

## CHAPTER XV

ON my first evening in Florida when I had tramped across the causeway from Miami to Miami Beach, I had especially noticed two gateways on my left leading away over graceful bridges to what were apparently delightful little islands sitting up anyhow in the blue waters of Biscayne Bay. They looked beautifully natural and immutable as they lay there, their pine-trees and red-roofed houses mirrored in the still waters of the bay; but for all that, if I had passed along the bridge that did duty for a causeway five years earlier, I should have seen no islands there at all. With the exception of a few mud-flats, visible only at low tide, there would have been nothing but a wide sweep of water. For those islands were entirely artificial, and had been created out of nothing in response to that insatiable demand for land at any price that had been brought about by the Florida boom.

At the time when I first came to Florida, there were already four of these islands; and they had proved a complete success, both from the engineering standpoint and commercially. Those trusting souls who had bought lots on them before ever their first bulkheads had been raised above the water had good reason to thank Heaven

for their optimism. Plots of land for which they had paid 500 dollars were already worth anything up to 15,000, and were still rising in value. Yet when the promoters of the Venetian Islands first announced their scheme they were ridiculed as swindlers and dreamers. The few unfortunates who fell into their trap and bought land that only existed in theory were regarded as greenhorns of a rare and special variety, remarkable even among those hordes of "suckers" with which the North, in the private opinion of the South, is filled to overflowing. But it was those first few buyers of non-existent land who made fortunes.

The enterprise of the Venetian Islands was encouraged by the tremendous success of Mr. Carl G. Fisher's engineering achievements at Miami Beach—achievements which, as I have already described in an earlier chapter, had succeeded in converting that dreary semi-salt swamp into what was certainly one of the most beautiful places in the whole of Florida. Mr. Fisher's method had been to surround his land with strong wooden bulkheads, and then to fill in the cup so formed with silt and refuse dredged from Miami Harbour. The City authorities had been in something of a quandary as to where their refuse should be dumped, and Mr. Fisher had been able to get it for nothing, to the great satisfaction of both sides. As the wet mud was deposited inside the bulkheads, the surplus moisture gradually drained away until finally a dry and immensely fertile island had been created out of what had before been nothing but a semi-tidal swamp. This enterprise, of course, needed considerable capital; but Mr. Fisher was not only a very rich man personally, but had also been

able to raise any additional amount he wanted from outside sources. He had the courage of his conviction that Miami Beach could be made into one of the most popular resorts in the whole of America, and he did not hesitate to plunge heavily on his new enterprise. In the result, his venture more than justified his wildest hopes. The boom came, and Mr. Fisher became a millionaire many times over; but even to-day, when the hurricanes and the financial disasters of the last few years have done their worst, Miami Beach Island still remains as a genuine, if somewhat shrunken, gold-mine.

I only met Mr. Fisher once during my stay in Miami, as he spent most of his time in New York. He was not a product of the Florida land-boom, though that phenomenon had enormously increased his already far from inconsiderable millions. He had been, at the beginning of his career, a professional bicycle-rider; and being singularly successful in that direction, had amassed within a few years sufficient capital to open a bicycle shop of his own. His shop flourished enormously; it was then the heyday of bicycling, and Mr. Fisher's business had come in on the crest of the wave. It was within only a few years of opening his shop that he projected the great Indianapolis Speedway, the famous motor-racing track on the outskirts of Indianapolis in the State of Indiana. In this enterprise Mr. Fisher invested every cent which he had made in the bicycle business and every cent that he was able to borrow, and within a few years he had turned what then appeared to be an objectionable and fantastic absurdity into an enormously profitable reality. The Indianapolis Speedway was a colossal success, and very soon brought

Mr. Fisher a large fortune. This fortune he was not slow to invest in various new enterprises, mostly connected with the motor-trade which was then still in its infancy. And so it happened that, when several years later he was casting round for further wholesale speculations and discovered Miami Beach, he was able to set the ball rolling with a tremendous initial deposit of his own capital. Miami Beach became an undreamed-of success and returned its investments in uncountable measure; but Mr. Fisher did not lose his head. Perhaps it was owing to his living so much out of Florida that he was not so fatally affected by the Florida mania as most; but I believe it to be a fact that before the boom burst he had sold out practically all of his holdings there and invested the proceeds several thousand miles away in an enormous new development at Fort Washington on Long Island. He and George Merrick and the late D. P. Davis, who afterwards disappeared in such tragic circumstances from the liner "Berengaria" in mid-Atlantic, were at one time the uncrowned kings of Florida. Mr. Merrick was by a good deal the greatest of the three, but for sheer business genius Mr. Fisher was at least his equal and perhaps (as later events showed) his superior. But then Mr. Merrick loved Florida for its own sake, while I am inclined to think that Mr. Fisher loved Indianapolis or Miami Beach or Fort Washington, or anywhere else where he could make a fortune, about equally.

It was the success of Miami Beach that started various of the larger Florida developers in that passion for island-building which soon became one of the most remarkable features of the whole Florida boom. After Miami Beach

came Davis Islands, those very beautiful little settlements on the Mexican Gulf just outside the comparatively ancient City of Tampa; and almost simultaneously there sprang into being the first of that chain of Venetian Islands which it was at one time hoped would rank among the wonders of the world. The first two of them, being built in comparatively deep water up to fifteen feet even at low tide, presented engineering problems a good deal more serious than those encountered at Miami Beach; but these were surmounted completely successfully, and within a few months the lucky investors who had sponsored them had made fortunes. They were also quite definitely very beautiful indeed, and they remain still as one of the happiest monuments of those crazy years.

The islands of the D. P. Davis properties near Tampa were nothing to compare with the Venetian Islands as engineering triumphs, as the waters in which they were built were quite shallow and the tideways not nearly so formidable as on the East Coast. But as artistic creations they stood alone; Mr. Davis and his architects had somehow managed to attain an effect of natural and even rustic beauty that was unaccountably lacking in the Venetian Islands, and even in the wonderland of Miami Beach. Perhaps it was the older and less glaring style of Spanish architecture that he had adopted, and the more mellow colouring of old brick as against the dazzling whiteness of concrete and coral rock, that gave to Davis Islands that suggestion of peacefulness and age. Anyway, Davis Islands were utterly natural, utterly inconsequent; and especially when they were seen from the mainland in the early morning, lying in their setting

of absolutely motionless blue water with the misty haze of the horizon beyond, there was nothing quite to compare with them in the whole of Florida. And yet—such is life!—the popularity that Davis Islands enjoyed among northern visitors depended far more on Mr. Davis's acquisition of the syncopated dance-orchestra of Mr. Isham Jones than on any other and more inherent qualities of their own. It was the hotels and the amusements which mattered most, even in the Earthly Paradise of the south. And Mr. Isham Jones had certainly the best orchestra I ever heard, anyway.

This idea of island-building which Mr. Fisher began soon became a craze, and it lasted right up to the time of the first hurricane, and even afterwards. The geographical construction of Florida makes it ideal for this sort of enterprise; practically everywhere the shallow water runs right out to sea, and there are natural foundations of hard coral rock just below the surface. There was no particular reason why these islands should not have been built solidly round the coast, so long as the boom lasted, or why, in fact, the coast itself should not be pushed bodily out to sea, as indeed was practically the case in the area immediately adjoining Miami. And this speculation in island-building possessed an added lure from the fact that the latest island to be built, or at any rate the furthest out, had always the highest market value as being directly on to the open ocean. It was, moreover, a comparatively cheap form of enterprise as land-developments went, as there were excavations going on everywhere and all the necessary filling material was always to be obtained for next to nothing. The legal complications, on the other hand, were legion, and

were additionally complicated by the endless technicalities which had arisen in connection with the rights of individuals to purchase the bottom of the sea. More important still were the protests which came from owners of properties on the mainland who, after buying their allotments on the pardonable assumption that they would be able to command in perpetuity a wide stretch of water in front of their doors, were now confronted by great masses of land where no land was before. It was all very difficult, and there were endless wrangles in the law-courts as well as in the senatorial chambers of Tallahassee, the seat of the state government. But in practice the state almost always yielded to the claims of the island-builders, on the ground that the rateable area under its control was being increased; and the fantastic and the dramatic were always encouraged in Florida, anyway.

Practically all of the building that went on in Florida during the boom time, with the exception of a few of the larger hotels and office buildings, depended entirely on the local coral rock, which must surely be the finest constructional material that ever existed. A large part of the whole state was formed out of this rock, and it could be quarried so inexpensively as to make it far cheaper even than the lowest grades of local timber. When it is first taken out of the quarries it is comparatively soft; it can be shaped with an axe and cut with a hard saw, almost as though it were very tough cheese. After a few days in the air, however, it hardens to the consistency of concrete, and with every month that passes becomes harder still. Its colour is generally a whitish-grey, though sometimes it is a curious pink which is not

unattractive. The architects made good use of this Heaven-sent material, to such an extent that timber and brickwork were generally reduced to a minimum. The result of this was that practically all the boom buildings are likely to remain standing indefinitely, in curious contrast to those ply-board cities of the Middle West which within a few years had become only a memory.

It was rather unfortunate that the architectural restrictions of almost all the "ideal cities" tended to prevent the evolution of any essentially Floridian architectural tradition. Everywhere there were Italian villages, Spanish villages, Indian villages; and, while some of these were attractive enough in their way, they were in the main singularly disappointing. Personally, I should doubt whether any large agglomerations of buildings all following exactly the same architectural style could ever be perfectly satisfying. The Moorish watch-towers and the red roofs of Coral Gables were inclined to be more than a little overwhelming; and although in that city alone there were nearly a dozen areas confined to different architectural types, they were so large in themselves that the effect of variation from any one standpoint was generally lost.

The typical Florida house was built of white coral rock with a stuccoed exterior, and roofed with brilliant red or multi-coloured tiles. The whole effect, especially when it was set off as usual by brilliant sun-blinds and masses of tropical flowers, was for the most part dazzling and cheerful, and well in keeping with the unbroken blue of the sky and the no less blue sea that was usually somewhere in the background. There is some quality in the Florida soil that makes all its fresh water, even its shallow





SEA-GOING REAL ESTATE—THE PANCAKE-LIKE OBJECTS ARE UNPLANTED RECLAIMED ISLANDS



LOTS UNDER WATER RECLAIMED FROM THE SEA—FILLING OPERATIONS NEAR MIAMI



pools, extraordinarily vivid. The canals of Coral Gables and Boca Raton were sky-blue, and they created the most curious decorative effects especially in those places where they wound through green golf-courses or brilliant gardens. The result is bizarre and not unattractive, but I should imagine one would soon tire of it. I know that in Australia, where the colours are almost as brilliant and as vivid as they are in Florida, one longs for the grey skies of less favoured climes and for the blurred outlines of a misty day.

Nearly all Florida houses built during the boom were distinguished by a characteristic form of broad verandah of which the roof was supported on wide archways that gave the effect almost of cloisters. In the ordinary way such houses would have been uncomfortably dark, but in the intense sunshine of the south this was rather an advantage than otherwise. On the roof, generally in the centre, there would usually be another so-called verandah reached by an attic staircase, and used for sun-basking. The woodwork was invariably constructed from the local pine, and all the interiors were finished in self-coloured plaster. The workmanship, generally speaking, was poor; but considering that most of these houses were actually completed within four or five weeks of the laying of their foundations, the standard was a good deal higher than might have been expected. And there was hardly anything built that did not make at least some attempt, however misguided, to attain to some standard of architectural beauty.

The greatest architect working in Florida during the boom was quite undoubtedly Addison Mizner, the creator of Palm Beach and the presiding genius of Boca

Raton. The Everglades Club at Palm Beach is said to be the finest building of its kind in the United States, and I should say that this is not unlikely. Its graceful square tower has that perfection of proportion that is possessed, for instance, by the utterly different Magdalen tower at Oxford; it has that perfection which makes it impossible by some trick of the senses to form any accurate idea as to what may be its real size as judged by the arbitrary standards of height and breadth. It is always difficult to judge the height of any building that is so complete in itself, that requires nothing of its surroundings to make it stand out as being intrinsically a thing of rare beauty. It is difficult to explain what I mean, but to me this particular quality of elusiveness has always seemed to be a proof of perfection in architectural massing. To take an entirely different example, it is, I imagine, almost impossible for anyone to estimate without elaborate calculations what is the true height of the dome of St. Paul's. It is complete in itself; it stands there, an achievement of architectural genius in its own right, and cannot be expressed in such materialistic terms as are suggested by feet and inches.

Towards the end of the boom Addison Mizner's genius was almost wholly confined to Boca Raton, a city which shared with Coral Gables the reputation of being backed by fabulous millions. There were certainly a great many impressive names behind Boca Raton, and it was generally supposed that Addison Mizner had been given a free hand to do practically whatever he liked. In the result he did not do so very much, as the city was late in getting started; which was rather a pity, as there is no doubt that he was capable of very fine work indeed.

Addison Mizner's own house was being built at Boca Raton when I was there, and it was certainly a most extraordinary conception, and I should say one that might easily have developed into something genuinely beautiful. It completely covered a small island in the middle of a lake, and was approached by a drawbridge connecting with a long causeway to the mainland. It was planned to be an immense building in the style of an ancient Spanish castle, and one entered its inner recesses through a great semi-circular archway cut into the rock. The castle itself was in the shape of an L, the remainder of the island being devoted to a mysterious and exotic garden surrounded by high walls down to the water's edge. There was an immense keep at the eastern corner, destined to be surmounted by a still higher watch-tower, and this was connected with the entrance-tower by a broad arm of buildings containing the principal rooms of the house. On its other side, the keep opened out on to a suite of reception rooms and an immense ballroom, and on to Mr. Mizner's private wharf. The minimum cost of the actual building itself was said to be £200,000. There were extraordinary numbers of curious little galleries and hidden recesses, and the whole conception had about it something of that romantic mysticism that one is accustomed to associate with the Middle Ages. It was quite obviously this obsession for the mysterious and the romantic that was the main inspiration of all Mr. Mizner's work at this time. He loved to think of himself as a magician in a huge castle, terrifying and remote, whose secrets were known to no one and whose mysteries would remain for ever unplumbed. His was the sort of magic castle that

a child builds for itself out of the sofa-cushions and the chairs, a fairy palace for dragons and princesses and knights at arms. I believe there are many for whom Mr. Mizner's work presents an appeal greater than that of any other architect living, and I can well understand this feeling. One longs to explore every building of Mr. Mizner's, to probe its hidden secrets; one feels certain that even the most innocent-looking of his panels conceals darkened galleries and winding stairs.

For all that, it was Mr. Paul Chalfin, one of the architects of Coral Gables, who was responsible for one of the most definitely beautiful and certainly one of the most "mysterious" houses I have ever seen. This was the Villa Viscaya, the truly marvellous palace built for the late Mr. James Deering at Coconut Grove, to the south of Miami. The Deering Estate, enclosed behind its endless line of high, forbidding walls and dark trees, is generally regarded as being without any parallel at all in the United States, and personally I have never seen any more beautiful house of its kind anywhere in the world. The house itself, or rather the palace, is designed in the purest spirit of the Italian Renaissance; but the whole effect is somehow one of curious sadness, for all the perfection of its design. It may be that this impression was brought to me so strongly because I saw the house when it was unoccupied, and at a time when it was still closely associated with tragedy and mystery and death; but for whatever reason, even in the broad daylight of that summer afternoon, one felt that it was haunted. The great windows, with their blinds drawn, looked out across the marble terraces and fountained courts towards the glittering blue waters of Biscayne Bay; to the right

the immense formal Italian gardens, with their gems of statuary and brilliant flowers and peaceful lakes, stretched away into the distance; to the left the broad drive lost itself within a few yards in an impenetrable forest of bougainvillæas and magnolias and tall green trees that arched over it like a solid roof. Everything was extraordinarily quiet; even the passing cars, speeding along the famous "Millionaires' Row," were too far away to be heard from the house. I stood there on the terrace, and forgot that this was America; I was in a world apart, and this was another age, an age when the great nobility of Italy was secure in its pride and power and lived in such incredible palaces as these by inalienable right.

The Deering house and gardens cost over eight million dollars to build even long before the boom, but for all its suggestion of illimitable luxury and wealth the Villa Viscaya has subtly avoided that feeling of extravagance and ostentation to which its type lends itself only too easily. It belongs to another period altogether, to a period when a life of magnificence and luxury was the recognized heritage of the great. Mr. Deering had died in the October of 1925, and since his death the house had remained unoccupied; but already there were rumours of some other Cræsus who would revive its pomp and circumstance once more, and under whose flag that great steam-yacht lying idle in the bay would come gliding into its private harbour and moor alongside its marble quay. But I do not think that its atmosphere of mystery, and even of fear, could ever entirely pass away. There is something about its remoteness, about that long blank wall and that impenetrable line of dark woods shutting it away from the

common herd, that must always preserve for the Villa Viscaya a strange and sinister character of its own. There were weird tales told of the Villa Viscaya: of tunnels, running for miles under its impeccable courts and gardens, leading to strange little marble temples hidden in its deep woods; of secret harbours in the inaccessible jungles away to the south, reached by subterranean canals; of strange doings of which the world never knew. And Mr. Chalfin guards the secrets of the Villa Viscaya well. For many years the building of it occupied the whole of his life; but now, if you ask him, he has "forgotten." He will never remember them; because he loves this great creation of his too truly to show it to the world.