

CHAPTER XIV

I FIRST met Mr. Frederick Zeigen, the "Managing Regent" of the University of Miami, on the only cold night I ever spent in Florida. I had never even heard of Mr. Zeigen before that afternoon, and to say the truth after leaving Miami some six weeks later I never heard of him again; but for all that he was one of the most extraordinary personalities I have ever met. He was a little, dark, soft-footed man blazing with nervous energy; his eyes shot fire as he talked, and when he outlined in a few words schemes so enormous as to take even my breath away, who was inured by this time to a good deal, one could see that he had no doubt whatever that they were already as good as accomplished.

I had been working at the Administration Building all day on some financial article designed to prove the complete stability of the Florida banking system. By the time that I had finished it was six o'clock, and I was feeling glad enough of a rest. Just as I was getting ready to go, however, I caught sight of Mr. Merrick himself drawing up outside in his car, and accompanied by Mr. J. P. Yoder. Mr. Yoder climbed out, and they stood talking together for several minutes before Mr. Merrick drove away again. I felt instinctively that there

was something in the wind; and sure enough, as Mr. Yoder passed through the main office he gave me a meaning look and told me to come on into his private room.

"See here," said Mr. Yoder, as we sat down, "I don't know if you can work fifteen hours at a stretch from now on, but you'll have to have a good try. George E. is going to found a university here, and it's going to be the biggest story yet. There isn't going to be anything like it in the world. It's all fixed, but he's only just told me. There's a bird named Zeigen just arrived by the afternoon train from Baltimore, and he has the whole dope from the foundation-stone to the M.A. They meant to keep it dark, but somehow or other somebody's smelt a rat. *We've* got to tell the story first, and what's more we've got to have fifteen columns, two whole ——— pages, in to-morrow's evening papers. I've fixed for them to take it, every line you can write. Go out and have some dinner, and then get out to this Zeigen straight away. He'll be waiting for you. Let him talk his head off, and when he's blown flat come back here and write all you know until eight o'clock. McGuire'll meet you here then, and start the rehash for the northern circuit. I don't suppose you'll finish till lunch-time, but by ———! it'll be a great story, and if it's the goods, why, George E. will do anything but kiss you."

Like everybody else at Coral Gables, Mr. Yoder was possessed of such an overwhelming enthusiasm for everything connected with the place that it was impossible not to be carried away by it, even if I had not already been possessed of at least my fair share. All my tiredness

melted away. It certainly sounded like a good story, and I went across to the Antilla Hotel for a quick dinner with my mind already full of flaring headlines and four-column streamers.

As I have already said, it was a cold night; but I had scarcely driven away from the hotel before this was amply compensated for by my car suddenly bursting into flames, without the slightest warning. I leapt out, and beat at them with the floor-mat, and after a few minutes they went out without having done any very material damage. I restarted the car rather gingerly, and resumed my journey rather more slowly towards the famous "Millionaire's Row" in Coconut Grove where Mr. Zeigen lived. The fire, however, had fused my lights, and I took a long time to find the house. When at long last I was actually turning into the long drive, there was a loud explosion behind me and for a second time that evening I was again enveloped in flames, this time rather more seriously. I had no extinguisher, and as the mat had somehow become jammed under the pedals, I could do nothing. By an extraordinary coincidence, however, I had apparently at that very moment run completely dry of petrol, and after a glorious flare-up of only a few seconds, the whole thing died out again. Seeing that I afterwards found that the petrol pipe had come completely adrift, and that the whole contents of the tank were pouring out on to a red-hot exhaust pipe, this second respite for the car (which had never been insured) could hardly have been anticipated. However, I pushed it backwards into the bushes, and went on up the drive on foot for the momentous interview.

Mr. Zeigen had a large house and an English butler, who when the door was opened to me and I asked for Mr. Zeigen himself, inquired with perfect courtesy whether I would not first prefer to wash my hands. I looked down at them, and realized for the first time that I was almost completely covered with filth—hands, face, clothes, everything. Still, nobody is ever surprised at anything in Florida. I cleaned myself as best I could, and a few minutes later was shown up several flights of stairs to a great airy room like a studio at the top of the house, with open windows on every side and the whole of the rest of the walls lined with books up to the ceiling. It was a most attractive room, and as I looked at it I did not for the moment see Mr. Zeigen himself, sitting behind his great desk at the far end.

He was, as I have said, one of the most extraordinary men that I have ever met, and one of the most charming. He was, I gathered, by profession a banker; but he had apparently travelled everywhere, written several volumes of poetry, and made a deep study of world religions. He was also, I discovered later, a very considerable authority on music, an active enthusiast in politics, and a veritable mine of information on any subject connected with sport. During the course of our conversation we talked about practically everything, and so far as I could make out he was, perfectly genuinely, an expert on any topic whatever that happened to be mentioned, however fantastic. He completely staggered me. It was not that he made any attempt to parade his knowledge; it was just there. Such few things as I happened to know anything about myself he obviously

knew a great deal more about than I did; and the climax came when in discussing university sport I by some chance referred to the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Zeigen, "I have seen more of those races than I remember."

This was too much. "Did you see the last one?" I asked; and added, with I am afraid a certain unpleasant cunning, "You know—when Oxford won by four lengths."

But it was no use. "Cambridge, surely?" said Mr. Zeigen, with his charming smile. "No, I was not lucky enough to see that; I was in Paris. But I understand that it was anybody's race until the last mile."

After that I gave up. Mr. Zeigen had beaten me.

We had been talking for perhaps twenty minutes before I mentioned the real purpose of my visit, the rumoured founding of the University of Miami. Up to then I had only seen one aspect of Mr. Zeigen's many-sided character; but as soon as the University was mentioned, I began to see another. He carefully put away the book that he had been showing me, adjusting it in its shelf with meticulous care; and then without the slightest hesitation he launched out into one of the most eloquent orations that I have ever heard, before or since. I think he forgot that it was to me that he was talking. He simply poured out everything that was in him. Under the ægis of the University of Miami, Coral Gables was to become the Athens of the modern world, a centre of learning and culture that would be a landmark in

the progress of civilization. As he described those great marble halls rising beside the lakes, talked of the fabulous millions with which they would be endowed to enable them to possess the finest libraries, the finest museums, the finest scientific equipment that ever existed, visualized those vast gardens with their shaded walks and marble fountains and canals wandering away into the woods, he made it for the moment at least almost come true. It was an amazing outburst, and it was not acting. I am quite certain that Mr. Zeigen himself believed every word of it.

As he paced up and down his study and told me how it had been the dream of his life to play a leading part in the moulding of such a great University as this was to be, a University which should retain all the glamour and beauty of the ancient seats of learning while representing at the same time the highest ideals of modern civilization, and as he suddenly stood still and revealed to me that on that very night he found himself on the threshold of having his ideal realized, I felt myself almost overwhelmed by a strange admixture of totally different feelings. One was a feeling of immense admiration for this man, who almost alone had conceived the whole vast scheme and had been able to set in motion the machinery that might actually carry it into effect; another was a feeling of wonder at and enthusiasm for the conception as a whole, a conception which, however impracticable, was certainly a magnificent one; and yet another was a feeling of sadness and almost of pity, in that I knew that it was still all a dream of which the realization might

be infinitely more remote than the inspired little man in the blue serge suit so passionately believed. In spite of his extraordinary knowledge of affairs, his travels, his practical experience, his amazingly successful business career, I felt somehow older than Mr. Zeigen could ever be. It is difficult to explain what I mean; but although everything that he said was founded on unarguable fact, though I could see no loopholes in his reasoning and no reason to dissent from his terrific conclusions, I just couldn't altogether believe in him. The whole thing was, I suppose, simply beyond my conception. In one sense, Mr. Zeigen completely carried me away; but it was only a part of me, and the other part still sat there in that leather arm-chair facing the open windows through which I could hear the faint washing of the Atlantic on the beach at the bottom of the garden, and knew that this was only a scene in some extraordinary play from which a little later I should walk out into the prosaic streets of the world I used to know in the old days before I came to Florida.

Mr. Zeigen's voice went on and on; and I still sat there, part of me completely under its spell, part of me scarcely listening even. It was all so colossal. So far as mere money went they had already, it appeared, such a staggering amount available that it had ceased to have any significance. That very afternoon George Merrick had himself, and merely as one of many individuals, contributed a donation of five million dollars. The site of 175 acres overlooking Biscayne Bay had already been secured, and the foundation stone of the central unit of the

University buildings would be laid on New Year's Day. The designs for these had already been completed, by the three leading architects in America. The Central Unit, facing an artificial lake 1000 feet long and 800 feet wide, would have an unbroken frontage 600 feet in length. It would stand on an artificial hill fifty feet high; the buildings themselves would be fifty feet high too, and the central tower, fifty feet higher still, would be visible for fifty miles. From a special University station on the Florida East Coast Railway, which would be built on the boundary of the University park, a boulevard 600 feet wide with marble sidewalks and bordered by canals and illuminated after dark by flaming electric torches would lead straight towards the main entrance, dividing into two sweeps round the lake. The Greek theatre, the centre of the School of Dramatic Art, would be built on another lake further to the south; the players would perform the old Greek tragedies by moonlight, speaking across the water, and the mystery and beauty of ancient Greece would be re-created for the first time in two thousand years. All the rooms in all the buildings would be so designed that the free airs of Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic Ocean would sweep through them all the year round; yet, when there were rains or high winds, sliding plate-glass panels would shut across the archways of the great colonnades, making them as warm and as draught-proof as a modern hotel. With a sudden gesture, Mr. Zeigen swept out the designs from a cabinet under his desk; and there it all was, exactly as he had said. The buildings really *were* extraordinarily beautiful and impressive; there could be

no doubt of it. That tower 150 feet high, that could be seen for fifty miles, really did possess more than a little of genuine architectural beauty. And yet I just couldn't believe it, even though the site had been bought, the money was lying waiting in the banks, the designs had been completed, the architects were even now hurrying south to begin their work. Even the students, I gathered, had already started to enrol. And yet it just couldn't be true.

Mr. Zeigen turned to higher considerations than mere architecture. The outstanding ideal of the University of Miami would be to give to its graduates a background of culture and general knowledge which would enable them to meet the leaders of the world's thought on terms of equality and understanding. It was this "cultural balance" that was, after all, the greatest asset that any seat of learning could give, and the asset that Americans in general most conspicuously lacked.

"I believe that a great banker will be a greater banker still if he knows something of art," said Mr. Zeigen, for a moment standing still by his window and gazing unseeingly out into the darkness beyond. "A great musician will have a finer and a better understanding of the beauties he is trying to express if he knows something of mathematics or philosophy. It was Thomas Edison who said that a love of music had been the greatest stimulus that his inventive genius had ever known. It is this spirit that I want this great University to instil. I want to sweep away the narrow, the bigoted, the materialistic conception of learning, to create a new conception of learning and culture in their fullest and

truest sense. I want to raise the standard of knowledge, and of the appreciation of knowledge, higher than it has ever been before. We in the United States take things too easily, too much for granted; and so do you in Europe, though they are different things. We do not appreciate beauty and history and tradition; you do not appreciate science and progress, and those great adventures of political discovery which are to-day going forward throughout the world. Neither of us, through lacking one or other of these points of view, can see civilization as a whole. Why cannot they be combined? They *can* be combined; and that is the great ideal that we have set before us, and an ideal that we have been given more means of achieving than any body of men and women has ever had before."

Mr. Zeigen had been travelling for over two years, and had visited practically every important University in Europe and the United States. He had spent months at Oxford and the Sorbonne, and weeks at Harvard and Yale. He was in correspondence with professors and librarians and university authorities all over the world, and was even already negotiating with many of them to come to Coral Gables. "Everywhere I went I found the most intense interest in our effort—no jealousy, no discouragement, no lack of understanding. This is going to be the greatest contribution to civilization that America has made for a hundred years; and everywhere—in England, Germany, France, Italy—they are helping us to the full. It is all very wonderful." He sat down suddenly, toying with a silver paper-knife on his desk. "Wonderful!" he said again; but he was not thinking of what he was saying, he was lost in his own thoughts.

He had stopped talking; it was two o'clock in the morning and icy cold, and I was mentally and physically exhausted.

We had some Vichy water, which made me colder still, and Mr. Zeigen showed me to the door, switching on the lights in the darkened house as we came down the stairs. We shook hands, and I walked off alone down the drive, my brain still in a whirl, to look for my derelict car among the rhododendrons. I supposed that it would be all right; I had a can of petrol somewhere in the back, and the petrol pipe was not broken, only unscrewed. I found the car after a few minutes; but it was impossible to dislodge it from among the bushes, and to open the bonnet at all I had to pull away great branches and tear off the searching twigs. I don't know how I did it at all in the darkness, but somehow or other I managed to find the screw, and in half an hour I had the engine spasmodically running again. And so I rattled back along the deserted tree-lined roads to Coral Gables, with my headlights gleaming mysteriously on the white trunks of the palm trees.

I did not know what I thought of the University of Miami; I do not know what I think now. It was all very well simply to refuse to believe in it; but, after all, my reason for doing so was probably no more than a reaction from Mr. Zeigen's implicit faith that the attainment of so high an ideal was so easy and so certain of achievement. He had not, I reflected, seemed to have any conception of the enormous difficulties and prejudices which it would have to overcome before it could take its place even as a humble unit among the leading universities of the world, or to attain to even a

remote particle of that almost holy eminence that belonged to such universities as Oxford. Perhaps it would never possess the intangible atmosphere of those historic places; perhaps it would always be a little crude, a little callow, a little young. Now that I was away from the direct influence of Mr. Zeigen's overwhelming personality, I began to feel almost antagonistic to this vast, unpractical dream that had sprung from nothing. There was more in the building of a university than merely the best architecture that money could buy, more in its standing than the mere acquisition of some of the greatest leaders of learning in the old world. But for all that it was impossible to deny the power of sheer millions; millions which undoubtedly could and would, if they were put to the proper uses, tempt many of these leaders of learning to the sun-soaked shores of Biscayne Bay. Mr. Zeigen had at his disposal the means whereby he could build the finest laboratories in the world, the finest lecture-theatres, and—in course of time—perhaps one of the finest libraries as well. Why should not even the greatest of thinkers fall to lures such as these? Might not Mr. Zeigen's overflowing optimism be justified after all? And so thinking I steered suddenly into the kerb, for I had almost gone to sleep at the wheel; and I must have been tired indeed, for it was the first time that such blasphemous doubts as to the perfection of Florida had ever entered my head since I had first arrived at Coral Gables.

The night watchman let me into the Administration Offices, and very cramped and stiff I sat down to begin my article. I wrote on and on and on, my typewriter echoing strangely down the deserted corridors. Away

in the distance through the open window I could hear the steam shovels working their night shift on the excavation of the Venetian waterways, and occasionally a car droning past on its way home from the Coral Gables Country Club. I was very, very tired. But as I worked, that something which I had lost for a little while when I was driving back in the car began gradually to come back to me; and when the dawn had broken and Mr. McGuire, cheerful and unshaven, had arrived to give me a hand at least an hour before his due time, I had become once again the unshakable and enthusiastic believer. Outside the windows the Ponce de Leon Boulevard glowed quietly in the early morning sun, too beautiful to be true; and yet it *was* true, so why should all this that I was writing not be true also?

I only saw Mr. Zeigen once after that night, as he went back to New York almost immediately afterwards on some further University negotiations, and I had left Coral Gables before he had returned. I do not know what happened to the University of Miami, and I have never been able to find anybody who does. I never heard of Mr. Zeigen again, and apart from the people at Coral Gables I never met anyone who knew him. The whole thing, and all the personalities connected with it, became suddenly and completely a closed book, which I would give a very great deal to be able to reopen. I still cannot conceive of a man like Mr. Zeigen not making his mark on the world in some way; and yet I should think, if he had done so, that I should at least have come into contact with somebody who had heard of him. For all I know, the University of Miami may

be even now a flourishing institution, working out in obscurity its high destiny. Perhaps, after all, it will blaze out on the world as the fulfilment of Mr. Zeigen's ideals. But deep down within me I know now that on that cold and lonely drive back to Coral Gables from Coconut Grove I saw something that I had never seen before in Florida, and something that was true.