

CHAPTER XVII

IT was not until some four or five days later that I began to feel those first uneasy stirrings of doubt, at first only half-formulated, that I realize now to have been the as yet remote danger-signals of the panic that was to come in some three months' time. It is very difficult to describe the effect that these first dawning doubts had on me; and at first, in a way, I was more disturbed by my own lack of faith than by any other and more material consideration. The magic of the boom was still all about me; the hordes of speculators were still pouring south, frantic to spend money; the twenty-four hour shifts had been doubled at Coral Gables, and now great arc-lights swung on poles stretched out over the Biscayne swamps where an army of engineers worked day and night for that glorious moment when the Venetian waterways would at last be connected with the open ocean. An enormous pageant had been planned to celebrate the occasion; and I have before me now as I write an old copy of the "Miami Herald" containing the announcement, for which I was myself responsible.

In the beautiful setting of the Venetian Pool, Coral Gables, with mermaids and water-nymphs in attendance

and with music and shimmering lights wafting away the last vestiges of everyday reality, the most gorgeous pageant ever attempted in America will represent the meeting of the Spirit of the Ocean and the Spirit of the Bay.

And so on, with several thousand more words to the same effect. Gorgeously decorated barges would float along the canals, illuminated by coloured searchlights; three hundred Nubian slave-girls would rise through a fountain of coloured water to take their places beside the colossal figure of Father Neptune standing at the head of an electrified cascade; and (somewhat baldly) "The whole of the lyrics have already been written by Mrs. Dora Hood Jackson of Atlanta, Ga." Mrs. Dora Hood Jackson herself sat beside me at my desk in the Administration Offices while I drafted this announcement, and we worked late into the afternoon until I had to leave for dinner with my friend McGuire at Coconut Grove. It was a gloriously sunny day, and comparatively cool; and I remember it so well because it was the last day of that perfect and unquestioning faith in Florida and its future that I was to know. For four months I had been living in the most strange and fantastic dream I had ever known, and this was to be the end.

There was nothing unusual about that evening, except that it was a quieter one than most; and it was not until very much later that I realized, on looking back, that it had marked the end of an epoch. After dinner Mr. and Mrs. McGuire and I had sat talking on the verandah in the darkness, and later we had driven across to the Coral Gables Country Club to listen to the music of a

new dance-orchestra. We had joined a party there, and danced until about one o'clock; after which Mr. Percy W. Morningstar, the newly-appointed Assistant Recreational Director of the Coral Gables Corporation, had driven me back to Miami Beach while we discussed the arrangements for the official welcome of Mr. Paul Whiteman, due during the following week. Mr. Morningstar left me at the New York Hotel, and I went up to bed. It was a gloriously clear moonlight night; I stood for a little while by my bedroom window looking out over the sea, and marvelling that anything could be so beautiful. And that, as I have said, was the end.

I awoke suddenly on the following morning with the absolute certainty that something had gone wrong. Though it was still only six o'clock, there was already the promise of a very hot day, and the tops of the palm-trees outside my window were stirring restlessly in a gusty wind. I went down to the beach in my pyjamas for an early bathe, but the water was green and choppy and full of drifting sea-weed, and I came back sticky and unrefreshed. The conductor of the early tram across the causeway to Miami told me that he was going to get married next day; he had a lot at Fulford City, right down on the sea-front, that he could let me have at 2,000 dollars; it was a steal at twice the money, he told me, but he wanted the ready cash to take his wren to New York, and there it was. The conductor was an old friend, and asked me what I thought he should do to give the wren a good time. It appeared that he had only met her some two days previously, at the Beach Casino; but he had no qualms as to the future. We talked about this all the way across, and the steal at

Fulford City was forgotten. We shook hands when I got out at Flagler Street, and I never saw him again, so I suppose that everything went according to plan. I hope so; he told me he had everything he possessed in Fulford City, and when the crash came that was the first place to go.

When I arrived at Coral Gables, Mr. Yoder was full of the announcement of the building of a new hotel, and I was handed the usual mass of papers and sales-contracts from which to make out the fanfare for the press. It was, said Mr. Yoder, the biggest hotel yet, and worth at least two columns in all the locals and all we could get anywhere else. He left me to attend to something else, and I settled down at my desk to begin the morning's work.

It was not until I had been studying the papers for quite a long time that I suddenly realized that I just didn't believe in this hotel at all, and that, in spite of the definite statement of the promoters that the foundation-stone would be laid on New Year's Day, I was perfectly certain that the whole thing was utterly preposterous. "The Towers," it appeared, was going to cost nine million dollars. It would be built in the shape of a four-pointed star with the central wing 376 feet in length, and there would be 1,124 guest-rooms all of a standard of luxury hitherto unknown. It was to be primarily a resort for those of delicate constitution, and would contain, in addition to a private chapel, a private theatre, and a private bathing-beach, a complete hospital wing staffed by trained nurses and resident doctors and surgeons. There would be special dining-rooms maintained at various fixed temperatures for the benefit of

such gourmands as happened to suffer from varying degrees of blood-pressure. A private water-way fifteen feet deep would branch off the main canal system and open out into a lake adjoining one of the terraces of the main building, where there would be a special hotel wharf alongside which guests could moor their steam yachts and power boats. The lists of all these luxuries went on and on; and I didn't believe in any of them. And at the end of all the papers there was an architectural drawing of the hotel as it would appear when it was completed; extending, apparently, a frontage of nearly a quarter of a mile, and including an enormous glass pavilion in its grounds, a sort of miniature Crystal Palace, which the promoters had seemingly considered as too trivial to mention.

It was the first announcement in all the months that I had been at Coral Gables that had left me entirely unmoved. I took the papers back to Mr. Yoder, and told him so, adding that I felt perfectly certain that we would do more harm than good by making a splash of it.

"Why, what's biting you?" asked Mr. Yoder. "They're all good people behind it, aren't they? What's the trouble?"

But the trouble was that I had no reason in particular to distinguish this from any of the other thousands of schemes already going forward; so I went back to my desk and did the best with it that I could. But somehow the whole feeling of the place was different; something that was very faintly sinister seemed on that morning to have mingled with the air that drifted in through our windows from the dazzling whiteness of the Ponce de

Leon Boulevard. I was possessed with that indescribable feeling that it was all waiting for something; that all those glaring white houses with their coloured blinds, all those great cars lined along the sidewalks, even that great airy cathedral of an office in which I was at that moment working, were all moving, swiftly and silently, towards some inevitable end. I was beginning, I suppose, some little private panic of my own, though it was as yet only half-formulated, and remained so right up to the time when I left Florida. But I was several weeks in advance of the times; or else Mr. Yoder, if he were himself beginning to feel the same way already, was better at concealing his feelings than I was.

I went out to rather a dreary luncheon celebration to a deputation of "Women industrialists," whatever that might mean, who had arrived from Pittsburg on some mission which they evidently considered to be of the highest importance; and on returning to the office in the afternoon I learned that the announcement of the new extension to Coral Gables had been postponed for another week, as there had been some delay in completing the agreements. This, although on the face of it an ordinary happening enough, caused me now a renewed access of uneasiness, and I went round to consult with my partner as to its effect on the value of our option. His mood was not in the least in tune with my own; he laughed at the idea of anything having gone wrong, and offered to buy my share of the option himself. Rather reassured by this, I let the matter lie; but I didn't go dancing that evening as I had intended. I went out alone on Miami Beach, and ate Chili Con Carne as I used to do in the old days, and talked to a young Canadian

arrived that afternoon from London, Ontario, who insisted on standing me a drink on the strength of my home-town having the same name as his own.

A couple of days later I met my partner in the option again, and he was not quite so happy about it. He had no deep-seated doubts such as my own, but he was beginning to be concerned by rumours of further delays in the extension being completed seeing that we had now less than three weeks in which our deal would have to be closed. Some northern capitalist, said to be Mr. John McEntee Bowman of the Bowman-Biltmore Hotels, was supposed to be heavily involved in the new scheme and the rumour had gone round that he had left suddenly on a lightning trip to Europe and could not possibly be back inside eighteen days. It was impossible to find out any definite details or whether Mr. Bowman was in fact an essential figure in the deal at all; but talking it all over, we decided that as neither of us could afford to lose our deposit we had better quietly sell it within the next day or two for the best price we could get for it. It was a disappointing anti-climax to our dreams of a week ago, but we were neither of us—although for different reasons, my own being far the more vague—quite so happy as we had been before. Later in the afternoon he telephoned me saying that he had had an offer which would clear us out at 500 dollars loss, and that nobody seemed too keen about it, as the option was not long enough to cover the probable delay. So with rather a bad grace we decided to sell out and make up our losses in something else, and I then and there joined the up to then select few who had failed to make money out of a Florida land-deal.

As it happened, however, the announcement of Mr. Merrick's extension was issued on the very next day, so that if we had held on twenty-four hours longer we should have made a very large profit instead of a slight loss. Mr. Bowman, it appeared, had very little to do with it; and in any case the story of his having gone to Europe was all wrong, as he was expected at the Casa Loma Hotel by the afternoon train from New York. I felt a considerable fool, and had every reason to do so, and for a few hours after hearing the news I felt almost convinced that all my uneasy instincts were wrong, and that I was practically half-witted not to be piling up the money while everything was still going so well. Acting on this sudden and (as it happened) quite temporary reaction, on my way to the office I stopped at the building of the Miami Coliseum, Inc., a huge theatre-development company, the shares of which were supposed to be a gold-mine, and purchased almost without thinking a large block of them with a considerable part of the money that I had made ever since I had been in Florida. I paid cash down; the deal was completed there and then, and I went off with the scrip in my pocket. It was a completely fatuous move, and even before I had left the building the reaction had already set in, and I was bitterly regretting it. But it was too late to go back. So I went on to the office gloomily enough, to find the whole place in a ferment over the new announcement and masses of papers waiting for me to boil down for the press.

Even the bald details of Mr. Merrick's new scheme were staggering enough, but as they came to be expanded into flaring newspaper headlines they became almost

terrifying. I didn't exactly disbelieve in Mr. Merrick's promises; the spell of his personality was too great for that. I didn't exactly believe that all these huge developments would never come true; but I just couldn't cope with them. By comparison they made everything else that had been done in Florida utterly insignificant. And as I wrote there began to come over me now the first feelings of real panic and the instinctive certainty of impending and unimaginable disaster. I felt that the whole thing had suddenly crossed the border-line of sanity, and that we were entering into a world where nothing meant anything any more. Mr. Merrick, apparently, was proposing to blow up the whole of his sea-front, to dig-out a deep-water harbour and make a mountain out of the residue, to raise a vast chain of islands far out to sea connected with the mainland by a great arc of illuminated viaducts five miles in length, and to erect on them a whole series of hotels and casinos and palaces each one of which was to be the most magnificent of its kind ever built.

Scores of millions of dollars, covering a development project unapproached in size and imagination by any other that has ever been undertaken, will be expended in the Biscayne section alone in the carrying out of Mr. Merrick's scheme.

I wrote the announcement myself, but even as I wrote it meant nothing to me. The thing was too colossal to bring into focus; the pressure and the excitement which had kept me going during the last four months seemed suddenly to have gone, and I felt that we were

all madmen. I was tired out. The fire had died in me, and the moment when I first began to flog my typewriter into its highest panegyric of all was the moment when, with a sort of amazement at realizing that it was still possible, it burst on me that at any time I wanted I could catch the first train from Miami Station and go home.

We worked all day and late into the night; runners on motor-cycles kept us in touch with the local newspaper offices, and hour after hour our private wires to Pittsburg and Chicago and New York hummed with the news. That day, I think, I worked harder than I had ever worked before, harder even than on the night when Mr. Zeigen had disclosed his dreams for the University of Miami; but somehow I was apart from it all now. Something had broken inside me, and I was not a unit in that vast organization any more. I was helping, it was true; but I was helping from outside, and at any moment I could cut myself off from it all and could go back to my little room in Kensington five thousand miles away and sleep as I had never slept (or had ever wanted to sleep until now) since I had been in Coral Gables. I could imagine myself meeting my old friends again, and telling them about the extraordinary things that had happened since I had been away; they wouldn't believe them, and I knew already that I would hardly believe them myself when once I had left Florida behind me. Already I was feeling that Coral Gables was slipping behind me, that Florida, though I was in it still, was more remote than England. It was late now; and under the light outside my window I could see a dark-coated figure striding across the sidewalk and disappearing into a car. It was Mr. Merrick; and

I felt that in that instant I was saying good-bye to him.

The Coral Gables extension was blazoned forth throughout the United States on the following morning, and created so far as Florida was concerned a more than usual stir. Even for that hardened state, "Scores of millions of dollars" was a phrase not to be used lightly, and the Coral Gables extension, if it were anything even remotely approaching a reality, was recognized as being something a good deal larger than anything that had as yet been attempted. For several days the local papers at least could talk of nothing else, and it was not until the promoters of the Venetian Islands announced another development scarcely less colossal that the general tumult of argument and adulation which the Coral Gables scheme had aroused began to die down.

I read our rival's announcement of the Venetian Islands in bed on Sunday morning; but in my new mood I regarded it with a cold and professional eye, and it meant nothing to me one way or the other. Still, the Venetian publicity experts had certainly done their work well. They had poured out a torrent of language that apparently contained every known adjective in the English language, and a great many more that they had invented for the occasion besides. But if they had written a thousand times more rapturously still, they could not have made their booklet lying on my bed one hundredth part as interesting as the railway time-table that was even now under my pillow.

"It is difficult to portray in words just how magnificent this great project will be," exulted the booklet. "It will be just as difficult for the artist to spread upon the

canvas the splendid conception of their final magnificence; since they will stand alone in the annals of developmental work the world over, the culminating pinnacle of artistic and architectural genius." Under the modest title of the "Drive of the Campanile," the causeway connecting the fifteen principal islands would focus on Miami "International attention." In the centre of each of these islands there would be a superb tower in the Venetian style of architecture, and in each tower there would be a peal of bronze bells which would be rung at stated intervals all the way down Biscayne Bay. And the whole thing would cost "countless" millions of dollars, a wider but less definite adjective than my own "scores."

Well, it was all over; I was not interested any more. I was going away, to a land where dollars—whether "countless" or reckoned by "scores of millions"—would have no further significance for me. I pitched the booklet into the waste-paper basket, and went out into the early morning sunshine and down to the beach.