

## CHAPTER IX

### MANGROVES, MUD, AND MILLIONAIRES

#### I

MIAMI the city, and Miami the Beach, have distinct characters. They are connected by three bridges some four miles long, one of which rejoices in the name of the Venetian Causeway. Like the new causeway at Venice, it is made of concrete, and designed chiefly for motor traffic, and it also crosses a lagoon of blue water. But here the resemblance ends. One causeway connects a mainland with a city fifteen hundred years old, the other connects a city fifty years old with an island that in the last thirty years has been created by sucking mud out of the lagoon and converting a mangrove swamp into a holiday resort.

The mangrove might be said to be the foundation of Florida real estate. There was a time during the famous boom when hundreds of acres of mangrove swamp, without the mud superimposed, were sold at prodigious prices to the 'suckers' who bought, at a distance, 'paradises' to which triumphal arches, of pink stucco in fanciful baroque shapes, gave entrance.

The mangrove is a species of shrub abounding along the shores and in the waters of Florida. It is somewhat spiderish, for it throws out long legs that dip downwards into the swamp. At its roots the soil and mud collect, brought in by

the waves or created by fallen leaves. In the course of time great areas are thus covered and become a foundation rising out of the water. Little by little men are draining and filling in these mangrove swamps which cover Florida for hundreds of miles, and what were once regarded as quite useless acres are being filled in with a top soil or with pumped-up sand, and turned into very valuable land.

A frontage on Miami Beach, created from the mangrove swamp, now costs one thousand dollars a foot. Miami Beach itself, covered with hotels-de-luxe and magnificent private villas, is now criss-crossed with streets, and extend lengthways for some fifteen miles along a broad avenue. When land gets too scarce, another island is sucked up out of the lagoon, which is really a backwater of Biscayne Bay.

The south end of Miami Beach degenerates into a ghetto, the north end accommodates what is known as the wrench-and-screw aristocracy—the automobile millionaires, builders of engines, and makers of tyres, who work in Detroit and play in Miami. How much they spend may be gauged from the shops in Lincoln Road, a Bond Street-cum-Fifth Avenue-cum-Rue de La Paix that crosses the island. Here my lady can spend in twenty minutes, in tropical sunshine, all that her husband's ten thousand employees earn amid the snow and ice of the North.

## II

Let us look at what man has made out of mangrove swamps. My host wished to show me America's popular winter playground, for if you are exclusive you will stay at Palm Beach and only come to Miami for the races or a tonic vulgarity.

We are calling at the Surf Club and lunching at the Bath

Club. The former came into being because the latter sniffed at the Jewish friend of a member, who wished to join, and the Bath Club's formidable waiting list was drawn on for members, at least that is the story. The Surf Club set out from the beginning to be bigger and better, which meant more expensive. It has more marble floors, more marble pillars, more—but I grew dizzy long before I had finished walking through marble halls, drinking at malachite bars, and inspecting bathing cabañas that cost three hundred dollars a season.

One of these cabañas was furnished with conch-shaped chairs upholstered in white kid. The cocktail table of another cabaña and its fitments would have fed a family for a year. All these elaborate cabañas, replete with dressing-rooms and showers, were for bathing in the sea, which they faced. But the bathers more often went into the pool, behind. It was the same at Palm Beach. The sea has been improved upon.

Not a detail seemed overlooked. Arriving at the Surf Club was like arriving at Court, except that one did not wait so long. The traffic problem had been settled in a most ingenious way. The club entrance was on the main-highway Avenue, but main-highway motorists nevertheless found themselves held up by the police, to give Surf Club members precedence.

How could this be? I asked. What an outcry there would be if the traffic in St. James' Street were held up for the members of Boodles, arriving and departing! The explanation was simple. The part of Miami Beach in which the Club was situated had been declared a local town, the Club superintendent had been made the local mayor, the local police obeyed the local mayor, and the general public obeyed



the local police. Nothing could be more simple, and the American motorist who had to wait on the highway while the members' cars were brought across from the parking-place could make no effective protest. Most probably he waited, mollified by the possibility of seeing a multi-millionaire emerge.

But splendid as the Surf Club was, with its ballroom, view tower, marble patio, dancing floor and restaurant, lapis-lazuli swimming pool with golden Apollos in attendance, with outdoor and indoor bars, loggias, pergolas, palm trees, and jazz bands, deep as were its pile carpets, high as were its coffered ceilings, the manner of one's reception was so regal that all other marvels seemed in natural sequence.

There was a veritable ballet of club stewards, every one of whom might have been drawn from a Czar's crack regiment, or have danced in the musical-comedy success of the moment. Their blue understrapped trousers moulded their adolescent waists, and merged into short white jackets, so tight that they scarcely permitted a heart-beat. Their military figures suggested two hours' daily on the drill ground, and their heads one hour at the hairdresser's. Their immaculately gloved hands waved you on, their broad manly shoulders supported the gold epaulettes, surely, of no one less than a General. They gave to the coming and going of members a royal consequence—a millionaires' bodyguard of bellboys-in-waiting.

The Surf Club does not claim, like the Bath Club, to be exclusive. Its keynote is gusto. Its Saturday-night galas set a standard of opulence. There was an Inferno Night with red-lit blocks of ice steaming on the ballroom floor, while skulls dangled from the cavernous ceilings; and a Hunt Ball Night when a cavalcade, complete with horses, hounds,

and fox, in paper *mâché*, careered over the heads of the diners.

The Bath Club has luxuries and wonders of its own. It costs as much—fifteen hundred dollars for entrance, three hundred dollars annual subscription, three hundred dollars for a *cabaña* for the season, and an additional two hundred dollars or so for local taxes. But its life is a little less gay, its members a little more portly. There are formal dinner dances. I fancied that even the Hawaiian Jazz Band, and crooners, who played as I lunched with the President's wife under a gaudy umbrella in the patio, had a subdued note. The servants were not so sumptuously tailored, but they had an old-retainer manner.

The president of this rich man's club was named Mr. Poor. He had risen in the world and kept up a state which belied his name. And such is the easy tradition of American life, he made no secret of his impoverished youth. He was delighted when a club member recalled that the president of this millionaires' retreat used to deliver groceries at his father's door.

After lunch and a siesta in the sun, or, more correctly, out of it, under the awning of a *cabaña* that looked seawards on to a square of white sand planted with palm trees, we departed for Indian Creek Golf Club.

This is yet another suction creation. Not content with a flat island, the promoters of this golf club sucked up not only an eighteen-hole course out of the Bay, but also a hill with a view, on the top of which they placed a club house like a Renaissance palace, with patio, ballroom, loggias, dining-hall, bars, and terraces. The club dressing-room, a large hall with cedar-wood cubicles, each upholstered and furnished like a small study, reminded me of a cathedral

with side chapels, the soaring roof supported by stone pillars. Outside there were arcades that suggested Sicilian cloisters. The island itself was joined to Miami Beach by a bridge of white stone over the creek of the bay. It was a private bridge, and only members' cars could pass the entrance gate.

After tea in a great oak-panelled hall, we went outside on to a terraced court, which looked across a long pool, and over miles of sun-burnished water to Miami, whose skyscrapers rose in blue-grey silhouette against the crimson evening. Around us the lower sky was indigo, the upper afire with the glory of a Florida sunset. How tall and black were the feathery plumes of the royal palms bordering the terrace! Some lights winked intermittently high up in the distant sky. They belonged to an airship that cruised over Miami. One by one the skyscrapers were perforated with window lights, throwing an illuminated screen across the dark horizon. The cool jade lagoon darkened, the long low causeway from Beach to mainland speared the dusk with a diamond sparkle of lamps, the sun in flaming glory fell quickly to the dim horizon, touched it, and was gone, plunging us into the quick nightfall of the tropics.

On the homeward journey to Coconut Grove I tried to clarify a thousand impressions, to bring order to the facts teeming through my brain. I had seen vast projects costing millions of dollars, I had seen lovely villas, palm girt, built of marble and brick, nestling under Spanish tiles over which trailed the orange-scarlet flame vine. I had seen canals leading to water gates that made a little Venice of these Beach homesteads, where even the gondola was known, as well as sumptuous launches. Moorish arches, Italian loggias, Spanish patios, battlemented walls, Greek courtyards,



painted Venetian posts for moorings, a miniature lighthouse even, and an arch window set in studied reverse between the wishbone formation of twin outcurving palm trees—all these things I had seen. They were in every colour, green, orange, pink, white, lemon, russet, and rose, in every material, limestone, marble, brick, concrete, rubble, adobe, wood, and steel. I thought of the lines of immense hotels I had seen climbing the sky, loggia-crowned, balcony-festooned, with palm courtyards, terraces, and pools. I thought of the Roney Plaza, the immense hotel set on the edge of the sea, from whose terrace you could see the deep-blue Gulf Stream flowing through the bright green of the Atlantic, and the ridge where the coral reef divided the waters, mauve on one side, indigo on the other.

The garden of the Roney Plaza had suffered in the hurricane, but tall palm trees still waved, upheld by wire cables, and a flock of flamingoes stood on a lawn which had been buried beneath seven feet of sand. The Gulf Stream, seen from this garden over the beach, kept the temperature, winter and summer, around 75° Fahr., and there was always a breeze blowing inland from the sea. It was a coast of pleasure, and yet it was a restricted coast, for only a little of it was free of access. The hotels, clubs, and villas owned it, and no promenade brought the casual visitor into contact with the sea. It was possible to motor for five miles and scarcely glimpse the ocean. Man had entirely commercialised the shore. Miami Beach is not a resort so much as a sea-side reservation; and no one seems to mind. You live at an hotel, or join a club, or pay for a cabin in a swimming enclosure. On this shore the sight of children is rare.

We motored along the four-mile Venetian causeway towards Miami, while my host told me the story of the first

bridge across the lagoon. Along the inner water, bordered by mangrove thickets that still await the builder, the cruisers and yachts can sail up the Florida coast, sheltered by long reefs. There is a system of inland waterways dredged eight feet deep, that goes up the Atlantic Coast for over a thousand miles, as far as New York, and a great number of yachts, some as long as sixty feet, come down to Biscayne Bay by this safe route. The southernmost causeway between Miami and the Beach is thronged with anchored yachts which have made the journey from the north.

The story of the first causeway connecting mainland and Beach epitomises the romance and ruin written over this part of the coast. At the beginning of the twentieth century John Collins had a strip of land across the lagoon, and he decided to grow fruit on it. But rabbits devoured his coconuts and sea spray destroyed his avocados, until he planted Australian pines to protect them. Next came the need for a bridge. In 1912 he began to build what became the longest wooden bridge in the world, but he ran out of money when one-third of the way across. An Indianapolis man named Fisher, who had made a fortune of five millions exploiting an acetylene lamp, was looking for a new world to conquer. Collins approached him for a loan, gave him a mortgage, and went on with the bridge.

But it was not enough. Collins then decided to sell land, Fisher agreeing, and a public auction was held, Collins prophesying that this land would soon be the centre of the largest seaside resort in America—a wild guess that came true. The lots were sold, so well sold, that the sale was kept on day after day, and Collins even got rid of water-logged land and mangrove swamps. The boom had begun. The bridge was completed and opened for traffic.



This was only the beginning of Miami Beach. Collins and Fisher had scented a gold mine. They bought more land, and when there was no more land they made it out of the swamp by cutting down the mangroves to within a foot of their roots and then pouring mud out of the Bay over these roots to make a foundation. On the top of this they put good soil, around it they built concrete embankments. It cost sometimes two thousand dollars an acre, but they were in no way dismayed.

In the next ten years they had built up out of the swamp nearly three thousand acres. On this land they now built de-luxe hotels, golf courses, polo grounds, and tennis courts. Miami Beach was made. They had staked immense fortunes. Later the boom was to come and carry their profits to dizzy heights. Fisher himself made a fortune of twenty-six million dollars—and lost it in attempting to create another resort on Long Island, New York.

The first wooden bridge has disappeared. It has taken less than forty years for a mangrove swamp and lagoon mud to be transformed into a city of splendid streets, gorgeous villas, skyscraper hotels, luxurious surf clubs, gambling dens, night-clubs, golf courses, and boulevards, with three four-mile bridges, across one of which I now motored to flood-lit Miami.

### III

In the sunshine of my Florida holiday one shadow fell, ominous as a darkening thunder cloud when all Nature is stilled, except for birds twittering in the garden. My hostess was ill, and although a tacit silence lay around us, we knew it was mortal. But on her face there showed no abatement of her cheerfulness, her quick response to the jest, her love

of the antic disposition I put on for her special entertainment. My raillery, my exaggerated comment on the American scene, were constant for her delight. One comedy I played again and again, since it gave her unfailing joy, an impersonation of the Great White Queen receiving Mr. Gladstone at Balmoral, which required for properties only a large armchair, a walking-stick, and a handkerchief folded diagonally on my brow. And if I committed *lesé majesté* by making so august a figure a centre of mirth, I am certain the shade of that great little old lady forgave me for the forgetfulness and laughter it brought to one on a couch of suffering.

With what kindness my friends surrounded me. Throughout fifteen years of friendship, from that first day when these good souls had rescued a homesick young lecturer in Chicago and taken him into their bright household, their hospitality had never failed, their loyalty had never lost an occasion for demonstration. We had toured a large part of the United States together, down through the trail of the Civil War, through Gettysburg and the Shenandoah Valley, through Virginia lovely in springtime, through Alabama and Georgia. And when a northern university gave me an honorary degree, up we all went for the occasion, happy vagabonds in a car we called the Green Dragon. Memories such as these cemented our friendship, and now in this Florida home I knew that a chapter of happiness was drawing to a close.

But though the shadow was there, we maintained a disregard, and kept the joyous warmth of friendship running through our veins. There were a few days when my hostess made excursions with us in the car, her eye quick to point out a cat-bird or a silk bombax tree with its scarlet flowers,

rising from viscid green cups. But for the most part she lay out on the verandah, happy in the heat of the Florida day.

Her love of heat was a standing joke between us. She would have a fire blazing in the sitting-room when the sun was almost unbearable outside. But the Floridians are quick to feel coolness, and I was often surprised to find fires blazing within, while the sun blazed without. Blazing is the only word with which to describe these fires. The local architecture indulges in enormous Spanish fireplaces, and in these they burn great logs of pine. Pine trees being a plentiful wild product of Florida, they are consumed with an extravagance which in time will devastate the landscape. Being extremely resinous, these great logs burn with inconceivable heat and rapidity.

Coal is almost unknown. Nature, for domestic comfort, has supplied resinous wood and hot sunshine, and the sunshine is harnessed to domestic use. A great number of the Florida homes heat their water by sunshine. The solar heater is a device so simple that I was, at first, sceptical concerning its ability to heat water. It consists of a glass frame, about the size of a door, let into the roof. Under a pane of glass run a number of copper tubes containing water. The glass, concentrating the sun's rays on these tubes, heats the water. "How hot?" I asked. "Almost to boiling point," came the answer, and a tap was turned on out of which poured scalding water. When you drink Florida orange juice you are drinking sunshine, declare the Floridians, and when you take a hot bath you are taking a sunshine bath. Nor is this device merely a fanciful asset. The house agents advertise 'solar heating' as a standard equipment in the smallest houses.

The verandah was our favourite retreat after lunch on



those days when a warm wind from the Gulf brought what in Italy is called *scirocco*, an unpleasantly sticky wind. For there were times, let it be candidly confessed, when this escape from winter left one pining for a freshening blow. Everything was damp. The ink ran on the writing pad like blotting paper. Envelopes had their flaps gummed fast, postage stamps, kept in the pocket, were stuck together, books and papers were soft, clothing stuck to one, and the least effort brought perspiration.

Such days were not frequent, but they came. Occasionally, but very occasionally, it rained, and all the Florida holiday-makers, old ladies and gentlemen, rich widows and spinsters, rentiers and subsidised relatives and all the old wives and dodderers, and villa owners, and boat hirers and shopkeepers, bitterly complained. For although the rain was refreshing, and the parched landscape needed water, and rain clouds were a respite from the blazing blue with its towering masses of snowy cumuli, it was regarded as a shameful thing for it to rain at all. Was not Florida's great asset sunshine, was it not the great winter holiday land just because the sun never took a holiday? I confess I welcomed the rain, but all the old ladies and retired business men crowded around blazing pine-fires and complained bitterly of this "most unusual weather."

This respite from enervating heat does not even rejoice the gardener who finds that flowers bloom themselves to death if they are imported from temperate climes. A rose tree will go on producing roses until it dies from exhaustion. When gladioluses bloom too fast their growth is arrested by putting them into refrigerators, the equivalent of winter storage. I saw the night-blooming cereus kept for a week in this manner, its great waxen trumpets, which in England

bloom and perish in a night, preserved in all their strange beauty. Potatoes, kidney beans, and peas, planted at the beginning of December, were picked in February.

Most of the flowers have been imported into Florida, as also the trees. They flourish so rapidly that their stock needs constant replenishing. A friend told me it cost him fifty dollars a month for water to keep the grass in his patio alive and green. But even so, the sun's temporary absence is resented, and rain is regarded as a bitter enemy by Miami's Advertisement Bureau.

The Gulf Stream seldom loses its tranquillising effect, winter and summer, but, like the sun, it has its off days, and then a cold wind blows and the thermometer falls quickly to 55°. The wind is always in the same direction, hurricanes apart, and blows towards the Gulf of Mexico, with the result that all the palm trees bend westwards. Since the land is flat—the highest hill in all Florida is four hundred feet—the wind goes right across the peninsula, and nowhere, on the most torrid day, does one lack a breeze.

At four-thirty, thanks to my hostess, the Englishman's weakness was catered for. Moses, in white linen jacket, brought out the tea-tray. It was a subject of mirth between us, and for several days I kept my hosts guessing at the cause of the merriment the tea service created in me. Surely it was all very English? asked my hostess.

There was tea with sugar and milk, and thin bread and butter, sandwiches and cake, with the housekeeper presiding at the teapot, and Moses solemnly going round with napkins, and Moselle bringing in more hot water, her eyes looking on in wonder at this English rite. "Why are you laughing?" asked my hostess from her couch. "There's something wrong, somewhere," commented my host. "Is the tea strong

enough?" asked the housekeeper. Moses came round with a plate of hot cakes.

"I hope you like those biscuits," said my hostess.

"Biscuits?" I queried, taking one.

"But they are biscuits—aren't they?" she asked. Then, seeing my merriment—"So that's it—now why do you laugh?"

"I'm not laughing at the biscuits—though we call them scones," I answered.

"Scones?"

"Scones—what do you call biscuits, if these are biscuits?" I asked.

"He's pulling our legs again—take no notice of him," said my host.

"We must find out what's amusing him so. We've done something wrong. We're not quite English. We certainly aren't."

"Mr. Roberts, he must have his joke, suh—mebbe it's me, not in proper butler-style, suh," interposed Moses, grinning from ear to ear as his black hand balanced the cake dish.

But at last I had to confess. The teacup had no saucer! It stood on one side of a large dessert plate that also held a spoon, a knife, and a tea napkin.

"In England," I explained, mirthfully, "we have a cup in a saucer of its own, and a tea plate."

"There! He's caught us out! We can't do it, mother!" exclaimed my host. And mother rippled with laughter from her couch.

"Sure, we're poor benighted Americans," she laughed.

"That's sure remarkable, suh," said Moses, solemnly.

"We have saucers—but we thought it more convenient to



have the cup on a big plate so that you can hold it all with one hand," explained my hostess.

"You can't have English tea without saucers, my dear," said her husband. "This Englishman has caught us out."

"To-morrow we must have saucers!" said my hostess.

"Yes'm. To-morrow we sure will have saucers, and Mr. Roberts, he'll have real English tea," agreed Moses, grinning with delight.

A little thing, a silly little thing, but the memories we treasure most spring from such absurdities. A tea saucer brings back those afternoons on the sunny verandah with the squirrels running up the palm trees, the inquisitive cat-birds hopping around, Jerry, the dog, gobbling tit-bits, my hostess's face wreathed in smiles, and Moses in white jacket decorously attending.