

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was two nights later, at a moment somewhere about 3 a.m., when I was lazily splashing about in the inky-black waters of the South Atlantic some quarter of a mile off-shore from Miami Beach, that I definitely decided that I would hand in my resignation on the very next morning. Across the breakwater from Miami, there had come borne the echo of a tug's siren, towing some empty freighter out to sea; and a few minutes later, beyond the end of the breakwater, I could see the little winking red-and-white lights of a tramp steamer standing up-channel for New York. The echo of a ship's siren, especially at night, is always vaguely disturbing; I had heard it, often enough, through the open windows of my bedroom at home, away over the housetops from where the Thames glided inkily under Chelsea Bridge past the silent trees of Battersea Park, the unwinking eye of Big Ben, the dark, oppressive silhouette of Somerset House. It had been an echo then of something that was not London at all; of vague, far-distant countries where the sun shone, of coral islands and palm-trees and wide sandy beaches where the surf broke lazily under glittering skies; and such dreams as these, on a summer's night in London, can

make even the most stay-at-home of us stir a little restlessly in our suddenly cramped beds. And yet when I heard that tug siren in Miami, and saw the little winking lights of the tramp steamer as she stood out to sea, it was not of coral islands at all that I was thinking, but of the cold, fretting estuary at Tilbury and the fog-shrouded arc-lights of Piccadilly. And suddenly I knew that I couldn't possibly stay away from England any longer; that my time was up, and that I would go home.

My decision to leave was taken as a conclusive proof of sheer, stark insanity. "Ain't you makin' more cash than you've ever made in your sweet life?" I was asked. "Then why th' hell. . . ." And so on. "Say! Ain't the climate back your way like a muck-pit?" I was asked. "No use argufying wid an egg-head," said the proprietor of the Miami Beach coffee stall, who had followed my fortunes with some interest. "Guy bums off from here—why, I'll tell the cock-eyed world he's a gazoob!" And so he may have been. But for all that, as I went down to the steamship offices that afternoon to book a passage to New York—I had decided against the railroad—I could have sworn that I was the best gazoob in America.

The steamship company officials were not particularly enthusiastic. "Fifty bucks to one-seven-five," said the clerk on the other side of the railings, to my inquiry as to the fare; and when I said that something between eighty and a hundred was about my level, he spat contemptuously into a waste-paper basket and remarked to a colleague that another of them cheap bums had come strutting their stuff. There was a brisk interchange, and half an hour later I had booked by rail after all.

My shares in the Miami Coliseum were now my only difficulty, but I disposed of them easily enough, for rather more than I had given for them, to a man whom I had known slightly for some months, and who was and still is a well-known figure in the world of sport. He shall, further than this, remain nameless. I sold them on the afternoon of the evening that I left, and foolishly enough—as he had not a cheque-book with him at the moment—I handed over the certificates in advance and made arrangements for the money to be forwarded to me in New York the next day. I never saw or heard from him again, nor did I ever see or hear of his money. It was to me a considerable sum, but he was at that time at least a rich man and I have no doubt could have paid it easily. It was a bitter blow for me on my last day in the south, even though I did not begin to realize it until two days later when I was already in New York.

I had made a great many friends in Florida, and I parted from them with real regret. It is highly unlikely, I imagine, that I shall ever see any of them again even if fate should carry me back to Florida within the immediate future, which at the present time seems about as unlikely a contingency as possible. Things moved rapidly in Florida in those days; it is nearly five years since I left there, and I was myself among the "oldest inhabitants" after only five months. But for all its beauty, for all its magic, for all its incredible achievements, I parted from Florida itself without regret. I can quite realize what such a country might mean to others; its appeal, if one felt it at all, might well prove irresistible. I can understand, even, how there might well be those who could find in its sunshine and its beaches, its warm sea and its

brilliantly coloured trees, something that could make it home. But in my own case even my last glimpse of Coral Gables, as the tower of the Miami-Biltmore died away among the palm-trees and our crazy little Ford swung out of the great Ponce de Leon Boulevard on to the prosaic tramlines of Flagler Street, brought no regret so poignant as that I should never be able to watch the meteoric career of Mr. Merrick to triumph or disaster or that I should never see any of my friends there again. To me it was the personalities of the boom that were so intensely interesting; the boom itself, by comparison, was nothing. I could leave the idyllic beauties of Miami Beach, the splendour of Coral Gables, the shimmering peacefulness of Tampa in the early dawn, almost without a pang. They were all very wonderful; but they were not, as I knew now, for me. But I did want to know whether my street-car conductor ever married his wren and followed out my programme for giving her a good time on the proceeds of Fulford City, or whether "Art" of the New York Hotel ever succeeded, as he was always vaguely planning to do, in running some sort of complicated combination of a dance-hall and real-estate agency; I never quite understood how. But these little unfinished stories are the common property of all travellers everywhere.

I had eaten my last dinner at the restaurant on Miami Beach, I had said good-bye to my very good friends at the New York Hotel, I had crossed the causeway to Miami for the last time and had seen those glittering lights of the Fleetwood Hotel winking out at me across the water. I was standing on the platform of the Florida East Coast Station; my two suit-cases had already been

safely stowed in the Pullman, and I was taking my last look at the distant sky-scrapers, the myriad lights, the sweating jostling crowds that made up the Bedlam that was Miami. A mass of people, like a swarm of bees, was gradually collecting at the further end of the platform, and I wandered along and joined them. They were waiting for a train from New York; an afternoon train, seven hours late, that had just been signalled from Hollywood. Fresh victims, fresh grist for the mill! After a little while, the flickering headlamps of the engine could be made out in the distance; the crowd seethed and swayed forward, overboiling on to the line. Angry porters rushed forwards, shouting and pushing them back. "Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! . . ."

Slowly, with an immense outpouring of steam, the train was drawing into the station. . . . Now then, boys—all together! "Mi-am-am-am-ee-ee-ee. Shore-haw-haw-haws! . . ." White, dishevelled, scared faces looking out of the windows, blackened with soot and two days' beards; fat, perspiring men with suit-cases, climbing down the steps and shouting greetings; a pale, miserable youth, standing alone with a carpet-bag, down from Kansas or Wyoming to pick the gold out of the gutters. . . . Well, well, *I* had been through it all—*I* had been one of that crowd, long ago! I felt tremendously old, tremendously worldly-wise. Did *any* of these people know what they were doing—could *any* of them see even an inch beyond their own affairs, realize what hopelessly inconspicuous, enormously unimportant atoms they were in that great surging sea that was modern America? And suddenly it was borne in on me that I did not understand these people at all;

that those hearty, sweating men struggling about me on the platform, that overawed, frightened adventurer from Wyoming mounting indecisive guard over his carpet-bag, were so remote from me as to belong almost to another world. I was alone in America; I did not feel old or worldly-wise in the least now; I wanted to get home. I struggled out of the crowd by the gate, and walked rapidly back towards the far end of the platform where the night train was waiting. It was very stuffy and very quiet inside the Pullman; the man in the bunk underneath mine was unpacking, pulling out a pair of pink silk pyjamas. I climbed into my berth and lay there under the little electric light, reading the Saturday "Evening Post."

I was frightfully cramped and stiff; I sat up suddenly, rubbing my eyes, and knocked my head against the roof. Everything seemed to be moving about; there was a roaring, droning sound—why, the train had started! I must have been asleep! I pulled back the curtains and peered out into the deserted corridor. Underneath me I could hear the man in the pink silk pyjamas snoring. I climbed cautiously down, and made my way along to the swaying, crashing little gallery at the end of the compartment. Through an open doorway into a pantry I could see a negro porter in a white jacket, asleep. Everybody, behind those mysterious dark green curtains, seemed to be snoring; there was no other sign of human habitation, though I knew the train was full.

It was a very dark night; through the window of the gallery I could make out nothing except that we were travelling very fast, between endless lines of pine-trees.

There were no lights—Miami had disappeared utterly and absolutely, swallowed up in the night. A long way ahead, infinitely remote, there came wafted to me that mournful wail three times repeated that signals the approach to a level crossing, and a few seconds later we had crossed it over a rattle of points and left it behind. I looked back; and there, drawn up to let us pass, their headlights glaring on the trunks of the pine-trees, was a little crowd of automobiles southbound towards Miami. They moved off like glow-worms as I watched them, and disappeared among the trees; and the train roared on, crashing and swaying, towards the icy winds of the north and to the boat that was waiting, even already, to carry me to London.

THE END

