

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER my first few weeks on the Coral Gables staff, the tendency of my work there brought me increasingly in contact with the innumerable official and semi-official visitors from all over the United States who had been invited down there as the guests of the Corporation. Although the winter season had not yet opened, the boom had completely upset the normal programmes of those who usually never came south before the end of autumn, and by the beginning of October there were already thousands of prominent Americans in all walks of life who had come down to Florida to see for themselves what was really going on there. Many of these, of course, I never met at all, and many others only momentarily at official dinners or receptions; but there were some with whom for a short time I was thrown into contact comparatively intimately, and through whom I was given an opportunity of seeing a side of the political and business life of America that under any other circumstances would have been closed to me.

Yet of all the politicians, film-stars, millionaires, authors, and "people in the news" generally that I met in Florida, there was no one who impressed me to

quite the same extent as did Mr. Merrick himself, the founder and owner of the city in which I was working. No doubt, in the atmosphere in which I was living then, I was predisposed towards this particular form of hero-worship and was hardly capable of forming an unbiased judgment; but looking back now, even after five years, I still feel certain that Mr. Merrick was a very great man.

I first met Mr. Merrick personally about the beginning of October, and after that was brought into contact with him fairly frequently. I never knew him very well—I doubt, in fact, whether anyone did. He was not a man with whom friendship was easy. But from what I saw of him personally, and from what I heard and knew of him during the months that I was in Coral Gables, I believed then and I believe now that I had never come into contact before with such an outstanding personality.

I met many of the other Florida real-estate kings during the course of my stay there; but Mr. Merrick, as a personality and as a man, had nothing in common with any of them. I did not admire him because he was at that time fantastically and almost unthinkably wealthy, nor yet because the personal triumph which had been his had placed him in a limelight of local publicity the brilliance of which can scarcely be imagined on this side of the Atlantic. I admired him for his passionate sincerity, for his absolute honesty, for the incredible sanity with which he kept his head at a time when men far less successful than he, and men who were by no means fools, had lost their sense of proportion altogether. He was the only man I have ever known who was at once the dreamer and the man of action in

the highest degree. I hold no particular brief for Coral Gables—its value as an artistic creation or as a financial investment was at that time entirely a matter of individual opinion, and to some extent remains so still. I have met many who thought that it was the most beautiful city in the world, and some who thought that it was one of the most ugly. But however one may regard Mr. Merrick's actual achievements, I think there can be no doubt that they were conceived not in a spirit of money-grubbing or publicity hunting, but in a spirit of the highest idealism.

At the time when I first met him, Mr. Merrick was quite undoubtedly the leading figure in Florida, and in many ways one of the most remarkable men in America. He had come to Coral Gables with his father as a little boy of eleven, and with the exception of a few years in New York he had lived there all his life. Until the death of his father in 1912 his one ambition had been to write, and all his early studies had been devoted to that end. A volume of his poetry was published some years ago; a curiously sentimental and somehow unreal volume, giving no indication whatever of that enormous driving power and terrific energy lying latent within him. But he had read a great deal, and his verses have a certain literary quality which raises them above the average level of similar youthful publications.

Mr. Merrick was passionately in love with Florida; and to me, he always seemed to believe in Florida in quite a different way from that of most of the other 'developers' that I encountered there. He loved Florida for its own sake, and not for the money that could be made out of its exploitation; he saw in Florida

the last outpost of the United States, a fresh and unspoiled territory which it would be criminal to let develop along haphazard, ugly, or unscientific lines.

His father, during the latter days of his life when he had become comparatively prosperous, had conceived the idea of turning Coral Gables into a sort of resort for the indigent clergy, and of building there a number of bungalows where they could live in peace and comfort in their old age, enjoying the sunshine and the fresh air. The idea never came to anything in itself ; but it may, perhaps, have been the germ of the far greater inspiration that came to his son. According to his own accounts, the conception of Coral Gables as the perfect city first came to George Merrick somewhere about 1913, at a time when to any ordinary man there must have appeared no conceivable chance whatever of such a project coming within even the remotest range of practical possibility.

Up to that time, George Merrick had had no experience whatever of practical business ; but no sooner had he set up his offices in Miami than he began to display an extraordinary ability as an organizer and an executive. No doubt circumstances were all in his favour, as even already Florida land-values were rising and its population increasing. But the courage to take the fullest advantage of them—to anticipate the directions in which Florida would develop, and to stake everything that he possessed on its future—was the attribute which he most needed, and which he soon showed that he possessed in the highest degree. His almost passionate enthusiasm for the south, and his capacity for imparting that enthusiasm to others, carried everything before it. He was so

transparently honest, so obviously sincere, that he made you feel that not to love Florida as he did was almost a blasphemy.

When once Coral Gables had been started, Mr. Merrick believed—and I think with reason—that if the control of it were ever to pass out of his own hands things might be done there that would mar the perfection of the development as he had planned it ; and it was this, far more than any merely financial consideration, that had prevented him from ever losing that tight and autocratic hold of the reins that he had assumed from the beginning. He ruled as an absolute dictator ; he took expert advice, and listened to expert opinion, but when the time for action came he acted swiftly and alone. There was no power on earth that could wrest the control from his hands. Coral Gables was to be one of the wonders of the modern world ; a city built by one man, representing one man's ideal of what a city should be.

Mr. Merrick was a large, square-built young man, immensely strong physically, with no remarkable outward characteristics except that curiously-shaped head that so often goes with genius. Almost invariably, he favoured singularly ill-fitting tweed trousers, a Norfolk jacket, and old brogues, but he was one of the few Americans that I have ever seen who was able to wear these old clothes quite unselfconsciously and to appear in spite of them distinguished and almost well-dressed. He genuinely disliked publicity, and hardly ever appeared at any public function. He was never interviewed, and during the whole time that I was in Coral Gables I never heard him make a speech.

It is impossible to describe the extraordinary reputation which Mr. Merrick had gained in Florida, a reputation enhanced by the fact that he was so seldom seen, and by that atmosphere of mystery that somehow always surrounded him. I felt, when I first met him in his unobtrusive little house that looked out over the golf-course, that it was almost a blasphemy to be sitting talking on a verandah with one who was almost a god. And yet, when once his reserve had been broken down—which was not often—he was curiously unsophisticated in his enthusiasms, his appreciation of simple things, his unquestioning faith in the future of his city. Once, when I was motoring down a deserted side-road among the pine-trees, I came suddenly on his car, empty and drawn-up on the grass. A few yards away Mr. Merrick was standing on a little hill; he was quite alone, gazing out over his domains. And as he turned towards me, and I saw the look in his eyes, I felt that I knew more of him in that instant than I could ever have known even in years of ordinary association.

I think that there could be no man, also remarkable in his own way, so utterly removed from Mr. Merrick as was Senator James J. Walker, Mayor of New York, of whom I saw a great deal both in Florida and afterwards in Cuba. Mr. Walker, who is invariably known as Jimmie, was at that time just over forty, though he looked at least ten years younger. His inexhaustible flow of fireworks, both verbal and physical, and his unflagging high spirits reminded one more of a boy of twenty. He was the son of a penniless Irish emigrant who came to New York in the eighties; he was born and brought-up in New York, and was soaked, if ever a man was, in the

strange and elusive spirit of Gotham. After long years of struggle, his father had managed to make a place for himself there and to raise sufficient money to give his son a good education, and Jimmie was not slow in proving that he was to go far. From the very beginning, I was told, he had possessed that genius for making friends, that inexhaustible charm for both men and women of all kinds and all degrees, that alone would have been enough to carry him to almost any heights he cared to scale.

I met Mr. Walker for the first time on the steps of the Miami-Biltmore Hotel, on the afternoon of his official reception in Coral Gables. The place was thick with mayors and other civic dignitaries, but it so happened that for the moment we were alone.

"What sort of a place *is* this, anyway?" said Mr. Walker. He glanced round, lowered his voice, and put his hand on my arm. "Tell me something to say to these guys—there's a good fellow."

Well, we are all a little vain, and I do not pretend to be less vain than most. There was a subtle, a very subtle, compliment implied in being spoken to in that sort of way; as though Jimmie Walker—who was, after all, at that time probably the most popular man in the whole of America, having just won a particularly wild and strenuous election—had singled out me personally from all that gathering of official notabilities as being the one man there who could tell him what it was all about. Jimmie Walker had seen through me in a moment, of course; he had realized that I was not altogether at my ease (as indeed I was not) and had proceeded to put me there in two sentences. It was

quite impossible not to be flattered, though even at the time I fully realized that he hadn't really the faintest interest in what I thought about the people or the place, and had long ago made up his mind as to exactly what he was going to say and do. But, for all that, I was his slave for ever after—and who wouldn't have been? Mr. Walker had that extraordinary power of making every individual in a crowd feel that he was the only one who really understood and appreciated the whole situation; that he and Jimmie would perhaps meet afterwards somewhere and talk it all over. It was not long before I saw that he had won over everyone else by the same technique, and I did not wonder any longer how it happened that he was by far the most successful politician in New York, and was even regarded by many as a future candidate for the Presidency.

Jimmy Walker was, and still is, an actor through and through; he is one of the few men I have ever met who, even when you are alone with him, never gives the faintest indication of what are his real opinions or his real interests. He acts so perfectly that it is only intermittently that one realizes that he is acting at all; but he *is* acting, all the time, and whether his audience be one or ten thousand he is equally successful.

He began life as a song-writer—he wrote that saccharine but very successful ballad “Will You Love Me in September as You Love Me in May?”, and it was the beginning of his public career. Afterwards he studied for the law, became involved in state politics under the aegis of Governor “Al” Smith, and was somehow elected to the directorate of a large mineral-water company. But his main asset was his unfailing insight into human

nature, and his incredible capacity for making every sort and kind of person like him at first sight. Jimmie Walker could dance all night until six o'clock in the morning, and by seven, shaved and fresh, be tramping round a sugar plantation discussing the prospects of next season's crop, complimenting the proud owner on his enterprise, and enthusiastically appreciative of his children, automobile, tennis-court, or anything else. He was the only man I ever met in Coral Gables who completely baffled the shrewd and genial "Doc" Dammers, who will appear later in these pages; but they got on wonderfully well, and it was a great sight to see them together. With Dr. Dammers, Mr. Walker adopted the attitude of the enthusiastic tyro thirsting to know everyone in Florida, incredulous of the millions that the other had made by selling Miami Beach, full of eager questions as to the prospects of the next boom. They were very happy together; Mr. Walker always was, for that matter. "That boy's the rooster's boots!" Dr. Dammers told me once; but a little gloomily, I thought, despite the implied admiration. He had realized, I think, that he had been taken in a little like all the rest of us, though he didn't quite know how. But Mr. Walker hadn't been trying to get anything out of him; he had just been automatically carrying out what was his invariable policy. When Jimmie had been at Coral Gables a week, and drove down Flagler Street, Miami, with his escort of mounted police, it was like a Royal Progress down the Mall and there was scarcely less enthusiasm.

I shall not attempt to give my impressions of all the visiting celebrities I met in Florida; they have all been described many times by others far more familiar with

all of them than I could ever have been. I have only ventured on giving a slight sketch of Mr. Walker because he is still practically unknown on this side of the water despite his being one of America's leading public men. But no description of the Florida boom could be complete without mention of Dr. Edward E. Dammers, of Miami, one of the most characteristic figures which the boom produced and certainly one of the most popular. It was my good fortune to be almost continually associated with "Doc" Dammers during my stay in Coral Gables, and his kindness to me on all occasions, his humorous comments on men and affairs, and his amazing knowledge of local personalities and local doings were time and again absolutely invaluable to me. It is always particularly gratifying for a young and entirely unimportant stranger when a much older and very busy man can find time to interest himself in his affairs and advise him in his difficulties; but apart altogether from these kindnesses I would have liked "Doc" Dammers no less than I did. I would certainly have not less enjoyed his conversation and his opinions, sometimes expressed with a staggering freedom, of those about him; and I, for one, invariably learnt more from him in five minutes than I could have picked up in five hours from the wisest philosopher in the world.

I first met "Doc" Dammers—who possessed, incidentally, the very flimsiest claims to any medical knowledge whatever—in the offices of the Edward E. Dammers Realty Corporation, one of the largest and most booming of all the land companies in Miami. In that vast room opening directly out on to the street through high folding-doors extending its whole length, scores of

white-shirted, coatless salesmen worked feverishly to the accompanying roar of two enormous electric blowing machines which sent a continuous blast of air from one end of the building to the other with a sound like a squadron of aeroplanes in full flight. Towards the front of the building, groups of pleasant-faced young men lounged about the doors, willing to engage in conversation with anyone and everyone under the sun, and to discuss any topic whatever that could be wheeled round, after a few sentences, to the question of real-estate and of what were the best values in Miami. Not that any conversation in Miami needed much manœuvring to bring it round to matters of real-estate; it was usually there already, right from the beginning.

“The old Doc’s always about,” said the salesman of whom I inquired for Dr. Dammers. “He’s the Lord-High He-buzzard, I’ll say.” He grasped me confidentially by the elbow, and led me through the crowds round the door. Somebody was making a speech about something, pointing out subdivisions on an illuminated map with a long billiard-cue. I vaguely heard the words “A steal, gentlemen—at 25,000 dollars !” but so many people were jostling about with papers that it was impossible to make out in passing any further details of what this attractive proposition might be. “There’s the surgeon, sir !” said the salesman. He indicated one of the innumerable little desks, exactly the same as all the others; and there, in a striped zephyr shirt, smoking a cigar, writing a cheque, and talking through a telephone all at the same time, sat Dr. Edward E. Dammers—enormous and genial, humorous and shrewd, a millionaire many times over, a man with more

experience of life and of living than most ten men would have if they were rolled into one.

"Hullo, boy!" said Dr. Dammers, when he had finished with the telephone. "Want to sell the old Doc something, hey?" He pushed the telephone away, and though obviously up to his eyes in work and without the remotest idea in the world of who I was or what I wanted—and I wanted something for myself, as a matter of fact—he offered me a cigar and sat back in his chair, apparently prepared for a long talk over the world's affairs. "Doin' pretty well these days?" he asked, apparently with real interest.

The incident, as I afterwards recognized, was peculiarly characteristic of him; he possessed in a supreme degree that happy faculty of being able to get through an enormous amount of work while still keeping what was apparently an unlimited time available for casual conversation with chance acquaintances. Yet before we had been talking for two minutes he knew exactly what I wanted and why I was there, much more clearly than I had felt able to put it myself; and in three he had signed my papers, shoved a handful of cigars into my pocket, clapped me on the back, said "Hell!" very loudly as somebody bumped into him from behind, waved me cheerfully away, and was already signing more cheques and conducting a shouting conversation with a salesman on the far side of the room about some land-deal at Daytona Beach. He was an amazing character, was Dr. Dammers. From that time onwards until I finally left Florida I was in more or less close touch with him; and I only regret that many of the astonishing things that I learned from him about politics and business

and American life generally cannot ever be retold, as they were given to me under the seal of a much valued confidence.

Warned by some instinct of what was going to happen in Florida, Dr. Dammers had found his way south well before the boom started. After a wild and roving boyhood seemingly spent largely in more or less violent collision with authority, and during the course of which he found time to have lived in most of the states of the Union, he had started an optical business somewhere in the north and amassed a large fortune. He had afterwards sold land in California but it was not until he had come to Miami that his genius as an auctioneer had been given those unhampered opportunities of which he had taken the fullest advantage. He made his headquarters at Palm Beach, and was at once unbelievably successful in selling lots of what were at the time regarded as utterly useless waste lands. He was a salesman born. I believe "Doc" Dammers could have sold anything to anyone; he was perpetually succeeding where all others had failed. He had the knack of suiting the action to the moment; at one instant he could be standing on the back seat of a charabanc, applauding the efforts of the trombone-player and between items pointing out to his audience, with many confidential nods and winks, that those guys who hung on to the old Doc's coat-tails wouldn't be left far behind when the big rush came; at another he could be seated at his desk, talking austere high finance to chilly northern bankers and proving by statistics that Florida's immense tourist income was alone more than sufficient to support the boom indefinitely; at another still, he could be chairman at a dinner

of realtors, pulling the wires and making the puppets dance to his own tune through his amazing knowledge of local affairs and his grasp of personal idiosyncrasies.

Dr. Dammers enjoyed life thoroughly; he was a genuine, natural-born student of human nature, and feared no man either physically or morally. The only man in the world, I think, for whom he had really a respect and an admiration altogether unbounded was George Merrick, whom he had backed in his younger days when things at Coral Gables were not so good and whose adviser and friend he had remained ever since. "By hell, it certainly needs a tall giraffe to high-hat *that* guy!" he said to me once; and the remark, made perfectly seriously, was one of the most sincere tributes from one man to another that I ever heard.