knowledge that one had paid for the privilege.

For all that, practically all the more successful speculators in Florida had their own personal publicity agents; and these, again, indirectly contributed an immense amount to the general advertising of the state. All the papers in America seemed to be full of the histories of

Florida millionaires, so that under the circumstances the general rush to the south was scarcely surprising. Nearly all newspaper men did a certain amount of personal publicity work as a side-line; it was very easy to do and generally highly remunerative, and I had not been at Coral Gables more than a week or so before I took on some of it myself.

I never regretted the idea; it was one of the few really bright ones I ever had, and that was of general benefit to everybody. I conceived the plan of setting myself up as a personal publicity agent to one or two particularly outstanding people connected with Coral Gables; and as anything I could write about them naturally brought in the city as well, it had the full support of their whole organization and was automatically disseminated all over the United States. In one stroke I could serve the purpose of everybody—Coral Gables, the publicity-hunters, and incidentally myself. The scheme worked like magic; I confined it entirely to one day a week, and spent the whole of every Sunday at the writing-desk in the hall of the New York Hotel. For a short time, until the work became altogether impossible and could no longer be continued without cutting-in to my more serious efforts for Coral Gables, I made so much money that I blush to think of my idiotic stupidity in losing it again so soon. I had one "client" who paid me fifty dollars every Friday for a single twelve-line verse in the local humorous weekly paper; and so long as that verse somehow managed to drag in his name he was perfectly satisfied. The marvel is that the newspapers were willing to accept such rubbish for publication; but most of their staffs had by this time

deserted them in favour of the real-estate business, and they were thankful to accept whatever contributions they could get, especially when there was no obligation to pay for them.

There was only one unfortunate incident to mar the complete success of these first few weeks at Coral Gables. My ill-starred outburst against Florida, written on that night at Miami Beach when I had felt that the world had turned against me, had unfortunately been accepted and published by the London newspaper to which I had so precipitately despatched it. More unfortunately still, it had appeared under my own name, and a copy of the issue had found its way out to Florida. At that time I don't think that Mr. Merrick himself knew that I existed; but Mr. Yoder did, and he was completely outraged, as well he might be. For myself, in the totally different mood that now possessed me, I could scarcely believe that I had ever written the thing at all; but there it was, and there was no use in denying it. There was a tremendous row; I had no explanation to offer and nothing to say except that I had changed since then, which was indeed true enough, although singularly unconvincing.

"What the hell do you mean?" said Mr. Yoder. "Look at the thing, damn it—*look* at it! Pah!" He banged the paper down on his desk, and flicked it off on to the floor as though it were something unclean.

"Look here," I said, "when I wrote that, I didn't know that I was born. I was fed-up to the teeth, and I didn't know what I was doing. It hurts me like hell, just the same as it does you. I hate the sight of it."

Mr. Yoder was quiet for a moment; and then he said quite mildly:

“ It’s a funny thing, but I believe you. I think you’re half cracked, and I don’t understand you; but I think you’re straight, and I don’t want to lose you. Let’s shake and forget about it.”

I was very greatly touched, and we shook hands solemnly and sincerely. I had hurt him a great deal, and he had been extremely good to me; and I despised myself for the inconceivable stupidity and ignorance that had led me to do so. We were always afterwards firm friends, though he was a great deal older man than I, and we wrote to each other afterwards when I had left America.