



Chapter 21: Easter at Palm Beach

Man has set Palm Beach as a gem in a jungle, which is itself as beautiful in its way as the nacre of the oyster in which we find the pearl. The gem is cut and polished till all its facets and angles flash forth not only their own brilliancy but the reflected glory of all around them. These blaze upon you from afar and draw you with a promise of all delights till you stand in their midst bewildered with them. The beauty of the surrounding jungle you must learn little by little, for it does not seek you, rather it withdraws and only subtly tempts. Yet when you come away you do not know which to love most, the gem or its setting. And all this you find upon a ribbon of island between the muddy blue of Lake Worth and the unbelievable colors of the transparent sea beyond. Unlimited resources of wealth have brought from the ends of the earth tropical trees and shrubs and set them in bewildering profusion. Wild nature in the setting, the landscape gardener in the gem, have done it all.

Not so long has man been banished from Eden that he need feel lonesome on returning. Here is the air that breathed over that place in the old time floating in over the miraculous sea, seemingly transmuting its swift-changing coloration into a symphony of perfume that now soothes in dreamy languor and again stimulates to the delight of action. Bloom of palm and of pine are in it and the smell of miles of pink and white oleanders that grow by wayside paths. There, too, is the mingling of a score of wee, wild scents from the jungle, and beneath it all the good, salty aroma distilled by the fervent sun of late March from crisping leagues of sapphire sea. It prompts you to breathe deep and long and look about with proprietary gladness as Adam and Eve might could they return for Old Home Week and tread again the well remembered primrose paths.



To appreciate fully this garden redivivus one must not dwell in its midst too long. Had Eve been permitted to come only occasionally, there had been no dallying with the serpent. I dare say those unfortunates who reach the place in December and do not leave it until April get to look upon its beauties with as lack-luster an eye as that with which the home-tied New Yorker looks upon Fifth Avenue. I have known Bostonians to pass the gilded dome of their State House, and go by way of the Common and Public Garden through Copley Square into the Public Library without looking about and expanding the chest. Such a condition does familiarity breed.

There is a fortunate refuge from too much Eden at West Palm Beach. You may on the outskirts of this now beautiful hamlet see how little aid the earth may give in the building of a beauty spot. Here is the same barren, sandy ridge which one learns to expect on his first progress inland from any point on the East Coast. Here grow rough-barked, dwarf pines of small stature, all bent westward in regular area from root to top as if yearning inland from their birth. Thus has the steady force of the easterly trades inclined them. The everlasting saw palmetto grows about their roots, and little else. Yet, so pervasive is the spirit of good example that the West Palm Beachers, going back to their barren land from across Lake Worth, have taken heart, and seeds and slips of blossoming shrub and vine, have brought or made soil, one scarcely knows whence or how, and made their West Palm Beach wilderness blossom in miniature like the Palm Beach rose.

Here are tiny fenced-in gardens all about little unpretentious houses, gardens which are soft with turf underfoot, stately with palms overhead, and all between bowered with purple bougainvillea and violet bohenia, and passion vine and allamanda, almost, indeed, all the beauties of The Garden over yonder. There is none of the stateliness that space alone can give, but the shrubs and vines crowd lovingly together, till one might well wonder if Adam and Eve did not plant something of this sort just beyond the flash of that flaming sword and perhaps learn to love the home they had found better than the Eden they had lost.

You may, if you will, go westward still from this ridge and get into another land of enchantment, the borderland of the Everglades. Here road winds from one saw-grass island to another across Clearwater Lake. It is a region of marsh plants, of cat-tail and pipewort, of purple bladderwort and wild grasses and sedges, where nestling blackbirds make love with a boldness that might put the flower-margined walks of The Garden to the blush, and where you may look into the wayside ditch and see big-mouthed bass waving their square tails as they move leisurely off into deeper water. To plunge from the barren ridge into the marsh



district is like going from the sackcloth and ashes of Lent into the full awakening joy of Easter. Here the Florida wilderness itself marks the season of the revival of life and joy, and with nothing more vividly than the cypress.

On the farther margin of Clearwater Lake the ground rises a bit into cypress swamp. All winter these close-set, gnarled trees have held bare and knotted, writhing arms to Heaven in mute repentance for misdeeds. Gray Spanish moss alone has draped them, waving in the winds most lugubriously. The water has been warm about their roots, the sun has steeped them in its heat that has kept the water gay with bloom of bladderwort and sagittaria and pickerel weed, yet the cypresses have held aloft their sackcloth moss and stretched their arms skyward, unforgiven, while the trade winds mumbled prayers in the gray gloom of their twining limbs. Now—it seems all of a sudden—the richest and softest drapery of green has hidden all their bareness as if they had taken off the sackcloth and put on the joy of forgiveness and new life. Spring green is always beautiful. It seems to me as if the cypresses must have picked their shade from the softest and richest of colors that soothe the eye in the shoaling sea outside. They are vivid indeed against the rising land beyond, where flat woods pines and saw palmetto hold sway again in grim monotony.

A day of this and you are ready again to pass the gateways and seek The Garden with senses once again hungry for its delights. One's self seems to belong in this scheme which simulates the primitive joy of the earlier, happier days of the world. Often one cannot be so sure of the rest of mankind. The animal creation takes it as matter of course. The black and white "raft" ducks that are common on the Indian River, yet fly before you get within gunshot of them, here in Lake Worth linger boldly about the docks and hardly move aside for chugging motorboats. I look daily for some fascinating descendant of Eve to call them up to eat out of her hand. Why should they here fear a gun. Adam never had one. In all my wanderings in palm-shaded walk and flower-scented jungle I saw no predatory bird or beast. It is easy to fancy that the serpent was banished with our first parents. Tiny lizards only, dash like scurrying brown flashes along the hot sand from one thicket to another in the denser part of the tangles of wild growth. A thousand glittering dragonfly fays flit on silver wings along the paths which the blue-throated, scurrying swifts cross.

Benevolent Afreets frequent The Garden and the jungle path at all points. In the days of Haroun-al-Raschid these used to gather princes up in mantles and bear them noiselessly from point to point. Here the mantle has become a wicker-basket wheel-chair, but the Afreets are in the business still and all along paths you see them passing, silently bearing one or two passengers.



A dollar wish will bring a bronze magician to your service for an hour and you glide majestically on air the while. You may be irreverent of tradition if you will and dub the Afreet and his conveyance an Afromobile, and say the air on which you glide majestically is but so much as is included in the inner tube of pneumatic tires, but the effect is the same.

But man! the sentence of banishment must still be heavy upon him, for he seems to me to tread The Garden somewhat fearfully, his glance over his shoulder expectant of another writ of ejection. Often he pokes about with a grim solemnity which is much at variance with the laughing face of all nature. Very likely these are the newcomers who have not yet learned that from Paradise are barred all vengeful spirits. Man has been out so long that the habit of watchfulness and distrust is not to be lost in a day. You see none of this on the faces of children. They are from Paradise too recently to have forgotten.

Over on the bathing beach where beryl waves break on the amber sand these children play like fluffy sprites of foam blown inland from the spent waves, as much a part of the place as the fleets of rainbow-tinted nautilus that have made port on the same sands. Youth too belongs. Stretched in the shadow of a boat lie two, as lithe and keen of outline as the sea gulls that swoop outside the line of breakers, they two a part of Paradise, soothed into immobility with the gentle spell of the place, reminding one for a fleeting moment of a paragraph from "Ben Hur." Yet the throng which must represent Mankind, with a capital M, melts in no such harmonious way into the symphony of sea and sky. These old ones have been away too long to fit into the place when they come back. Shorn of the world glamour of the tailor and haberdasher, the hall-marks of pelf and power, they are as grotesque as the satyrs of the time of Pan might be. Here is incongruity personified. Fingy Conners in fluffy ruffles and tights, Fairbanks in fleshings, or if not these some others just as good, go down to the sea in skips, and the breakers roar.

It is the cocoanut palms that put the touch of picturesque adventure on the place. Here are the bold beach-combers of the tropic world come to add storm-tossed beauty to The Garden. The cocoanut is the adventurer of all seas, born of salt and sand on the wave-worn shore it matures, clad in a brown, elastic, water-defying husk that will bear its live germ whithersoever the waters will take it. The storms that tear it from the yielding stem and toss it in the brine send it on through scud and spin drift, to currents that drift lazily to all shores. The breakers that roll it up the beach and bury it under driftwood are but planting it, and when in its own good time it germinates the tough fiber of its endogenous stem defies all but the fiercest hurricane. Here at maturity it will bear two hundred nuts a year to adventure further on all tides.



It is these trees that give the place its rightful name. They spring in stately, swaying rows along all the shore. They line the paths on either side with the gray columns of their trunks. The mighty fronds touch above your head and make swaying shadows on the way, as the leaves rustle in the easterly trades and the rich nuts fall to the ground for all. As Adam may have done, so you may do, pick the ripe fruit from the ground, beat the husk from it, bore a hole in the one soft spot at the stem end and drink the cool and delicious milk for your refreshment. Thousands of these nuts lie on the ground ungarnered save by the thirsty passer. Seed time and harvest are one with them and young fruit, acorn-like in size and appearance, grows at the same time that the ripe nuts are falling. You may find any size between at any time.

The cocoanut trees are beautiful, picturesque and romantic. You might well call them stately, yet there is a touch of the swashbuckler about each that forbids you to call them dignified. They should be the patron tree of buccaneers and wild sea rovers, and one cannot look upon them without peopling the strand beneath them with such gentry. The lawless, sea-roving life of the South Seas is theirs as it was that of Bluebeard and Teach and Morgan and Pizarro. They add to Eden a spice of dare-deviltry that makes it doubly dear.

Far different are the royal palms, the trees of kings' courtyards. I saw but four of these in The Garden. They stood apart, erect columns as smooth as if built out of gray masonry for fifty feet in height. You would sooner think this smooth but unpolished gray granite than wood. Miraculously from the top of this stone column, which swells outward as it progresses upward, then recedes as slightly, grows a green stem for a distance of a fathom, from the top of which spread the majestic, leafy fronds. Such columns should grace the stone palaces of the Pharaohs. So stately and impressive are these that I see them but I fancy that they stood thus as pillars to the gateway by which stood the angel with the flaming sword, while our first parents fled with averted faces, outward.

At Easter time The Garden blossomed with white stems of femininity, bearing aloft Easter flowers of gorgeous millinery. The violet of bohenia blooms, the purple of bougainvillea, the soft pink and pure white of blooming oleanders were all outdone and the butterfly-like flowers of hibiscus nodded and poised unnoticed as these passed by. Yet I saw three things outside The Garden that typified Easter to me with far more potentiality than these. One was the green of repentant cypresses in the gray swamp at the back of Clearwater Lake. Another was a cactus in the jungle on the outer rim of The Garden. Here was a stubborn thing, its oval, dusty, lifeless joints hideous with thorns. Seemingly nothing could give this thing life or



beauty. It stood in arid sand, and rough, dusty ridges to seaward shut off even the reviving, purifying winds. Yet the time came and out of the very thorns sprang a wondrous, yellow bloom of satiny-cupped petals that was more lovely than any flower of sweetest wood in any rose garden in the world. Butterfly and bee that had so long passed by came to this and caressed it, nor could anyone remember the thorns or the hideous crooked joints for love of the beauty of this Easter bloom.

Best of all I remember, over in the flatwoods, a young, long-leaf pine that had for a week been growing altar candles for the season as is the way of such trees. Only this tree in its love could not stop there. From every spike it grew on the right and the left exultant buds that made of each candle a little cross of pale bloom, lighting the little lonely tree in the level waste with a glorification and chaste beauty that made the worshipful onlooker forget all else. Nor in The Garden, nor in churches, nor even in the hearts of men has there grown, I believe, a lovelier or more acceptable Easter offering.

