

CHAPTER VII

COCONUT GROVE

WITHIN ten minutes of my arrival at Miami I had several surprises. My host stopped at a store to buy a siphon of gas. "Gas?" I queried, as the chauffeur came out with a thing that looked like a small oxygen cylinder.

"Do you mean gas, or gasolene, or oxygen?" I asked, as the chauffeur deposited the cylinder in the car.

"Gas, natural gas, for cooking," replied my host, smiling. "It's 'bottled' as it comes out of the earth."

"But how do you use it—isn't it dangerous?"

"Not at all. You've seen oxygen cylinders? Well, we feed it into the gas oven in the same way, by turning a tap."

"And it's natural gas—taken straight out of the earth?"

"Quite natural."

The car started, I sat back. But something else made me ask another question.

"Just now your chauffeur put a coin into a machine standing by the kerb. Was he buying chewing-gum?"

"No—he was reducing the rates."

I looked puzzled, and my host explained.

"He was putting a nickel in the park-o-meter. You pay five cents for twenty minutes if you want to halt your car in the main streets. It checks congestion, stops you leaving your car indefinitely, and helps the city's revenue. The

park-o-meter company pays a yearly sum for the right to erect their meters."

"And the visitors pay the rates!"

"Part of them. We have to live on our visitors—we've got no income-tax."

"What!" I exclaimed.

"No income tax and no inheritance tax."

"I wonder the whole world doesn't migrate here."

"It will do one day. It's getting like that now in winter."

I saw it was. The streets were congested, both on road and pavement. Dearness of building space was forcing buildings up into the sky, as in New York, though the American needs no real inducement to Babelism. It is fitting he should build the world's largest telescope, for he is always probing into the sky, as if anxious to get off the earth.

We were now across the bridge, and out of the city, and began to run along a wide boulevard, divided by a magnificent line of poinciana trees, not yet in scarlet bloom. On either side of the boulevard the homes of the sun seekers, in gardens shady with palms, and ablaze with flowers, gave a Mediterranean note to the scene. On the left, not far away, one glimpsed the azure bay. There were six miles of this suburb running through the flat leafy land, leading to Coconut Grove. Some two or three miles along our route we stopped at a wayside station—for gasolene this time. Again I was puzzled. The chauffeur lowered his window and gave the pump attendant what looked like a Yale key.

"Was that a Yale key?" I asked.

"Yes—for the gasolene tank."

"You have a lock on it—you don't trust your chauffeur?"

I asked, thinking of those occasions on which I had seen the family servant receive the keys of the spirit cabinet.

"Oh, yes—we'd trust Moses with anything. It's the gasoline gangsters we have to protect ourselves from. If you leave your tank unlocked, they come round and siphon it empty."

The car started. I sat back again. Already my mind was saturated with new impressions, and since these are the real joys of travel, I felt a growing satisfaction with this adventure. When there are no more questions to be asked I shall be ready for the Long Silence.

We were now passing the house of a gentleman with innumerable millions who had lately died. His immense estate spread on either side of the main boulevard, and the stone walls, carved and scalloped, were surmounted by endless festoons of ramblers and creepers. Within the immense gardens stood a palace of pillared splendour, crammed with such treasures gathered from the Old World that the mind grew dizzy under the fabulous story of one man's wealth, derived from selling ploughs and reapers to farmers. Eccentricity invaded the social as well as the territorial habits of this Nabob from the North. There were occasions when the great gates were locked fast against neighbours and all the outside world. A special train transported from New York the complete chorus of the Ziegfeld Follies for the sole entertainment of the secluded sybarite. For a week or more they brought to a garden that Haroun-al-Raschid would have envied an American Night's Entertainment. As my host humorously observed, the gentleman probably improved on his neighbours; the Follies certainly weren't ugly, and not dull!

I think there must have been a mile of these festooned

walls bordering each side of the wide boulevard, but there was something amiss. Trees looked as if mastodons had taken mouthfuls out of their green tops, the palm trees appeared to have been plucked, great gaps appeared in the festoons of American Pillar, trailed from post to post. It was as though something had hit the whole estate.

Something had. It was the September hurricane. I was to hear more of that hurricane; I was to see its savage track of destruction wherever I went. Not unnaturally the Miamian and all the proud possessors of southern Florida land are ever ready to minimise the ruthless ravager of their earthly paradise, but as they point out, in the true spirit of hospitality, the hurricane never comes when the visitors come. There is a close season, honourably observed. It is commemorated in the jingle known to all Floridians—

July—stand by.

August—look out you must.

September—remember.

October—all over.

Remembrances of this September hurricane were everywhere. Again and again I commented on a sad gap in the garden, a devastated plantation, a cracked wall, a dismembered oak tree, or tall palms lying like skittles knocked over by playful giants, and houses with their tiles torn off, as though an impatient child had suddenly swept over its brick playthings. Everywhere there remained, four months afterwards, the evidence of the unruly blackguard and looter who had swept down in a few hours on a well-ordered community and reduced to a tangle of brushwood a garden landscape that had cost millions, and the ceaseless labour of proud landowners. But, says the cheerful Floridian, it isn't

too bad, and it should only happen once in five or ten years.

As for Nature, so ruthless in her moods, it must be said for her that she works overtime in repairing her damage to the scene. Everything grows furiously, and though uprooted trees are fallen for ever, except for the rescuing hand of man, a few months after the devastation Nature covers up the scars with a prolific growth.

"That was a bad hurricane," said my host. "I was visiting my wife in hospital, down on Miami Beach, when a warning came from the radio station that a hurricane was bearing down upon us at a rate of two hundred miles an hour. The barometer fell rapidly. In the hospital they wheeled all the beds into the corridors. A good thing too, as it happened, for when the hurricane struck us the outer rooms were streaming with water."

"What, with the windows closed?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, it siphons itself in, in horizontal jets through the cracks. The wind'll make a vacuum on one side of the building, and even if your windows aren't sucked out, the water on the other side is sucked in."

That was as much as I heard on my journey to Coconut Grove, but later I was to hear more stories of that September hurricane.

We had arrived at a wide flat field on the side of the bay. Enormous hangars told me it was an aerodrome. Near the water the Pan-American Airways had built a large establishment with booking office, restaurant, bar, and, on the first storey, an outside balcony running round the building which made a splendid lookout platform. One side looked landwards, three sides seawards.

I came to know that aerodrome very well. It was rightly

considered one of the entertainments of Miami, with its luxurious flying clipper ships, some holding forty passengers. On that balcony, with a wide expanse of the Biscayne Bay before us, and the low shore line of Florida stretching to infinity, we watched the great hydroplanes arriving from Nassau in the Bahamas, two hours away, from Cuba in Havana, two and a half hours south, Kingston in Jamaica nine hours away, and from Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, the Argentine, and Uruguay. Others came in from Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and Brazil. It was a vivid demonstration of the shrinking of the earth.

And how lovely was that calm evening light, the deepening crimson over azure water and green land, with the great masses of snowy cumuli towering up into the vivid blue heavens! Away on that deepening horizon, where the mauve flood of eventide began to fuse into the indigo of night, a small bird seemed to be winging towards us. Was it a bird? Even as it grew we wondered, and then the un-deviating course of its flight confirmed our speculation. It grew and grew, a grey form against the light sky, wingless as yet, but becoming more defined with every second's passing. It was the hydroplane from Havana, due at 5.15 p.m. A few minutes, and the small bird was swooping like an eagle, to break the mirror calm of the sea, and then to come to rest.

Day after day we could have set our watches by the timed precision of that arrival. Then, the last of the homing birds having been led to their roosting sheds, the spectators on the balcony melted away in the swift-falling tropical dusk. Overhead the sky was still light, but all around, through the palm trees and the dense undergrowth, burned a crimson fire that lit even our faces with its lurid glow.

I was to live for six weeks almost on the edge of this great aerodrome, to hear at breakfast and at evening the reverberating drone of these amphibians. Never did their pulsation beat upon my ears without awakening a swift vision of the lands and seas whence they had come: of the blue Caribbean and the Spanish Main, of Mexico's uplands, of dense Amazonian forests, and Peru's long coast-line.

"We are now running along Millionaires Row, and in a few minutes we shall be at Coconut Grove," said my host.

As its name denoted, no poor men lived in these luxurious houses set behind their drives of royal palms, embowered in gardens of tropical brilliance. The gardens of Schönbrunn, of the Villa d'Este, of Tivoli, La Mortola, Cintra, and Isola Bella, one after the other came to mind as I glimpsed a high belvedere, a palm-girt grotto, a balustraded terrace of dolphin fountains, Tuscan-tiled loggias, vine-shaded pergolas, and mansions whose stone windows revealed the arabesques of Spanish, the pointed arches of Venetian-Gothic, or the severer crenellated brickwork of Florentine architecture.

It was a jumble, but in the vividness of the setting sun it all had the gaiety and excitement that the multi-coloured masquerade of a circus achieves under the transmuting limelight. Each of these houses, set upon the slight eminence so valued in a land of monotonous flatness, commanded a sea-view, and possessed within its own estate a yacht harbour. When, later, I visited some of these houses I learned that many of their inhabitants made the Florida journey from the North, some fifteen hundred miles or more, in their own yachts, proceeding often by an inland route. Here indeed was a yachtsman's paradise, with calm bays and long reaches of water protected by the lidos and

reefs, or punctuated by the many Keys, terminating in Key West.

As for the fisherman, his renowned capacity for lying can find no exercise here. Size, shape, colour, and characteristics beggar description: the mammoth sporting tarpon, a ten-foot leaper with scales as big as a saucer, the vicious limb-snapping barracuda, compared with whom the shark is a gentleman, the seven-foot sailfish, with an upper fin the size of a bath towel—these are a few of six hundred varieties.

I could never get excited about fish, from goggle-eyed goldfish to sporting whales, and my conception of Hell is fulfilled in the octopus, which, in nursery days, had far more horror for me than the everlasting fire, in which one obviously could not be everlastingly consumed. But the fish I saw in Florida brought me nearer to an understanding of the low excitability temperature of fishermen. Here fishing seems a sport, while elsewhere it seems a catalepsy.

A little beyond Millionaires Row we suddenly came upon a church that appeared to have been transported from Assisi to this Gold Coast, with its Italian pantiles, its peristyle, its rotunda surmounting a Palladian façade. In the brilliant sunshine I had a moment's sense of the saint's hillside town. Large lettering in front of this building confirmed that it was a temple indeed, but Methodist Episcopal, and dedicated neither to Our Lady nor St. Francis, but to the memory of William Jennings Bryan.

The sonorous eloquence of this rhetorician had sustained the Fundamentalists in a famous trial at Dayton, Tennessee, when a schoolteacher had been arrested for daring to doubt the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. Bryan defeated the forces of modernism, secured the con-

viction of the too-enlightened schoolteacher, and was only just prevented from delivering a complete refutation of Darwin. The spectacle of the United States aroused to feverish excitement over a humble schoolteacher's doubt of the Adam and Eve version of our origin, and the briefing of this redoubtable 'spell-binder,' raised a superior smile on the face of the Englishman. But a little later he provided the extraordinary spectacle of his own countrymen working themselves into a passion, with a full-dress House of Commons debate, over the proposal to modernise the Prayer Book. One of the chief protagonists of that fierce battle showed such skill in spiking his opponents' guns, that later he was selected as the most suitable person to co-ordinate the British defence forces!

William Jennings Bryan's attack on the presumptuous Darwinian monkey exhausted him. At the conclusion of the trial in Dayton he was taken ill there and died, bringing to a conclusion the career of an irrepressible orator. His peak of sensation was achieved in a campaign for bimetallism that produced the startling challenge, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labour this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

In 1921, his arduous career almost over, he bought himself a plot of land at Coconut Grove, and gave the site for the Assisian memorial church I now beheld. He had great faith in Florida, and during the boom placed his eloquence, daily, for a fee, at the disposal of the promoters of Coral Gables, the most ambitious of all the soaring Utopias of sunshine, stucco, and gullibility.

A few more yards and we had arrived at my host's house. It lay up a drive that was like a triumphal arch. Coconut palms, high royal palms, hedges of hibiscus, and banks of

crimson bougainvillæa masked houses of Italian and Spanish design that lay deep in tropical gardens. I stared at a curious tree, a giant, that dropped smooth tentacles to the ground and had the sinister air of an octopus on the march. This, I learned, was one of Florida's many remarkable trees. It was the banyan.

One might well say 'Beware of the banyan.' It will sprout from a seed dropped on the limb of any tree by a bird. Then slowly its roots will drop down to the soil, and in time they will kill the tree from which they grow. The branches of the banyan in time throw down supports, so that the old branches look like cripples on crutches, and the crutches themselves take root as soon as they touch the ground, enlarge into trunks and throw out new branches. The tree, therefore, begins to walk, eating up more and more ground. The banyan that greeted us at the beginning of the drive was already a huge specimen.

And here at last was my Florida home for the next six weeks. The car stopped, I followed a short, flagged path to the iron grille door of a flat-topped house whose walls could not be seen for the thick growth of creepers over them. All the windows and the door, I noticed, were netted. So the mosquito had to be shut out. This was the first drawback in paradise, I surmised. It proved that I was wrong. The mosquito obligingly waits until the winter visitors have departed before starting its bloodsucking business.

The grille door opened, and we passed through an entrance hall into the inner well of the house, a stone-paved patio. The three enclosing walls were some thirty feet high, and the top was glassed in, with large palm leaves laid across the glass to keep the patio shady. The upper parts of the wall on either side supported columns that carried the

roof, loggia fashion, and these arcades, with a surrounding gallery, were open to the air except for mosquito screens. The centre wall had a stone staircase running down from a gallery which gave access to the bedrooms. Opposite the staircase the patio opened on to the garden, with a vista of palm trees, rockery, a long pool, and green grass with flowering fruit trees and shrubs.

The southern Florida home generally follows this model—a patio in the centre, the rooms surrounding it on three sides, with one side, also screened, open to the sky. It provides a cool courtyard in which to sit, and while according the maximum privacy, offers a free prospect of the garden.

My new home was lovely in many respects, with its beautiful arched loggia, its large drawing-room with Spanish tiled floor and cedar-timbered ceiling, but the patio was the most attractive feature. It looked on to a garden fountain whose silver tinkle was most pleasant in the heat of the day. It abounded with flowers, in pots, and along the edge of one upper wall. Entwining the pillars there was a glorious *rosa montana*, a coral vine that seemed aflame where it caught the sun. And in this brilliant patio, with its green vista, there was added to the tinkle of the fountain the sound of birds, the whirr of wings, a cooing of doves, and the full-throated singing of canaries in the adjoining aviary.

The house was largely built of coral limestone. This, when cut, is soft and pliable, but after exposure to the air it hardens to a granite firmness. It has a beautiful light-brown surface texture, and bears the fossilised impress of the coral insect. A stone so mellow enables the Florida house to attain a richness never garish, and it has been utilised by the sculptor and the architect with enchanting effect. A white stone

or marble in this sharp, vivid atmosphere would have offended the eye and have been too conspicuous in the level landscape, but the coral limestone starts with a patina that perfectly accords with the vivid scene.

One side of my new home had a long swimming pool adjacent, into which one stepped from the dining-room. Here again Nature had thoughtfully provided the perfect adjunct of a life passed in sunshine. The water was a light blue in colour, which at first I thought was due to tiles at the base of the pool, but the water possessed this natural colour. It came from a spring whose unfailing flow produced water of exactly seventy degrees Fahr. The whole pool could be filled overnight, and in summer, when the heat made a lower temperature desirable, my host floated blocks of ice in the water.

How delightful it was to come down every morning from the gallery into the song-filled patio, with sunshine drawing out the colours of the bougainvillæa, azaleas, and hibiscus, to pass out to the sparkling pool, and to float in that crystalline-blue water while overhead stretched the canopy of a cloudless sky. But even more delightful was it, towards midnight, to plunge into that warm pool, scintillating with moonlight on its rippled surface, and to scent as one swam, with the indefinable sounds of the tropical night around one, the orange blossom, whose petals had fallen from the bordering tree on to the water.

At one end of the pool there was a pergola covered with thurnbergia in blue flower, which shaded us by day, and where, by night, we talked in the warm air while the fireflies intermittently signalled through the darkness. All around there was a greenness that one felt; in that warm night one had an awareness that made the senses alert, so



LOGGIA AT COCONUT GROVE



THE HOUSE AT COCONUT GROVE



THE HOUSE AT ORLANDO



A CANAL AT MIAMI BEACH

that even the distant stars, so bright in the clear heavens, seemed to have relationship with this fecund earth.

It is a feature of the tropical night that life is not quiescent, as in a northern clime. A summer night in England has a suggestion of widespread somnolence, the leaves, the flowers, the woods, as well as birds and animals, have gone to rest and the soft moonlight is but a soundless accompaniment to quiescent beauty. Not so in this Florida garden. The moon illumines a scene in which, more by sense than perception, one is aware of a stealthy but determined activity.

How often, listening under that pergola, while a tide of perfume from unseen blossom came and went on the languid air, was I conscious of being in the midst of immense activity, a sense which drew not a little of its awareness from the knowledge that even at the garden's edge the primitive jungle awaited, and would come back once the hand of man failed in its incessant labour. The cry of a strange bird, the whirr of wings, the flitting shape of an insect, the voices that broke and were stilled again in the dark thicket, or down in the pond where a massive lotus rose from the water to bloom itself to death, the croaking of frogs—all these things made the night sentient as nowhere else. Imagination, doubtless, played its part, but a darkness so warm, so breathing, meant here, not rest, but a mysterious continuation of the forces of life.

I came to know that garden with its orange, lemon, and lime trees, with bright pink oleanders, with the Turk's Head of the closed hibiscus, the green Japanese tree, the pithacolobium, the eucalyptus with its white trunk, the coconut palms, the banana tree, and all the unknown, unnamable host whose exotic beauty greeted us at every turn. And all

this had been created in a few years from a jungle of coarse palmetto scrub which flourished on this hard limestone rock with scarcely any subsoil.

In England we make a garden mostly by conquest of a field, by dispossessing weeds from a rich earth responsive to labour. Never far away is the pattern formed by generations of gardeners, learned and certain of reward in the long tradition of their calling. But here, in Florida, man had to be a pioneer, subduing a land wild and fierce, where the turbulent forces of disorder, drawing reinforcements continually from the hot sun and the jungle, fought him at every step, and triumphed at the slightest weakening of vigilance. The sun, so potent in the tropics, is at once the forcing house and the destroyer. Meat and drought destroy and check the prodigality of Nature; the ranker growths choke down into a fetid, viscid swamp the weaker plants.

All this must be changed by man. The rains of Heaven have no certainty here, and the irrigation pipe must underlie the garden that is to endure. But first, as with this garden, before it becomes a paradise long preparation must be made. The tentacular banyan tree must be uprooted, the surface cleared of the coarse palmetto which presents a thousand sword-blades to the pioneer, and then the ground must be scarified, the coral rock blasted, and a top dressing of earth prepared. If palm trees are to be planted, deep holes must be blasted in the rock.

I have often thought that in the whole range of horticulture there remains one crowning achievement of the gardener's lore, so simple in itself, so wholly rewarding in its effect—the growing of green grass and the making of the perfect lawn. Whenever I think of England's beauty, foremost of all ranks the sweep of level lawn, seen before an

elm-girt vicarage, or in the quadrangle of an old college, and seen in all its shining beauty in the month of May.

*No white nor red was ever seen
So amorous as this lovely green.*

Green grass, the lawn, before it the rarest orchid is cloying and incapable of that tranquillisation of our spirits.

*Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.*

But the lawn as we know it in England cannot exist in Florida. With heavy expenditure, constant irrigation, and incessant cultivation a lawn such as is common in England may occasionally be achieved. A millionaire publisher bought Florida's only respectable hill near Lake Wales, erected a carillon tower, and made two artificial lakes in a garden. The garden is situated on the peak of Iron Mountain, which is not a mountain but a sandhill. Here Edward Bok planned his memorial. "The Singing Tower" as it is called, some two hundred feet high, tapering from a base of fifty-one feet wide to an octagonal top thirty-seven feet wide, is built of Georgia pink marble and Florida coquina rock, and is elaborately carved. At the bottom of the Tower there are heavy golden bronze doors with twenty-four hand-carved panels. The whole effect is supposed to be ravishingly beautiful. It seemed to me garish, an ice-cream confection, over-coloured, over-sweet. The Tower contains a carillon for which a master-carillonneur was imported from Bruges. In it Edward Bok built himself an elaborate private room with an electric attachment for playing the carillon in event of the bellmaster's absence. He also arranged to be buried in a crypt in front of the carved doors.

As for carillons, they leave me cold. This kind of music makes nothing but a disagreeable impression on my ears. Bells at a subduing distance can be lovely, but for the few they enchant, to many they are something of a torture. All carillons have the appalling trick, when playing tunes, of suddenly striking a wrong note, like a novice at the piano.

But whatever one may feel about this carillon tower, eccentrically embellished, and I am of a minority swamped by an ecstatic chorus, the garden which the millionaire donor planned on the top of this hill in the centre of the vast Florida plain is exquisite. It has all the richness of a tropical garden, full of exotic blooms, but it is essentially English in lay-out and effect. There are green swards, well-grouped bushes, noble trees, and a profusion of flowers. It is a marvellous achievement considering that there was nothing here but a waterless sandhill, and that now it is a leafy sanctuary for thousands of birds, who range from the nightingales that sing in its trees to the flamingoes that wade in its lakes.

Yet notable and lovely as the garden is, with its exotic blooms, its masses of azaleas, lilies, and roses, the one feature, *in excelsis*, is its grass. I never recall seeing grass more green, more luminous in its cool beauty, than that which met my eyes on approaching the sanctuary on a March day. It was grass of a perfection that would match an Oxford lawn. Perhaps it drew an enhanced beauty from its juxtaposition with harder colouring, with the verdureless nature of a landscape which is coarse and prolific, or, cultivated, brilliant but without atmosphere.

My host's garden had not, of course, a lawn like that I saw later at Mountain Lake Sanctuary. The ordinary gardener in Florida must be content with one of four varieties

that flourish in a cultivated soil. My host's lawn was of St. Augustine grass, a coarse, thick-growing herb that covers the ground like a small plaintain and gives a matted covering capable of withstanding heat and long spells of drought. Golf courses, requiring lawns of finer quality, use Bermuda grass. There are two other grasses, I noticed, in use: diandra grass, quick, hard growing with a clover-leaf, and Italian rye grass. This latter is brilliant in colour, very fine in texture, almost like green hair, and grows in a week. But, alas! its very fineness of quality and quick growth make it only suitable for show purposes. If trodden on it will die in a week also; it is a bad 'carpet' and has no wearing quality.