

### CHAPTER XIII

IT is almost impossible, and in any case it would not be particularly interesting to anyone except myself, to attempt to write any consecutive account of my own doings after I returned to Florida from Cuba. As I have said, my work in connection with Coral Gables began soon after that time to cover a much wider field, and entailed a considerable amount of travelling about the state, during the course of which I saw a great deal of the other developments that were working parallel with our own. Some of these, notably Mr. Addison Mizner's extraordinary conception of Boca Raton and the artificially-constructed Davis Islands near Tampa, were extremely beautiful; but the more I saw of other places, the prouder I felt at being even an insignificant unit in that vast organization which was responsible for Coral Gables. I had become by this time as genuine and complete a Floridian as even the most frenzied booster could desire, and had fallen entirely under the spell of those glittering blue seas and cloudless skies that were now, in early November, beginning to reach their full beauty. I felt quite sure that there was no place in the world like Florida, and no place in Florida even remotely approaching Coral Gables. As I watched

Mr. Merrick's vast schemes developing themselves under my own eyes, saw the last rivet driven into the tower of the huge Miami-Biltmore Hotel that had been still only a catacomb of foundations when I had first arrived there, my last lingering doubts were gone. At the beginning I had made some half-hearted attempt to retain some vestiges at least of a sense of proportion, but it was no use. Impossible things were happening under my very eyes; and with everyone else, I was living now in a wild dream in which it seemed that every desire would be inevitably realized. I had as much money to spend as I could possibly want; and—again like everyone else—I was spending it all with no thought for the future, and living like an emperor. Looking back at it now, I suppose it was incredibly stupid not to have taken such a Heaven-sent opportunity to lay by for a rainy day; but the whole atmosphere of the place was such as to make any idea of systematic saving seem almost revolting. This, at any rate, was the effect that it had on me, and apparently on most others. You can't start saving in a dream, and that vague idea of founding the family fortunes could always be begun to-morrow.

There had been a change, too, that had come over Florida with the beginning of November. Some of the great resort hotels, places of pleasure entirely where even realtors were a secondary consideration, had begun to reopen; and one evening in Fagler Street I saw the first dinner-jacket of the season, as significant a sign of change as the first swallow. The Coral Gables Country Club was beginning to be rather careful about its new members, and the indefatigable Mr. Dutton no longer

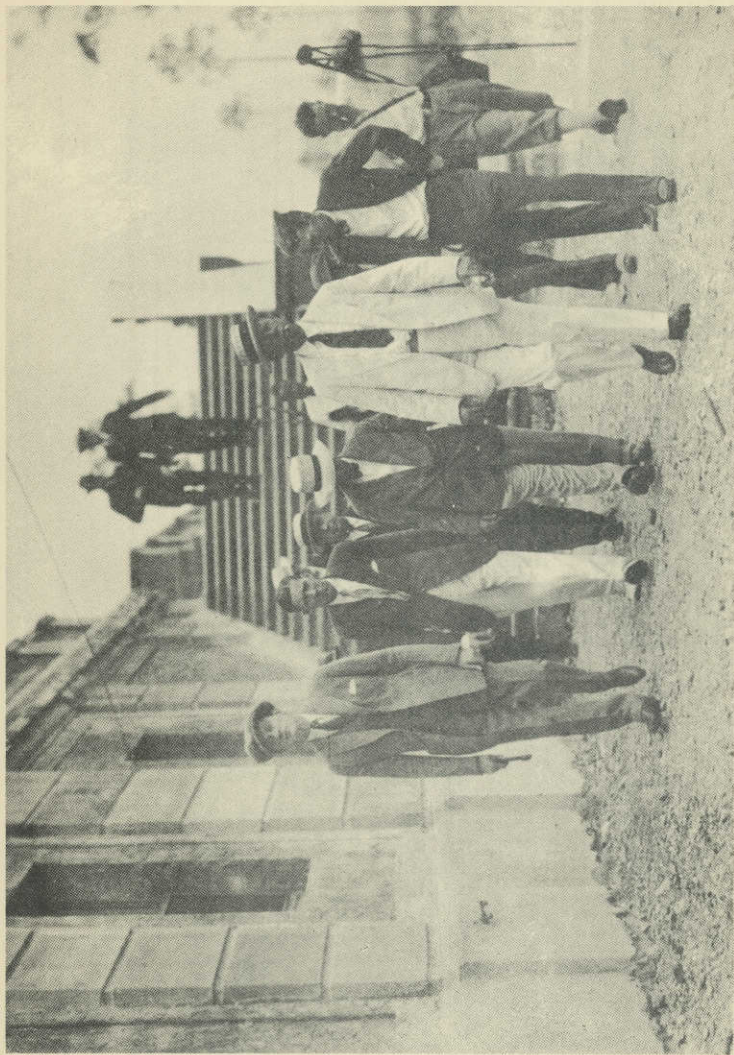
passed through the lounge with his sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

When I had first arrived in Florida it was still the height of summer, and even after I had managed to reach such a position that dancing and the kindred delights were not impossible luxuries it was still far too early for the real "season" to have begun. The hotels and dance-clubs were still filled with a distinctly unfashionable throng that would not have been tolerated within their doors two months later. The growth of snobbery as winter approached was indeed very remarkable. On the first occasion on which I ever danced there, I had been taken to a party at the Fleetwood Hotel on Miami Beach, and seeing that this was regarded as being by far the most exclusive hotel then open I was mildly surprised to see that there were many of the dancers who did not scruple to shed their coats and waistcoats after dinner was over. Shorts and the everlasting cotton knee-breeches were well in evidence, and I was relieved to find that my own somewhat battered flannel suit was a good deal above the general average in men's wear. As to the Coral Gables Country Club, my election to which I had innocently regarded as something of a compliment, it had for these summer months very definitely come down to earth and allowed anyone to become a member who could afford to pay the greatly reduced entrance fee. Throughout Florida it was, generally speaking, the time for the permanent residents to enjoy themselves, before the visitors had arrived to buy them out of countenance. The orchestras, in these dog-days, allowed themselves all sorts of antics which they would not have dared to attempt in the height of

the season. Ribald verses dealing with local celebrities accompanied the music, drinks were freely consumed on the platform, instruments were changed in mid-blast with weird and devastating effect. But as November grew older all this exuberance grew nightly less; and when Mr. Jan Garber's orchestra at last appeared in complete evening dress, one knew that the old times were over until next year.

It was not until these later and more conventional days that I began to see very much of the night life of Florida, and by that time the more respectable part of it had become much the same as night life anywhere else. That is, so far as the large hotels were concerned. But there still remained those less fashionable resorts that were peculiarly Florida's own—the open-air dancing-floors on Miami Beach, the great arc-lit bathing pools where incredible Venuses in incredible bathing-costumes danced on the terraces before diving again into the silky-warm water, the negro cabarets where in half an hour the unending din had all but battered the life out of you. They were extraordinary places, those negro cabarets, and it was not particularly easy to get into them; but in spite of their being so exhausting a means of spending an evening, one saw more of life in one of them in an hour than in a week at any of the ordinary night-clubs.

The first time I ever went to one of these places was as a result of a trip to Jacksonville. I had met a man at the hotel who seemed to know all about such places, and hours after I had gone to bed and to sleep, he had come stumping down the corridor to my room, slightly exhilarated and making a great deal of noise, to suggest that we should go and have a look at the niggers. It



JAMES J. WALKER (FIRST ON LEFT), T. H. W. AND 'DOC' DAMMERS (IN WHITE) ON A MAYORAL TOUR OF CORAL GABLES



was already about three o'clock in the morning, and I weakly protested that it was surely rather late; but he assured me that the show would only get going after we had arrived, and there was no arguing with him. So I got up and dressed, and half an hour later we were getting out of a taxi somewhere miles away in the negro quarter, and my friend was banging on the door of what looked like an ordinary tenement house, with no lights anywhere.

After a while there was the sound of bolts being drawn, and the door opened a few inches on a chain. "This guy's the President of the United States!" my friend remarked. "He wants to have a dance—it's all right, mother!" A very old negress regarded us through the opening; and apparently satisfied by her inspection, released the chain and let us in. We descended a very narrow spiral staircase into a sort of cellar that I could have sworn dated from the Middle Ages, and at the bottom of the steps pushed through a heavy baize door. Our ears were at once assailed by such an uproar of shouting and singing and drum-beating that any further conversation was immediately quite out of the question. The room was completely filled with negroes of both sexes, jostling and singing and exchanging leather-lunged repartees. It was arranged in the ordinary way of a cabaret, with a small dance-floor railed off in the centre and surrounded by tables. At the far end the noisiest and by far the most athletic orchestra I have ever encountered was performing at full blast, sweat streaming from their faces; there were twenty performers, and seeing that the whole room could not have been more than fifty feet long the din was indescribable.

We were the only white people in the whole place, but nobody seemed to mind about us. The dancers on the floor were jammed into a solid mass, and often for minutes at a time remained locked in each other's arms, perforce entirely motionless save for a spasmodic twitching of the shoulders in time to the music. In the centre of the floor, wearing a sort of purple fez, was an enormous Master of the Ceremonies at least seven feet high, who when the congestion had made further movement impossible put his shoulder against the couple nearest to him and heaved with his whole weight so as to force the mass into motion again. This action was invariably accompanied by an outburst of genial abuse of everyone and everything, expressed in terms of grossness almost unimaginable. But everyone was enjoying themselves, and this give and take of personalities seemed to be one of the main features of the proceedings. The most lurid remarks were generally directed at the ladies, who it must be admitted succeeded in returning such compliments in ample measure.

After the dance the Master of the Ceremonies, having for no apparent reason exchanged his fez for an immense sun-hat of yellow straw, was joined by two other officials, and all three lent themselves with a will to the task of clearing the floor. This was accomplished by the simple but efficient method of all three shoving with all their weight outwards from the centre. An astonishing flow of picturesque language proceeded from everybody, particularly from those who were being crushed against the railings, but in a few minutes the floor was cleared and the cabaret started.

The orchestra struck up at its loudest, and a negro



couple, hilarious and dishevelled, struggled through the crowd and on to the floor. They sang a verse of some song or other; but they were completely drowned by the orchestra, which made no attempt whatever to moderate itself, and their voices were never heard more than occasionally above the general din. After the verse was finished, the performers stationed themselves by one of the tables at the edge of the floor and repeated it, very fast and very spiritedly, to the accompaniment of a violent dance that made the perspiration stream from them as they worked. The guests at the table, who were wrangling over the ownership of a bottle of sauce, took no notice whatever; and the performers, as soon as their effort was finished, began it all over again, exactly the same, and without the slightest intermission. The orchestra, though playing infinitely loudly and monotonously, had apparently relapsed into a sort of waking stupor in which their movements were entirely mechanical. In the middle of this third performance, one of the women at the table turned round with a volley of abuse and hurled several small coins on to the floor. Without a second's pause, the couple moved on to the next table and repeated the song and dance again; and so on, right round the circuit, until the song had been repeated fifty times at least and—what was more remarkable—the dance as well. The custom was seemingly not to budge from any table until largesse had been distributed, and they adhered to it scrupulously. The whole turn, I should say, must have lasted for well over an hour, during the whole of which time the orchestra remained at full blast, without making the slightest variation. Towards the latter part, it was also

accompanied by almost continuous abuse from would-be dancers who had been thrust off the floor, rising to a roar of cheers and whistles when finally, utterly exhausted and bedraggled but still kicking, the performers retired into the centre of the floor for one more repetition and a wilder dance than ever to bring the show to a conclusion.

These negro cabarets did not close until round about six in the morning, and as most of their patrons started work at seven, it was difficult to see how they ever got any sleep at all. But they certainly looked cheerful enough, in spite of it. My friend of the hotel told me that it was the usual custom of the local niggers to sleep between seven o'clock and midnight, and then to begin the night's revels after—so to speak—they had got up in the morning. A strange idea, but perhaps not a bad one.

For myself, I much preferred watching the crowds at the open-air dance floors on Miami Beach, with their great arc-lights slung on poles planted in the sand. At these places nearly all the dancers were in bathing costume, and in the intervals they would dash into the surf and come back for the next dance dripping wet. The only restriction that was rigorously enforced was that sand was not to be carried on to the floor, and in order to reach the boards you had always to walk through a sort of shallow foot-bath. From time to time there would be cabaret performances, often surprisingly good, by casual amateurs; anyone in the crowd who could do anything—who could dance on his hands, sing a song, play the ukulele—might volunteer a performance, and could be assured of an enthusiastic reception. Most of these dance-floors on the beach were run by the owners

of the coffee-stalls and hot-dog stands, who reaped an enormous indirect profit from the custom that was brought to their doors.

Even in the tropics, it is sometimes inclined to be chilly in the middle of the night if one happens to be wearing a wet bathing-suit, and after about nine o'clock it was the custom for various enthusiastic parties to light great fires of driftwood at intervals along the beach, at which midnight bathers could come to warm themselves before careering back into the water. Any time up to two or three o'clock in the morning there were groups round these fires, usually singing to the ukulele. Those well-worn songs dealing with Kentucky, Tennessee, and the south generally took on a new meaning, somehow, when they were sung by people who knew by heart the places of which they were singing, and for whom such sentiments as are expressed in "Alabama Bound" might well have been real enough. For almost everyone in Florida at that time had come from somewhere else, and comparatively recently; they were all exiles to an extent, and those midnight hours round the beach fires were the times when they came back to their homes for a little while, if only in song.

Looking back at it now after nearly five years, I find it difficult to recapture even in memory the magic of those Florida nights; the strange excitement of the time made everything romantic and unreal, and the cool air that wafted across the Mexican Gulf and stirred among the shadowy palm-trees on Miami Beach brought with it something of that glamour and adventure that is so easily lost again, and perhaps may never be regained. Vast, glittering hotels, their outlines palely silhouetted

against the star-hung tropical sky; noisy, raucous dance-halls with negro orchestras in full blast and couples, arm-in-arm, wandering out on to the perfect white Florida beaches; little squat "road-houses" lost among the trees, that one would not know existed except for the lines of parked cars by the sidewalks and the snatches of music and laughter and high-pitched voices that drifted through their open windows, hidden in the scrub—I can see them all still, but their magic has gone. And I can see, too, those spacious country clubs, with their marble patios open to the stars, where the finest dance-orchestras in the world lilted out their music under the lantern-hung palm-trees. Always there were palm-trees; always there were the little strings of coloured lights, the armchairs nestling behind great banks of flowers, the coloured awnings of blue and gold. And yet if one wanted them there were those crowded, noisy cabarets hidden under great office buildings; stifflingly hot, with painted women and flushed men shuffling on a congested few yards of floor to the blare of the saxophone and the tinkling of glasses. But Miami Beach Island, with its huge arc-lit bathing-pools and its endless stream of high-powered motor-cars droning away into the darkness down perfect, polished roads, had about it some strange allurements that was all its own, and that I remember still as one remembers some wild dream.