

CHAPTER IX

I HAD been at Coral Gables about ten weeks before I began to be given what was more or less a free hand, and even by then I had only the smallest idea of the multifarious activities of any of the departments beyond my own. But my work had begun now to have rather a wider scope; I became involved in advertising—as distinct from publicity—schemes, I travelled out to meet distinguished visitors and escort them back to the city, and I incidentally assumed the position of Editor of the Coral Gables “Bulletin,” a somewhat feeble sheet which I did my best to make readable. The Coral Gables “Bulletin” consisted entirely of local news and personal gossip, but the sources of both were often so hopelessly unreliable that the press had several times to be stopped in full blast and the whole issue scrapped to avoid the publication of some flaring headline more than ordinarily wide of the mark. The first time that this happened I felt quite sure that my brief career as an editor had ended as soon as it had begun; but nobody seemed to worry even though thousands of copies had to be destroyed, and the whole incident was regarded merely as a good joke at my expense. So it was, too, in a way; but I doubt whether the average newspaper

proprietor, even in America, would have taken quite such a cheerful attitude towards the loss of practically his whole issue.

The cause of the trouble itself, however, was certainly ludicrous enough. A very impressive Italian had stalked into the office, wearing a huge wide-brimmed hat, a flowing cravat, and the most astonishing lavender gloves, and had announced himself simply as Signor ———. He appeared to take it for granted that I knew all about him; but I had never heard the name in my life, although I felt uneasily that I ought to have done so. When an opportunity presented itself, I excused myself for a moment and went across to the office of Mr. McGuire to make inquiries.

“Hell, yes!” said Mr. McGuire, whom it transpired afterwards knew no more about the man than I did and had never heard his name either. “He’s the best known portrait-painter in States—gets ’em like a photograph. A great guy.” He was very busy over something else, and thought the whole thing was some personal affair of my own; but I went back to my artist in high feather, and made a terrific story of how he had arrived in Coral Gables that very morning, had known at once with an artist’s instinct that here, at last, was perfection on earth, and had there and then decided to stay there for the rest of his life. The Coral Gables “Bulletin” was being published next morning, and it all went straight to press. But when late that evening I arrived back at the New York Hotel, and idly picked up a copy of the “Beach News” to read before turning in, I discovered to my horror almost exactly the same interview with the same man, only in this case referring

to the unparalleled attractions of Miami Beach—"where," had said this wretched artist, "I now realize is the only place that I can live, and can develop my personality to the full." By dint of frenzied telephoning the press was stopped, as I have said; but neither I nor the several others who had been hoaxed ever saw or heard of the man again. What his object was I can't imagine, unless simply to gain a quiet laugh, in which no doubt he succeeded. Five papers that I saw published the story on the next day, and no doubt many others that never reached me.

There was at that time practically no public interest in anything at all in Florida beyond local real-estate and whatever might directly or indirectly affect its values. Comments on prevailing land-prices, and a certain amount of sporting and social gossip, comprised the sole reading-matter in the newspapers. It was amazingly irritating at first; but even after a few days, when one had inevitably become affected by something of the Florida mania, one soon fell to reading these progress-reports of the various land-companies as avidly as the most one-idea'd realtor. The newspapers knew what the Florida public wanted, and they supplied it in overflowing measure.

The Publicity Department of Coral Gables had an extraordinary number of ramifications, and under the guidance of Mr. J. P. Yoder, who possessed an uncanny genius for this sort of thing, masses of literature were issued from the office every day to every corner of the United States. But the organization of the Advertising Department, with which I now began to be brought into contact, was in some respects even more remarkable still.

It is an actual fact that for two years this department alone cost the Coral Gables Corporation no less than two million dollars a year, and the Publicity Department very nearly as much again.

The Advertising Department occupied a special building across the road from the Administration Offices, and was presided over by a fiery-eyed young genius who apparently never slept, never laughed, never stopped working for a moment, and was perpetually in a state of nerves bordering on insanity. There was said to be some tragedy in his history, which he was working himself to shreds to forget, and I believe the story was true. Behind all that fantastic activity, it needed very little to realize that he was miserable and almost desperate. But he was said to be one of the best men at his job in the United States, and I have no doubt that the enormous salary which he was paid was earned many times over.

The main feature of the Advertising Department was a vast battery of electric duplicating machines, with double crews working in three eight-hour shifts all through the twenty-four hours. These machines consisted in mechanically-driven typewriters worked somewhat on the pianola principle; a slotted sheet representing a "standard sales letter" was placed on a roller, a switch was turned, and the letter was typed off at such a speed that it was actually impossible to see the keys moving with the naked eye. I believe I am correct in saying that an ordinary single-page letter could be typed in this way in fifteen seconds, and all the operator had to do was to fill in the name and address of the recipient at the top of the sheet. Each letter was thus an original

copy, and was in no sense a circular. To me this Niagara of propaganda, most of it extremely subtle and indirect, had about it something that was almost terrifying. The installation itself made a noise like a distant flight of aeroplanes; an uncanny sound, and one that echoed queerly from the lighted windows of the Advertising Building in the dead hours before the dawn.

I learned a good deal of American advertising methods during this period, but to the end I still found it difficult to credit that the psychology of the American public could be so utterly different from our own. Still, I have no doubt that the department knew its business a great deal better than I did, and its methods were certainly justified by results. The letters addressed to individuals were well enough, but the crudity and blatancy of many of the poster designs were past belief. The majority of these depicted an entirely mythical city, with gleaming spires and glistening domes making up an idealized blend of Moscow and Oxford, with the exception that they were invariably rising out of a tropical paradise in which lovely ladies and marvellously-dressed gallants disported themselves under the palm-trees. Advertisements of this type were by no means confined to Coral Gables; they were poured out in thousands by practically every land corporation in Florida. It is therefore scarcely necessary to add that such pictures scarcely ever bore the slightest relation to the dreary flats, occasionally intersected by a few hundred yards of white way lighting, the attractions of which they were proclaiming. Other advertisements, unillustrated, more simply proclaimed "A Steal—at 25,000 Dollars!"

and left it at that; but the city of shimmering spires was the favourite. It is scarcely possible to believe that the gullibility of the American public was so unlimited that these incredible pictures could ever have been taken for even a remote resemblance to reality. One can only imagine that the average man in the street had already been trained to the habit of discounting 99 per cent of what he was told in this way, and of treating the remaining one per cent with considerable caution.

Another remarkable branch of the Coral Gables Advertising Department was the free transport service, which was operated between the city and various points throughout the United States. "Prospects" were collected practically anywhere and were transported to Coral Gables entirely free of charge, afterwards being given a royal time for two or three days while they were being shown round the city as the guests of the Corporation. The transport fleet consisted of no less than seventy-six vehicles, each capable of accommodating twenty-three passengers in very considerable luxury. About twenty of these units were operated wherever occasion demanded; the remainder were run on regular schedules between Coral Gables and practically all the larger cities of the southern states. Many of these regular runs extended to over five hundred miles; actually the longest was that between Coral Gables and Montgomery, Alabama, a distance of 881 miles. This journey was performed three times weekly in both directions. In addition, occasional runs were made from points as far distant as New York, Chicago, and even San Francisco, covering anything up to four thousand miles. It was not only Coral Gables that operated these services—Hollywood,

Davis Islands, Boca Raton and Miami Shores, to mention only a few of its rivals, possessed fleets scarcely less large. The expense was of course colossal, but the statistics showing the resultant sales were said to prove that it was amply justified.

Taking it all round, I should imagine that the art of salesmanship had at that time reached a point throughout Florida generally beyond which it could hardly have been developed further. For myself, I was constantly meeting men there who could have sold me anything whatever, and although I was probably an easier victim than most I believe that almost everybody was affected in the same way to a greater or lesser degree. There were uncountable cases of "prospects" being so carried away by the atmosphere of the place that they had, on the spur of the moment, bought huge tracts of land, public buildings, or anything else that happened to be offering, without there being the remotest possibility of their being able to pay so much as the initial deposit when the time arrived. It was astonishing how often this happened; and it was generally not that the so-called "buyer" was in the least anxious to deceive or to make a nuisance of himself, but simply that he was carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment and lost control of himself altogether. The fact that this sort of thing was so common was a significant commentary on the general mania. But I can sympathize with the feeling; it is difficult enough sometimes not to bid at an ordinary auction in England, let alone to resist the persuasive eloquence of a "realtor" in full blast extolling the unthinkable beauties of some alligator-infested swamp on Lake Ochechobee.

Coral Gables itself, by the time that I arrived there, had been able to dispense with the services of these professional spell-binders; and a Corporation land-sale was a dignified if enthusiastic affair, strictly devoted to business. But four years earlier, even at Coral Gables a land-sale was apt to fall completely flat without the music of a trombone to lend gaiety to the proceedings and to stir hesitating buyers into action. Even "Doc" Dammers himself, who could have sold anybody anything, had the greatest difficulty in disposing of lots in Flagler Street, Miami, for fifteen hundred dollars apiece not so many years ago. Fifteen years later, when the boom was at its height, one of these identical lots changed hands for no less than one million and a half dollars, or exactly one thousand times the amount that it had fetched in 1910. This was an actual fact, as I knew the people connected with the deal, and had seen the original papers.

"Doc" Dammers, incidentally, had made fortunes for a good many people besides himself, and up to the time that I left Florida used to boast, and with reason, that nobody had ever done business with him for six months and come off a loser. I had lost touch with him completely before the boom burst, but according to rumour he was one of the few who saw what was in the wind and managed to get out in time. I heard too that he had become again associated with Carl G. Fisher in some very successful development on Long Island, New York; a revival of the old partnership of ten years before, when he had sold land on Miami Beach when nobody believed that such a remote island bog could ever be worth anything.

Apart from the publicity and advertising campaigns being carried on from our own offices, we worked too in conjunction with most of the semi-public organizations that were broadcasting the delights of the Only Tropical Paradise further and yet further afield. The Chambers of Commerce, Progress Associations, Boosters, Elks, Kiwanis, Shriners, Rotarians, and every other club and order in the country was helping in the good work, and by the end of 1925 it was impossible to open a newspaper anywhere in the United States without finding some reference to Florida and Florida's activities. Some of this publicity was carried even to the extent of wholesale abuse of the whole place; it being considered, and perhaps with reason, that even an attack on the boom generally, if skilfully worded so as to leave loopholes for a vigorous rejoinder, was preferable to no mention at all. But this was a dangerous weapon, and if not confined to skilled hands was apt to prove disastrous.

The nation-wide advertising and publicity for Florida was rounded off and completed by the contra-advertising from California, most of which condemned us in unmeasured terms to the great delight of the old stagers who were true to their beliefs that anything was better than nothing. All this, of course, resulted in an immense amount of controversy and correspondence in the press, in which Mr. Yoder and the rest of us saw to it that Coral Gables received its full mention. And yet again (to become more involved still) there were those who encouraged the Florida mania, for no other reason than that they believed that it couldn't last long, but that while it lasted it would lower real-estate values elsewhere and enable them to buy in cheaply while the going was

good. Whether such tortuous reasoning as this turned out to be justified in the event I have no idea, but I should imagine it quite possibly may have done. But towards the end I don't think that any of us, either in Florida or California, quite knew what policy we were supposed to be following.