

CHAPTER XII

I HAD seen a good deal of Dr. Dammers during our trip to Cuba, as well as of Mr. Walker, and indirectly as a result of this association I found when I returned to Miami that I was once again drifting into another sort of life. Dr. Dammers was, as attested by an illuminated coronet attached to the front of his official motor-car, the Mayor of Coral Gables, and through him and the Coral Gables Corporation together I became involved in various activities in connection with the city organization. While I was still attached to Coral Gables, this new work often carried me far afield in visits to other Florida cities, and I was afforded an opportunity of seeing the boom from a much wider angle than had been possible up to now.

I never quite became accustomed to the extraordinarily prominent parts played by the mayors of nearly all these cities; and among the multifarious duties of an overworked police-force not the least important was the provision of mounted guards for these functionaries on their official journeyings abroad. While Mr. Walker was in Florida he was almost invariably attended by four motorcycle police, two ahead of the civic car and two behind. On special occasions, such as a procession of

mayors—a mighty spectacle!—there were at least twelve of these escorts and sometimes as many as twenty. When “Doc” Dammers, who was always strong for maintaining the dignity of his office, went down to the Miami docks to meet the Cuban delegation, he was accompanied by the united police forces of Miami, Miami Beach and Coral Gables, and the entourage sounded like a fleet of bombing planes. On these occasions all ordinary traffic restrictions, and regulations as to such matters as one-way streets, were entirely disregarded. With their sirens in full blast and performing miracles of daring, the police would forge ahead at perhaps forty miles an hour through the crowded streets, the scream of their approach being sufficient to clear a path even through the hopeless congestion of down-town Miami. These motorcycle police were mostly ex-professional track riders, and the way in which they would travel at really sickening speeds within a few inches of the phalanx of densely-packed people on the kerb fairly took one’s breath away. Yet there were seldom any accidents. Whenever fire-engines or ambulances or mayors were about, and the unending, penetrating wail of the sirens could be heard rising and falling above the roar of the traffic, the effects were always magical. It was an impressive sight to see those crouching, coatless figures doubled over their handbars hurtling down a main street, scattering the traffic into the gutters, on to the pavements, anywhere and everywhere so long as the powerful cars behind them could have free play. Especially at night, when their blazing searchlights added to the confusion, did they convey an impression of inspired and maniacal demons.

I often enough participated in these orgies of speed during my later days in Florida, and exhilarating enough they were. I don't wonder that the mayors revelled in them, and regarded these constant Ben Hur-like progresses as among the chief delights of office. To me they never lost their first thrill, although the first one I ever experienced was I think the best of them.

It was during Mr. Walker's visit, but I had gone back early to the New York Hotel, and had retired to bed and to sleep somewhere about nine o'clock. In the middle of the night I was awakened by a heavy hand groping about among the bedclothes, and opened my eyes to see the figure of an immense policeman, bending over me with a lantern.

"What's the matter?" I asked. It didn't occur to me to be particularly surprised; anything may happen in Florida.

"Doc Dammers wants you," said the policeman. "He's over at the Pancoast Hotel—he wants you to come across."

I was only half awake, and very tired; but it seemed that there might be something amusing in the wind, so I got out of bed and dressed again, and followed the policeman outside. The mayoral car, with two chauffeurs and four mounted outriders, was waiting for me in the deserted street, and I climbed in and was whirled off along those wonderful tree-lined roads of Miami Beach. I had imagined that there must be something fairly important happening to warrant all this midnight display of pomp and glory; but on arriving at the hotel, where there were many other official cars and mounted police waiting outside, I found that the occasion

was nothing more than a supper-party being given by the genial Doc to Mr. Walker and a number of film-stars. The party was quite a small affair; but, as almost all the male guests were mayors, there must have been at least forty police in attendance.

It was a very hilarious gathering, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. Afterwards, at about three o'clock in the morning, Mr. Walker, Dr. Dammers, Mr. William Russell, the film-actor, and myself, followed by a car-load of female film celebrities, left the hotel and proceeded at an enormous speed to a dance-resort known as the Club Lido, several miles away on Hibiscus Island. The noise our cars made would have wakened the dead. Going down the Causeway we maintained a steady seventy-five miles an hour, and in addition to the roar of our own engines there was the indescribable din of twenty outriders and the continuous blare of twenty-two sirens, as those on our own cars as well as those on the police motorcycles were kept at full blast throughout. I don't know what anyone who saw this horrifying parade could have imagined that we were doing, but I scarcely think that even in Florida the fact that two mayors were going to a dance would have been considered as an adequate explanation. We performed a sickening and spectacular skid as we slewed round on to the bridge to Hibiscus Island; but nobody minded, though it was only by the grace of Heaven that we were not all pitched into the sea. "Hey! That'll tell the world what sort of guys we mayors are!" roared Dr. Dammers above the din. And so it would have done, if anyone had seen us. But as a matter of fact nobody did see us, except the ladies in the car

behind, which in spite of our breakneck speed had kept well up with us. It was being driven, incidentally, by an extraordinarily beautiful film-actress, Miss Dorothy Knapp, who under the title of "Miss Manhattan," had a few weeks previously been officially acclaimed as the most beautiful woman in America. "We thought you were all killed, surely; but we were having such a bully time that we just whooped!" said Miss Manhattan, as we were getting out at the Lido a minute or so later. "Hell!" said Mr. Russell, more simply; and then, with a quizzical look at the streaming-eyed police, he added, "Hadn't we best send these boys back to Miami to go buy us an egg sandwich?" It was scarcely a too satirical interpretation of the police's duties.

But while the police in most parts of Florida were certainly overworked, they were not altogether deserving of much sympathy. In Miami especially, they were so remarkably free with their language and their actions, and so extraordinarily unpopular with every section of the community, that it was impossible to believe that there was not something seriously wrong with them. As a matter of fact there was practically nothing to be said in their favour, except that their job was an impossible one. They all carried huge automatics in leather holsters slung conspicuously on their belts, together with a pair of large and no less conspicuous handcuffs. Such outward trappings of force, especially when their owners had no scruples whatever in the niceties of language, were in themselves sufficient to incite the independent spirit to revolt. They wore no jackets; blue trousers, white shirt, and a peaked cap

like a yachtsman's were their standard equipment. All of them were burnt brick red by the southern sun; all of them had their tempers roughened by the impossible task of trying to control chaotic traffic in that blazing heat. The majority, for some reason, hailed from the State of Georgia, which has never had any particular love for the State of Florida; and no doubt much of their savage brutality was due to the typically American desire of one state to "put it over" another.

There was a case while I was in Miami of a pedestrian, who crossed the road at the wrong place and who did not hear or disregarded the policeman's command to come back, being shot dead then and there. There was a mild sensation about this in the local papers, but it was only a mild one and it soon blew over. And even this was largely because the victim of the tragedy happened to be a newspaper editor in Hialeah, so that the press took up his case with more enthusiasm than if he had been merely an ordinary member of the public. There were countless cases of motorists, who had parked their cars in unauthorized areas, having their faces "plastered" by members of the force in whose hands the handcuffs had become a particularly nasty weapon of assault. Traffic in Miami was certainly almost beyond human control, even with everybody behaving intelligently, and for a policeman to be additionally obstructed by obtuse, antagonistic, and often bellicose drivers must certainly have been almost beyond bearing. No doubt many such drivers fully deserved the "plastering" to which they exposed themselves, laws or no laws. But on the other hand a great many didn't, and a great many were seriously injured.

The most flagrant example of the attitude of the police-force towards its prisoners, an example which occurred during the latter part of my stay in Florida, was that connected with an attempted "break" by a large number of prisoners in Miami gaol. This particular scandal certainly did attract a great amount of attention, and the sheriff responsible was indicted for manslaughter. The facts of the case were that the gaol authorities had heard rumours of an attempted "break" to be made on the following morning; and instead of taking the obvious course of mounting an extra guard, they arranged that one of the prison gates should actually be left open as an additional inducement, and that warders with guns should be placed at suitable locations to snipe the prisoners as they came out. Naturally enough, finding this unexpectedly easy outlet lying open to them, and unsuspecting that it had been left open by design, a great number of prisoners—many of whom were serving short terms for trivial offences—decided to take opportunity by the forelock. They poured out of the opening which had been left for them, and were literally mown down as they came. It was an incredibly brutal business, and an incredibly stupid one. One prisoner was shot dead who it was afterwards proved was not trying to escape at all, but had been pushed forward by the weight of those behind him. Public opinion was sufficiently stirred by this outrage to forget even real-estate for a little while, and there was a general outcry against the police which for a day or two seemed as though it might have ugly results. But Dr. Dammers, by putting on a terrific land-sale, saved the situation; and though there was afterwards very vigorous action

by the state authorities, the threatened riots never materialized.

Every visitor to America comes back with his own version of the working or non-working of the prohibition laws, and in joining in this general, and usually ill-informed, chorus I make no attempt at hazarding any opinion as to how prohibition may be working in the United States as a whole. From all accounts that I have heard, and from my own personal experience, prohibition operates along totally different lines in the various states of the Union. Kansas, for instance, was practically bone-dry at that time, but New York was quite indubitably wet, as it still remains. Florida, from my own personal experience of it, was the wettest country I have ever known. The state legislature had definitely abandoned any attempt to enforce the provisions of the eighteenth amendment; and the united factors of a tropical climate, the proximity of areas where liquor of all sorts was obtainable at all hours and at the lowest prices, and the presence of a vast amount of ready cash in the hands of people eager to spend it, combined to render quite abortive the intermittent efforts of the federal agents. Now and again there were raids, now and again bootlegging ships were sunk and their stores of liquor confiscated; but curiously enough, it always seemed to be the bootleggers outside the official "ring" who were the chief sufferers. There were frequent brushes between the rival gangs, and dirty work a-plenty. The official rings had no overweening affection for the unofficial operators, and their sanctimonious zeal in seeing to it that these malefactors were brought to justice was remarkable.

The extraordinarily injured attitude adopted by the recognized bootlegger towards the pirate, an attitude often perfectly sincere, always struck me as a most peculiar instance of how distorted one's outlook may become. "Yessir—I'll say it's a shame!" one of these gentlemen confided to me. "Here's a guy like me, with a wife an' kids, builds up a nice business with the best people in town; and, hell's bells! these other bums come in and go spoil the market. An' me just bought the best boat in the Gulf for twenty thousand bucks. Yessir, I'll tell the roof the country isn't what it was!" The speaker was a tall, hatchet-faced man looking exactly like the conventional idea of a methodist preacher; he was the official bootlegger of a little town not far from Tampa, and no man in the district was more respected, or was regarded as a more worthy citizen. As a proof of his respectability, he rejoiced in the title of "Doc." He operated his own fleet of motor boats from Bimini, Nassau and Havana, and supplied genuine wines and spirits of practically every brand for prices often comparing favourably with those obtaining in England. The arrivals of his boats were not actually published in the press out of deference to the feelings of the authorities, but there was no attempt to conceal them otherwise.

The price of a bottle of whisky in Florida ranged from three dollars upwards, and a good brand of French champagne fetched about ten dollars. Curiously enough, one of the most prized luxuries was beer, which fetched a dollar a bottle at the standard rates. Practically all of the hotels served these drinks quite openly, and indeed there was no particular need to conceal them. The state police would not interfere, and most of the federal

prohibition agents seemed either to be occupied with other business or to be suffering from acute blindness. In Miami there were at least two proper old-fashioned saloons, with polished counters, brass hand-rails and stocks of bottles ranged on wooden shelves behind the bar. One of them was within 200 yards of the central police station, and there was a constable on point duty directly opposite its entrance. A famous "beer-garden" on Miami Beach Island conducted most of its business on a wide verandah overlooking the main street, with only the flimsiest of bamboo sun-blinds to shield the glasses of iced Pilsener from the glare.

Prohibition in Florida, at that time anyway, had quite definitely collapsed. There was not even an "attitude" towards prohibition—people had simply forgotten about it altogether. Wines and spirits were served at all official dinners as a matter of course; generally quite openly, but occasionally concealed in soft-drink bottles when there were politicians present for whom a too open violation might not have been altogether desirable. This was done so that, in the event of any subsequent trouble, the wounded victim of the attack might claim that he never even dreamed that the stuff he was drinking was not true to the label on the bottle, and that he was an honest and law-abiding man cruelly misled by vicious associates. Many were the times that I sat down with mayors, chiefs of police, and state and federal politicians to enjoy the solace of a friendly glass. There was no concealment at all, in nine cases out of ten—nobody thought there was anything wrong with it, no more than the average motorist thinks there is anything wrong in exceeding twenty miles an hour across Salisbury Plain.

The amount of drinking that went on all over Florida, especially in the larger towns, was simply astounding. I should say that during the boom there must have been more alcohol per head consumed in Florida than in any other country in the world. The organization of the liquor traffic was so complete and so elaborate that it was difficult to see how it could ever be eradicated, even if anybody wanted it to be ; and personally, I never met anyone who did. The only thing which one might not do in connection with drinking was to be discovered with one's car loaded with bottles. In these unfortunate circumstances, the car and its contents were both confiscated, to the great jubilation of the police; whose motives in unflaggingly concentrating on this particular phase of enforcement, and this phase alone, were scarcely above suspicion.

There were innumerable little islands round about the Florida coast that were only visited by the federal agents on certain fixed dates, which were known weeks in advance and were more or less equivalent to Sundays to those engaged in the work of landing the cargoes of the motor-launches from Bimini and Cuba. Nearly all the traffic was carried on by the large rings, and these would brook no interference from amateur speculators. However one may regard this situation from the moral point of view, it was in the end probably just as well that most of the traffic remained in the hands of the "professionals." As my friend with the "nice little business" told me, there was a good deal of esprit de corps among the better-class bootleggers. Their business was a curious mixture of honesty and dishonesty; but when one of the ring sold you a bottle bearing a

well-known label, you could be fairly certain that its contents were what they were supposed to be.

I am no great drinker, and I can only remember one single occasion on which I actually purchased a bottle of whisky during the whole time I was in the south. This transaction was carried out with a particularly villainous-looking negro assistant to a bootlegger in Coral Gables, and as it was during the early part of my stay there and I did not know this gentleman's reputation for honest dealing, I decided after making the purchase that the stuff was probably "moonshine" and gave it away as a present to one of the clerks at the Casa Loma Hotel. So far as I remember, in my innocence I paid five dollars for it, out of which the negro must have kept at least two for his own purposes. But my knowledge of the Miami Beach beer-garden was more extensive, and I spent a good many hours on that wide verandah sipping iced lager and listening to the gramophone. A very pleasant resort, this beer-garden; but it obtained its supplies from some source not recognized by the official ring, and as a result was raided by the federal authorities just before I left and was almost entirely wrecked. The proprietor told me once that he always kept between ten and fifteen thousand dollars' worth of beer alone in his cellars, and that this supply was only sufficient to carry him over for about a fortnight.