

## CHAPTER XI

### WINGS OVER THE WILDERNESS

You can be as wicked as you like, or as good, in Miami. It caters for every taste, horse-racing, dog-racing, *chemin-de-fer*, dice playing, roulette, and the coarser forms of sheer gambling. For the poorer tourists there are legalised slot-gambling machines, which bring in a revenue to the State. The revenue from betting and gambling taxes is so large that income and inheritance taxes have been abolished in Florida, and there are counties that require no revenue at all beyond what they receive as their share of the gambling and gasoline taxes.

Miami Beach seethes with night-clubs. Near the home of Al Capone, on Palm Island, Big Bill Dwyer entered into partnership with Earl Carroll, the impresario, and they promoted the Palm Island Club with 'thirty-six of the most beautiful girls in the world.' Competition of this kind is keen, and Miami Beach in all senses lives on its legs. A live publicity agent, brought in to boost Miami Beach, reduced the problem to simple terms. You could bathe in winter on Miami Beach, which meant you could see girls' legs galore. So Miami Beach poured out to the newspapers and the newsreels 'girlies' with lovely legs, girlies in slips, girlies in bathing 'creations,' and girlies clad in oranges, or snowballing, with artificial snow, on the hot beach. Girls' bare legs

in winter are Florida's unique asset. And there is never any shortage of bathing girls for the press and cinema-camera men. The schoolgirls of Miami are willingly released from classes to aid Miami's campaign.

This is the coast of pleasure, but away from the hectic night life of Miami, from its swimming pools, and bathing galas, there live a great number of people in lotus-eating retirement. You glimpse them watering their lawns, fishing on the bridges and quays, playing a round of golf or a hand of bridge, and quietly waiting for the winter to pass, when they will trek north again. There is no lack of excursions, across into the wild Everglades, or down the straight highway to the Keys, bordered with Australian silk oaks, mahoganies, the sacred Bo tree, the great fig, and a variety of palms.

Near Coconut Grove a small beach has been laid out, with thatched huts and palm trees, and as one lay on the white sand, wearing sun-glasses to reduce the glare, and well oiled to lessen the burning, and looked out across the blue Bay to a distant reef like a mauve shadow under the azure sky, one felt the place was well named Tahiti Beach. There was even a bather sitting under a palm tree, wearing a great straw-plaited hat, and playing a ukelele.

We were a gay company one Sunday morning, Eunice Tietjens, the poetess, and her husband the dramatist, a professor of literature, a pilot from the near-by Pan-American aerodrome, Du Bose Heywood of 'Porgy' fame, Hervey Allen, as huge and powerful as his "Anthony Adverse" and Marjory Stoneman Douglas, whose stories have familiarised native Florida life to the millions. It was she who suggested the excursion to the Everglades to see the bird life. I eagerly agreed.

"It means getting up at four o'clock—we must be there before sunrise," she warned me.

"I'll stay up all night if necessary—besides, getting up in Florida isn't difficult, it's warm," I said.

So we made our plans. I was to be at the end of Leafy Grove by four o'clock, and we were to motor to the depths of the Everglades before the dawn broke. Then, if lucky, we should see flocks of herons and ibis feeding, and all the wild-bird life in this dense wilderness through which the Tamiami Trail runs from the east coast to the west.

The Everglades, of which one is always conscious, for it lies behind Palm Beach and Miami, consists of a great tract of land, seven thousand square miles in area, which comprises almost the whole of Florida, except the coastal fringe, south of the immense shallow Lake Okeechobee, which is seven hundred and thirty square miles in area, down to the extremity of the peninsula whose coast looks across the blue waters to Key West. It was once a No-man's-land, a region of death for the explorer who became lost and entangled in its terrible morasses, its interminable waterways swarming with alligators, rattlesnakes, and moccasins, or in its dark jungle where ran the panther, the bear, the wild cat, and the deer, and in whose tree-tops, sinister with clinging moss, rested immense flocks of birds. The only inhabitants, once upon a time, were the Indians whose canoes threaded its tortuous canals, and who alone knew the tracks across this wild maze of woods, and swamps.

The Everglades has now been tamed somewhat. A great motor highway, nearly three hundred miles long, runs through its centre, and the northern part has been drained and turned into farms, but only the trail has been touched,

and the cypress groves and the wide wind-swept swamps remain in their primitive state. It is, therefore, a paradise for birds and wild life, and is still the hunting-ground for the Seminole Indians, a vanishing race. The lucky observer will feel he is in the primitive jungle, for he will see alligators basking on the muddy banks, herons, flamingoes, pelicans, egrets, ibis, kingfishers, and cranes fishing in the streams. And from the dwarf cypress trees, scrub oaks, and palms he will see rise flocks of strange birds.

This No-man's-land has known many tragedies. It has been the lair of robbers, runaway negro slaves, warlike Indians issuing forth to make murderous attacks on white settlements, of outlaws, bandits, desperadoes, and more recently of bootleggers. For the tortuous morass of the Everglades defied pursuit. The rum-runners found it an ideal lair. Their aeroplanes, loaded with liquor from the Bahamas or Cuba, would return to a secret aerodrome in the midst of the swamps, whence the contraband spirit was conveyed by truck drivers who knew the secret of the maze. One murder gang succeeded in escaping capture for ten years and emerged again and again to perpetrate some crime in a bordering village or town.

The Everglades is a place of mangrove and palmetto swamps, cypress jungles, salt meadows, in part below sea-level, green wind-swept savannahs, entangling vines, ferns, air plants, wild orchids, isolated mounds overgrown with palmettos, pine and dwarf oak trees, and, everywhere, covering the soddened soil, treacherous miles of sawgrass, in which a man could be lost, and which cuts clothes and leather boots to ribbons and lacerates the lost man until he bleeds to death. Such was the wilderness to which I was bound.

Up and dressed before dawn, I made my way to the end of Leafy Way. It was a warm, starlit night with not a breath of air. The moonlight threw shadows of palm trees across my path, the banks of bougainvillæa and poinsettias were ghostly in the white light. A few frogs croaked, and the mysterious stirring of wings, or a bird's screech, broke the silence.

I came to the long black highway, shining between thick walls of trees, and waited. No light shone in any of the houses whose unwallied gardens flanked the road. I studied the bright heavens above me and fancied I found, low on the horizon, the Southern Cross. Jupiter and Venus were very clear and sparkled.

A sound grew out of the night. Far off I heard a car approaching, and then saw the headlights. Was it my friends? I waited in the loveliness of this mysterious night-piece. But the car passed on, then stopped, and a man got out, went to a door, re-entered his car, and moved on again. The noise died down the dark road. Intrigued by this episode, I approached the door of the sleeping house. A small parcel lay on the porch. It must have been a very early delivery service. Was the man going on down to the Florida Keys? They lay that way.

The conscious silence of a tropical night flowed around me again. It was already a quarter past four. There was no sign of dawn. But sunrise and sunset were short near the tropic of Cancer. Waiting, it occurred to me that I was actually three hundred miles farther south than Cairo, on the same latitudinal line that ran through the Sahara Desert and northern India!

There were poisonous snakes in Florida. I glanced apprehensively at the banyan tree under which I stood, to make

sure no reptile was uncurling itself from a branch. Strange, but there were no fireflies. Had they sensed the dawn? The scent of night jasmine somewhere filled the air, and the moonlight fell on the great fleshy trumpets of a night-blooming cereus. I recalled a story my hostess had told me of how, in the mating season, immense land-crabs crawl up the seashore in battalions and travel landwards at night. They are so large and their shells so sharp that the tyres of automobiles passing over them are lacerated, and motorists are marooned in the midst of this crawling army of many-legged crustacea.

The snakes, I learned, were seldom dangerous, but there were rattle-snakes, coral snakes, and water moccasins in the streams and swamps, all highly venomous. A local bishop had been pointed out to me who had been bitten in the heel by a deadly coral snake. He had been walking in the Matheson Hammock, a local reservation of the jungle, and had stepped aside from the path to examine a flower. Immediately after he felt bitten a companion stripped off his boot and vigorously sucked the poison out of the wound. It saved his life, but he had been stone deaf ever since. In the canals of the Everglades the water moccasins, a deadly species, abound, but the singular thing is that negroes and Indians fish in these infested waters with comparative immunity from attack.

I thought of all these things in a darkness that seemed now to be full of stealthy movements. It would not have surprised me if the octopus-like banyan tree had begun to walk in the moonlight, its snaky branches producing suckers on each end. An immense bat flew over my head; there was a screech and a savage scuffle in a tree across the way, and I knew death was in the air. I looked down the long black

road and drew comfort from the diminishing line of arc lights that festooned the darkness.

At last a car came out of a side road. I was caught in the bright flood of its headlamps. Eunice and her husband had arrived. We had now to collect Marjory, and we extracted her, after motoring across a communal front lawn, from a Grimm's fairy-tale cabin. In the night it looked like a large coconut under the palms; if we cracked it, would the fairy princess step out? We tapped it, and our friend appeared, no princess indeed, but a practical-minded woman ready for a picnic. Her head was swathed in a spotted handkerchief whose two corners, emerging from a top-knot, looked like a rabbit's ears. She carried packets of beans, bacon, coffee, and a frying pan. We all packed ourselves into the car and started off for the Tamiami Trail. Coconut Grove was still fast asleep in the darkness.

The Trail goes straight inland for the first thirty miles, a motor highway cutting into the heart of the Glades. The road has been made by scooping out canals on either side, which have filled with water. Along this road we motored. I was not made more comfortable as we rushed through the darkness by stories of cars that had plunged off the highway into the side canals, where their occupants had been drowned. It looked quite easy for this to happen, especially as collisions with Seminole Indians driving automobiles sometimes occurred. Owing to a superstition, they will not have lights on their cars.

The story of the creation of the Trail is a saga in itself. Forty years ago an exploring party had emerged from this wilderness, half-dead after their sufferings. It had remained for years a deadly No-man's land, a veritable green hell. Then a road had been conceived, to traverse this wilderness

despite alligators, crocodiles, snakes, wild animals, and swarms of mosquitoes. The enterprise began boldly and hopefully. Thousands of tons of rock were dumped into the morass for a foundation. As fast as the rock was dumped it disappeared under the ooze, or remained to be disintegrated by the fierce sun. Finally, after continuous failure, a desperate resolution was made. There was nothing else to be done but to dig down to the limestone bedrock under this swamp, and build up a solid road. In short, the way had to be blasted, every foot fought for.

With machetes the labour gangs attacked the wild growth. Sweating in tropical heat, up to their waists in mud and water, bitten by mosquitoes, lacerated by the terrible saw-grass, they hacked a track through the tangled undergrowth, and, as they progressed, guards kept watch with rifles to protect them from venomous snakes and alligators. Men died of fever, of bites, were drowned, or crushed, or killed in the dynamiting. Four million sticks of dynamite were used for the blasting. On the cleared jungle came teams of oxen dragging the boxes of dynamite, and after the blasting came the giant dredges and cranes. Gangs of men crushed the rock and made the road bed, following the clearing pioneers. Slowly civilisation fought its way into the jungle, a mile a month. Side by side with the road grew the excavated canals. To-day one proceeds on a highway built above the swamp, running from coast to coast; it is the Tamiami Trail.

Along this road we now rushed at sixty miles an hour. There was not a light, not a sound. The highway disappeared ahead of us into the wilderness. Then, at a cry from a companion, we turned and looked through the back window of the car. In the East a bar of pearl hung across the



level horizon, and even as we looked it crimsoned. In a minute the eastern sky had caught fire. Ahead of us a steel-blue world grew upon us. We stopped the car to watch the march of dawn. A green world of bush, tree, and grass, shining with silver dew, came into sight. Eastwards there was a drift of small clouds turning to pure gold. The cold ice-blue of the heavens above was now shot with streaks of rose and crimson. A new world began to glow about us. Suddenly the silence was broken by the cry of a bird. How solitary and eerie that one voice was, coming over the flat, grey jungle.

"Look!" said Marjory, and even as she spoke, birds came out of the dusk, wheeled overhead, and then skimmed down along a water-course whose face was silvered by the lightning sky. It was a pair of blue-grey herons. They rose again, and alighted on the top of a bare scrub cedar tree. I watched, fascinated, as they perched on the very pinnacle, stood one-legged, folded up their wings, and became motionless sentinels over the wilderness.

"Those are Louisiana herons," said Marjory. "I hope we shall see ibis."

We all stood on the road, silent. Birds cheeped around us, there was a whirr of wings as they flitted along the water-course. The sky was crimson, the undergrowth seemed afire, the cool air was sweet, and as the light grew I became newly aware of the lonely immensity in which we stood. Crows croaked, an animal gave a cry. More birds crossed the sky. A blue kingfisher came down to earth, and walked with stork-like legs along the side canal. Then a blue heron and a tiny bittern came to the water. A pair of immense black wings flapped overhead. It was a turkey buzzard, the scavenger of the wild. More herons, blue and white, flittered by and

alighted in the tree-tops. Day was here now. My companions complained. We had not seen flocks of ibis, herons, and flamingoes feeding at dawn, as had been hoped. But I was well satisfied with a quieter variety of entertainment.

While they prepared breakfast on the roadside I walked away. Dainty Louisiana herons rose all along the water-course, an opossum started up and scurried away, and I just glimpsed a small turtle as he launched himself from sight. A bird flew high overhead and settled on a tree-top. Stealthily I approached, camera in hand. How alert he was! His head turned suddenly, his dark eye surveying the world below. Step by step I proceeded, and was thrilled to find my first ibis poised on the tree-top, with long coral-coloured legs, great tapering beak, and black-tipped wings. I 'snapped' him, and then called, to have the pleasure of watching his slow, unsteady take-off, the spreading of his lovely white plumage, the long flight line of the head horizontally forward, with thin legs trailing behind.

My call startled another bird I had missed, an egret who took swift wing. These birds had suffered in the past from ruthless hunters. The white plumes of the egret had been a prize for the gaining of which Indians and Whites had not hesitated to slaughter the birds in their mating season, when their plumes grow, and thousands of nestlings are left to die of starvation owing to the reckless killing of their parents.

The flamingoes, the parroquets, and the spoonbills have been almost exterminated from these Glades, but now the wild life is protected by game wardens, who keep a lookout through the mangrove forests, the ghostly country of dwarfed cypress, and the wilderness of wind-patterned sawgrass. The hunting of ibis meat, a delicacy in demand up and down the west coast of Florida and in Cuba, and of

egret plumes in the spring breeding season, has been prohibited.

After the ibis had flown I retraced my steps, pausing on a rough wooden bridge to look down a stream half obscured in arching mangrove roots and white cypresses whose trunks rose out of the dark water. Their branches were hung with air plants whose greyish fuzzy mass gave an eerie touch to this wild scene. In vain I waited to see on the mud banks the wading alligators, but a blue kingfisher rewarded me with a flash of gorgeous plumage as he swooped to his feeding-ground.

My companions had prepared breakfast. Sausages sizzled in the pan, the aroma of coffee filled the sharp morning air. Already the rising sun was warm on our backs. The world glistened about us, the blue sky of Florida reigned overhead, the land lay around us, a tangle of waist-high palmetto, tussocks of coarse grass, and here and there a hammock of buttonwood, pines, and scrub cedars. We were on the old road that made a loop from the straight Tamiami Trail. It was neglected and more likely to offer a vantage point for birds than the broad highway. But my companions were apologetic.

"You've not really seen the birds—I hoped we'd see whole flocks of ibis and herons feeding," complained Marjory.

"We'll push on," said Eunice; "perhaps we'll raise a flock yet."

We packed our picnic articles into the car, and started off down the narrow lonely road, hemmed in now by the dense jungle. It presented an impenetrable tangle of undergrowth, swamp, small trees roped with vines, hurricane-blasted trunks, and leafless pines, all endlessly stretching

across the monotonous plain. It was easy to understand how men who had left the road in pursuit of game had been unable to find their way back, and had gone on and on, plunging over the soggy ground, until the heat of the day, and the terrible sawgrass had reduced them to a bloody demented state. There were grim stories of Indian trackers who had gone out in search of lost men, and had found only buzzard-picked skeletons in a patch of boots and clothes.

Suddenly we struck the Tamiami Trail again. It disappeared at either end into the far horizon, a long, straight, shining black track, on an embankment bordered by low canals. We halted at a roadhouse. Opposite, to catch the Trail traffic, was a Seminole village, an obvious tourist trap, but it was too singular in my eyes to be missed.

A sullen young Indian stood by a stall loaded with gaudy native goods—bead necklaces, moccasin shoes, carved bowls and pipes, and native costumes. We entered the village, and, being early, found the Seminoles were busy with their toilet. They had slept on raised wooden platforms with thatched roofs. A young man, olive skinned, was washing himself, stripped to the waist, another youth was having his hair cut by an old brave. The women, in multi-coloured skirts and capes, were winding beads around their necks until their heads seemed mounted on their vivid necklaces. Others were preparing breakfast.

Apart from a bevy of barefooted, dirty children, who rushed up to us and whined for money, we were ignored. The Indians will not look straight at their white visitors, and they seem to show in their reserved, churlish manner the resentment that still lingers against the white race for their betrayal and dispossession of the soil.

One hundred years ago to the north of these Everglades

they were fiercely fighting the white man. They had opened the war with a massacre, killing a Major Dade, whose name is now given to the county in which Miami is situated. Used in turn by Spaniards, French, British, and Americans, made allies by them in murderous wars, they have been robbed of lands and cattle, seen their villages burned down, women violated, men shot or carried into slavery. Denied all rights, treated like beasts or vermin, no wonder they revolted again and again. Deeper and deeper into the Everglades they retreated, but the white man pursued them, and sought to exterminate or deport them.

A chief, Osceola, the son of an Englishman by a native woman, arose to fight for the right of his race. At last, driven to despair, Osceola agreed to sign a treaty. He met with shameful treachery, was seized, manacled, and sent to a dungeon, with two hundred captives. Later he was shot. But the Seminoles never admitted defeat, and for a long time they refused to sign a peace treaty. To-day they live in their reservation, in the south-west Everglades. Only a few of their race survive, and soon they will be no more, worn out by four hundred years of struggle with the white invader, his treachery, diseases, and rum.

To-day the name of Osceola is honoured throughout Florida, but the Indian has not forgotten. In his proud reserve one discerns his scorn and censure. By the irony of Fate some of these Indians have become millionaires. Accepting an offer of land in Oklahoma, they migrated. It happened that the land they were given for a reservation proved to be oil-bearing. Sudden wealth resulted in freakish conduct in some cases. Indian braves kept grand pianos in their open yards, and one rode daily through the streets of Tulsa, sitting in a gold-plated casket in a motor hearse.

We left the village and took the homeward trail. It was now nine o'clock, the sun was already strong, and mirages hovered on the long black road. At a certain point we turned aside, into a secondary road. There stretched about us an illimitable savannah, blue-shadowed under a vivid sky of sunlit cumulus.

And then without warning, as we ran along this lonely road, parallel with a canal teeming with alligator gar, across from the horizon came a flock of birds. A flock? How can one describe that endless moving cloud, as wings, thousands and thousands and thousands of wings, now silvered in the sun, now darkened as these birds wheeled and dived, sweeping nearer, fading off, then sweeping inwards again. Nearer and nearer they came, not directly, but in a lovely rotary movement that shuttered the bright morning and grew nearer in wave on wave of light, until, at last, like a running tide of snowy wings, this multitude settled, and rimmed with grey and silver the swamp in the wind-swept sawgrass.

"Ibis—on the feeding-ground. That circling in the air is their nuptial flight," said Marjory.

Silently we watched. As though at a word of command the whole flock rose again, wheeled, and drifted like white smoke on the wind. Were they coming or departing? We waited breathlessly as they circled in the sunshine, alternately a bank of snow and a bar of dove-grey shadow. They were nearer now, and alighted again, near enough this time for us to see them lower their long slender legs, and wade in their rocking ungainly fashion through the swamp, with all the clamour, the croaking and clacking of beaks, carried on the wind towards us.

We watched, silent in the wonder of this spectacle. Then again, in swirls of innumerable wings they rose into the

bright morning, wheeled and drifted, seemed nearer, then farther off, and, finally, swept low down like a cloud and merged indistinguishably with the far, low horizon.

Homewards we turned, as the sun rose to its zenith, heating the air and dimming the wide scene with shimmering exhalations. We were happy and content: our early rising had been well rewarded by this miracle of wings over the wilderness.