



Chapter 22: Into the Miraculous Sea

Flying southward by rail from Palm Beach one immediately leaves behind tropical gardens and enters semi-arid wastes. The contrast is most vivid. The traveler feels like Es-Sindibad of old who thus was transported by magic, or perchance by an Afreet or the talons of a roc, from king's gardens to deserts, and anon back again. The dream of yesterday was of stately palms, of richly massed foliage plants, of broad petaled flowers tiptoeing for a butterfly flight, of softly perfumed breezes and man and maid in rich garments wandering joyously among it all. The reality of today is sand and saw palmetto and dreary wind-bowed, stunted pines, and dust and desolation.

Only by thus plunging back into bleakness can you realize what man and climate have done, working together, to redeem the wilderness from itself. By and by the arid levels of sand change to equally arid levels of rock. The coral formation which is the backbone of lowest Florida here rises to the surface, showing everywhere in minute, multitudinous, interlacing mountain ranges of gray that snarl the surface with ridges and peaks a foot high, entwining craters a foot in diameter. In the craters only is soil and in these grow tired and dusty saw palmettos. The railroad builders, seeking earth to put about the ties, have scooped the dirt out of these near-by craters, leaving the surface pitted with their yawning mouths till, looking down upon it at the stations, one is reminded of the moon's surface as seen through a good-sized telescope.

I say stations. These imply man, and here you find him, working in his own small, patient way with the climate for the redemption of the land. It may be that new gardens like those of Palm Beach are to be "wrested from the stubborn glebe" here and eventually make



the wilderness blossom like the rose, with it. Certainly such gardening is done by main strength. Dynamite and sledge and pick are the tools and vast walls of rock surround such acreage as is partially subdued. They plant orange trees by blowing out a hole with dynamite, filling it in again with such soil as may be purloined from potholes and setting the young tree in the middle.

What these trees are going to do when their roots fill these submerged flower pots and clamor for more soil I cannot say. The country is very young yet and may solve its own problems as it goes along. Between the ribs in this bony structure of the State lie little parallels here and there of real soil. Here again is man at work. He plants these tiny prairies with tomatoes, peppers, egg plants and other tropical vegetables in the dead of winter, whispering, I have no doubt, many prayers to his patron saint for luck. If his prayers are answered his harvest is bountiful and his reward great. Great also is his risk. Winter frosts may nip his budding vines and hopes, winter flood may drown them in the saucer-like prairies; and even the summer-like climate may be his bane, tropic thunder showers sometimes bringing hail which beats his garden to a frazzle and leaves it for hours under an inch or two of noduled ice.

The courage of the pioneer is proverbial. It seems to me that of the Dade County pioneer ranks as high as any. His land may some day be beautiful. To-day it is the stretch of purgatory which lies between one paradise and another, for through it one passes from Palm Beach down into the miraculous sea.

Even as far north as the play garden of the money gods you have wide glimpses of the miracle. There are days at Palm Beach when the sea is simply the sea as one may know it at Atlantic Beach or Nantasket, magical and mysterious always but lighted by no miraculous inner fires.

Again there come times of tide and sun when a wonder of color wells up from its depths, when it amazes with inner glows of gold and green and azure, and fires the skyline with smoky purples. Their subtle beauty lingers with you long after other impressions of the place have passed, a memory that is a promise of delight, the lure which the Gulf Stream scatters far toward the cold waters of the North. Circe has all who see it within the slender, elastic bonds of her magic and the lure of it will never be withdrawn. He who with seeing eyes has known the call must some day come back to the very source, or die dreaming of what it must be.

You get the first look at this as your train slides off the mainland onto the first key and



it flashes upon you again and again as you pass from one islet to the next or roar by some tiny bay where cocoanut palms lean over waters for the describing of which language has yet no fit words. Someone has said that in the building of North America all the chips and dust left over were dumped offshore and thus Florida was made. If so the sea which bathes its southernmost tip of coral islands must surely be formed from the dust of all gems that have been put into the ground for mines since the world was first conceived.

Here by the very railroad is a shallow lagoon, dredged out by the builders for all I know, whose color is the semi-opaque, semi-translucent white of pearls. Another has no hint of these gems of the sea but is a deep topaz. Anon the free tides wash the embankment with waves of mother-of-pearl that leap from shallows of a blue so soft and pure that to look upon it is to cry out with happiness. The heaven of poets and founders of loving creeds can have no purer hue than this. Beyond again the sea deepens through shining purples into sudden shoals of emerald and jade, that bar it from the distant stretch of the horizon where the depth and richness of the violet blue are a joy that is half a pain so deeply does it stir the soul.

I have said this sea is made of dust of all gems. It is more than that. It is as if it were steeped with all dreams of purity and nobility, all holy desires and longings unutterable, here made visible to the eye of man in miracles of translucent color. The memory of it stays with you as does the memory of music that has stirred the soul to such happiness and dear desires that the eyes are wet with wistful tears at the thought.

The eye finds the land of the keys little but a repetition of the dusty purgatory through which the train has brought him to the place of dreams. The rock-ribbed foundation is the same, though the vegetation is more luxuriant and varied. The palmettos seem to give up the struggle to maintain a hold upon the slender soil as you swing in bird-like flight from islet to islet, and to be replaced in part anyway by the slender-stemmed silver palm, which looks a bit like a spindling scion of a noble race. The red wood of the royal poinciana trees is everywhere visible, and these in the blooming season make the favored spots a flame of crimson fire. Beneath is a wild tangle of shrubbery, whose components are hardly to be differentiated in passing. Where clear beaches of coral strand rim round some opalescent bay the cocoanut palms feather the ground with shadowy fronds.

Along the side of the railway are to be seen the tall palm-like stems of the West Indian papaw, and one can but think that the negro laborers who made the grade have planted the seeds of the well-loved fruit, so regular and persistent are these rows, which stand up like grotesque telegraph poles along this railroad which, as we flee onward from key to key, more



and more impresses one with the might of a dominating idea. At the water-gaps in the flood of color are dredges and pile-drivers sturdily repairing the destruction which the West India hurricane of the previous autumn wrought on these seemingly indestructible foundations. Where the two miles and more of concrete viaduct is expected one finds the train running gingerly on piling and marl refilling, the supposed everlasting foundation having been ripped out in a night by the wind and sea. Men cling like birds to slender staging or insecure foothold, swaying to one side to let the train pass, then swaying back again to go on with their work. Through the piling beneath race the sapphire tides, and to lose hold for a moment is to be drowned in a suffocating transparency of miraculous color.

A lean, knob-muscle navy, who has been half-comatose, slumped in an awkward heap in his seat, rouses to the hail of these men as we pass, and becomes excited over the work. He explains that he has been in the hospital for five months, and is just on his way back to the job. The hurricane took his tent from over his head while he was eating his dinner, picked him up bodily and hurled him against a pile of railroad iron, breaking a leg and other bones. Some of his fellow-workers suffered similarly, some disappeared utterly, drowned in the opalescence, such toll does the sea take when man penetrates her mysteries too boldly with his puny strength.

Yet if man's strength is puny his mind is bold, daring as the sea itself, and one appreciates that as the train spins on. By and by the road leaves the embankment and winds tottering out on piling, far into the very sea itself, while above loom mighty concrete buttresses carrying a bridging of railroad iron on steel trestles. A little later it crawls beneath these trestles in the mighty space between two buttresses and as one holds his breath in suspense comes to a stop on a dock at the western tip of Knight's Key. Beyond that the railroad in the sea is still in a measure fluent in the minds of its originators and builders, not having fully crystallized in concrete and iron. You sail thence four hours or more over the miraculous water, viewing as you go the fragments of this labor of titans slowly growing along key after key, waiting yet to be fully pieced together, till you make port beneath the friendly harbor lights of Key West.

The cleansing tides and the east winds which surge perpetually over the island keep the city of twenty thousand inhabitants serenely healthy on Key West, without wells or sewers, paving or street cleaning. Walking along the dusty streets where shack-like wooden houses are piled together in that good-natured confusion which marks the usual West Indian town, one does not go far without having a sudden impulse to shout with delight, for soon all roads lead to the verge of the island, the rich, soothing breath of the trade winds and a glimpse of



the miraculous sea. You may come upon this sight as often as you will, you will never get over the sudden stab of the delight of it.

If environment is the matrix of beauty the inhabitants of this favored isle should in time rival the gods and goddesses of mythology. That they do not is probably because not enough generations have succeeded each other in these surroundings. The creatures that have been longer and more intimately born of these coral keys in this bewildering sea have caught its colors. You have but to go down to the docks to see that. Here the local fishermen bring in out of the surrounding tides fishes as rainbow-hued as the waters from which they are taken.

Perhaps the commonest fish of the Key West docks is the common “grunt,” a variety which seems to correspond in habits and size with our Northern cunner or salt water perch. As “hog and hominy” is derisively said to be the mainstay diet of the Florida “cracker,” so “grits and grunts” is the favorite food of the Key West “conch.” Yet look at the amazing little fish! His gaping mouth is orange yellow within, his tail the same color. His main color is light blue traversed with narrow lines of brassy spots mingled with olive. Beneath he is white. His back is bronze and a dozen bright blue lines on his head are separated by broad, brassy marks. Here is the amberjack, as long as your arm, a vivid silver with amber tints and a gilt band from his eye to his caudal fin. Here is the angel fish, named as well I fancy for his coloring as his shape, which latter is much that of a conventionalized, flat angel with fins which somewhat humorously represent long folded wings.

If you will go to the docks you may look over the edge and see big, semi-submerged boxes containing scores of these swimming freely, waiting for the call to go up higher. This too is a blue fish with broad yellow margins to the scales, making a scheme of color as a whole that is quite as miraculous to the Northern eye as the sea from which it is taken. It is as if the wonderful blues and greens and sapphires of gem-like transparency which the sea suggests, though it is a thousand times more beautiful than these can ever be, had been by long years of association transmitted to the fishes which swim about in it. But the one vast, continuing marvel is the sea itself. Never for one hour of the day is the magic of its coloring alike; always each phase is more wonderful than the last. Within its heart of mystery are continually born new dreams that pulse in nascent beauty to the rhythm of its tides, quivering to the mind of him who looks upon them with all fond longings and the bliss of noble desires. He who is privileged to see it must be base indeed if it does not call some answering glow from within him.

