

## Chapter Eleven

### HOME, SWEET FLORIDA

. . . "Go to Florida—

"Where enterprise is enthroned—

"Where you sit and watch at twilight the fronds of the graceful palm, latticed against the fading gold of the sun-kissed sky—

"Where sun, moon and stars, at eventide, stage a welcome constituting the glorious galaxy of the firmament—

"Where the whispering breeze springs fresh from the lap of Caribbean and woos with elusive cadence like unto a mother's lullaby—

"Where the silver cycle is heaven's lavalier, and the full orbit [*sic*] its glorious pendant."

THIS outburst of unbuttoned rhetoric was written in the autumn of 1925, when the Scopes trial was receding into memory, Santa Barbara was steadying itself from the shock of earthquake, Red Grange was plunging to fame, the cornerstone of Bishop Manning's house of prayer for all people was about to be laid, Brigadier-General Smedley Butler was wishing he had never undertaken to mop up Philadelphia, *The Man Nobody Knows* was selling its ten thousands—and the Florida boom was at its height. The quotation is not, as you might imagine, from the collected lyrics of an enraptured schoolgirl, but from the conclusion of an article written for the *Miamian* by the vice-president of a bank. It faintly suggests what happened to the mental processes of supposedly hard-headed men and women when they were exposed to the most delirious fever of real-estate speculation which had attacked the United States in ninety years.

There was nothing languorous about the atmosphere of tropical Miami during that memorable summer and autumn

of 1925. The whole city had become one frenzied real-estate exchange. There were said to be 2,000 real-estate offices and 25,000 agents marketing house-lots or acreage. The shirt-sleeved crowds hurrying to and fro under the widely advertised Florida sun talked of binders and options and water-frontages and hundred-thousand-dollar profits; the city fathers had been forced to pass an ordinance forbidding the sale of property in the street, or even the showing of a map, to prevent inordinate traffic congestion. The warm air vibrated with the clatter of riveters, for the steel skeletons of skyscrapers were rising to give Miami a skyline appropriate to its metropolitan destiny. Motor-busses roared down Flagler Street, carrying "prospects" on free trips to watch dredges and steam-shovels converting the outlying mangrove swamps and the sandbars of the Bay of Biscayne into gorgeous Venetian cities for the American home-makers and pleasure-seekers of the future. The Dixie Highway was clogged with automobiles from every part of the country; a traveler caught in a traffic jam counted the license-plates of eighteen states among the sedans and flivvers waiting in line. Hotels were overcrowded. People were sleeping wherever they could lay their heads, in station waiting-rooms or in automobiles. The railroads had been forced to place an embargo on imperishable freight in order to avert the danger of famine; building materials were now being imported by water and the harbor bristled with shipping. Fresh vegetables were a rarity, the public utilities of the city were trying desperately to meet the suddenly multiplied demand for electricity and gas and telephone service, and there were recurrent shortages of ice.

How Miami grew! In 1920 its population had been only 30,000. According to the state census of 1925 it had jumped to 75,000—and probably if one had counted the newcomers of the succeeding months and Miami's share of the visitors who swarmed down to Florida from the North in one of the

mightiest popular migrations of all time, the figure would have been nearer 150,000. And this, one was told, was only a beginning. Had not S. Davies Warfield, president of the Seaboard Air Line Railway, been quoted as predicting for Miami a population of a million within the next ten years? Did not the Governor of Florida, the Honorable John W. Martin, assert that "marvelous as is the wonder-story of Florida's recent achievements, these are but heralds of the dawn"?

Everybody was making money on land, prices were climbing to incredible heights, and those who came to scoff remained to speculate.

Nor was Miami alone booming. The whole strip of coast line from Palm Beach southward was being developed into an American Riviera; for sixty-odd miles it was being rapidly staked out into fifty-foot lots. The fever had spread to Tampa, Sarasota, St. Petersburg, and other cities and towns on the West Coast. People were scrambling for lots along Lake Okeechobee, about Sanford, all through the state; even in Jacksonville, near its northern limit, the "Believers in Jacksonville" were planning a campaign which would bring their city its due in growth and riches.

## § 2

For this amazing boom, which had gradually been gathering headway for several years but had not become sensational until 1924, there were a number of causes. Let us list them categorically.

1. First of all, of course, the climate—Florida's unanswerable argument.

2. The accessibility of the state to the populous cities of the Northeast—an advantage which Southern California could not well deny.

3. The automobile, which was rapidly making America

into a nation of nomads; teaching all manner of men and women to explore their country, and enabling even the small farmer, the summer-boarding-house keeper, and the garage man to pack their families into flivvers and tour southward from auto-camp to auto-camp for a winter of sunny leisure.

4. The abounding confidence engendered by Coolidge Prosperity, which persuaded the four-thousand-dollar-a-year salesman that in some magical way he too might tomorrow be able to buy a fine house and all the good things of earth.

5. A paradoxical, widespread, but only half-acknowledged revolt against the very urbanization and industrialization of the country, the very concentration upon work, the very routine and smoke and congestion and twentieth-century standardization of living upon which Coolidge Prosperity was based. These things might bring the American business man money, but to spend it he longed to escape from them—into the free sunshine of the remembered countryside, into the easy-going life and beauty of the European past, into some never-never land which combined American sport and comfort with Latin glamour—a Venice equipped with bathtubs and electric ice-boxes, a Seville provided with three eighteen-hole golf courses.

6. The example of Southern California, which had advertised its climate at the top of its lungs and had prospered by so doing: why, argued the Floridians, couldn't Florida do likewise?

7. And finally, another result of Coolidge Prosperity: not only did John Jones expect that presently he might be able to afford a house at Boca Raton and a vacation-time of tarpon-fishing or polo, but he also was fed on stories of bold business enterprise and sudden wealth until he was ready to believe that the craziest real-estate development might be the gold-mine which would work this miracle for him.

Crazy real-estate developments? But were they crazy? By 1925 few of them looked so any longer. The men whose fantastic projects had seemed in 1923 to be evidences of megalomania were now coining millions: by the pragmatic test they were not madmen but—as the advertisements put it—inspired dreamers. Coral Gables, Hollywood-by-the-Sea, Miami Beach, Davis Islands—there they stood: mere patterns on a blue-print no longer, but actual cities of brick and concrete and stucco; unfinished, to be sure, but growing with amazing speed, while prospects stood in line to buy and every square foot within their limits leaped in price.

Long years before, a retired Congregational minister named Merrick had bought cheap land outside Miami, built a many-gabled house out of coral rock, and called it "Coral Gables." Now his son, George Edgar Merrick, had added to this parcel of land and was building what the advertisements called "America's Most Beautiful Suburb." The plan was enticing, for Merrick had had sense enough to insist upon a uniform type of architecture—what he called a "modified Mediterranean" style. By 1926 his development, which had incorporated itself as the City of Coral Gables, contained more than two thousand houses built or building, with "a bustling business center, schools, banks, hotels, apartment houses and club houses"; with shady streets, lagoons, and anchorages. Merrick advertised boldly and in original ways: at one time he engaged William Jennings Bryan to sit under a sun-umbrella on a raft in a lagoon and lecture (at a handsome price) to the crowds on the shore—not upon the Prince of Peace or the Cross of Gold, but upon the Florida climate. (Bryan's tribute to sunshine was followed with dancing by Gilda Gray.) Merrick also knew how to make a romantic virtue of necessity: having low-lying land to drain and build on, he dug canals and imported real gondolas and *gondoliers* from Venice. The Miami-Biltmore

Hotel at Coral Gables rose to a height of twenty-six stories, the country club had two eighteen-hole golf courses, and Merrick was making further audacious plans for a great casino, a yacht club, and a University of Miami. "Ten years of hard work, a hundred millions of hard money, is what George Merrick plans to spend before he rests," wrote Rex Beach in a brochure on Coral Gables. "Who can envisage what ten years will bring to that wonderland of Ponce de Leon's? Not you nor I. Nor Mr. Merrick, with all his soaring vision." (Alas for soaring vision! Among the things which ten years were to bring was an advertisement in the *New York Times* reminding the holders of nine series of bonds of the City of Coral Gables that the city had been "in default of the payment of principal and interest of a greater part of the above bonds since July 1, 1930.")

There were other miracle-workers besides Merrick. Miami Beach had been a mangrove swamp until Carl G. Fisher cut down the trees, buried their stumps under five feet of sand, fashioned lagoons and islands, built villas and hotels, and—so it was said—made nearly forty million dollars selling lots. Joseph W. Young built Hollywood-by-the-Sea on the same grand scale, and when the freight embargo cut off his supply of building materials, bought his own sea-going fleet to fetch them to his growing "city." Over on the West Coast, D. P. Davis bought two small islets in the bay at Tampa—"two small marshy clumps of mangrove, almost submerged at high tide"—and by dredging and piling sand, raised up an island on which he built paved streets, hotels, houses. On the first day when Davis offered his lots to the public he sold three million dollars' worth—though at that time it is said that not a single dredge had begun to scoop up sand!

Yes, the public bought. By 1925 they were buying anything, anywhere, so long as it was in Florida. One had only to announce a new development, be it honest or fraudulent,

be it on the Atlantic Ocean or deep in the wasteland of the interior, to set people scrambling for house lots. "Manhattan Estates" was advertised as being "not more than three-fourths of a mile from the prosperous and fast-growing city of Nettie"; there was no such city as Nettie, the name being that of an abandoned turpentine camp, yet people bought. Investigators of the claims made for "Melbourne Gardens" tried to find the place, found themselves driving along a trail "through prairie muck land, with a few trees and small clumps of palmetto," and were hopelessly mired in the mud three miles short of their destination. But still the public bought, here and elsewhere, blindly, trustingly,—natives of Florida, visitors to Florida, and good citizens of Ohio and Massachusetts and Wisconsin who had never been near Florida but made out their checks for lots in what they were told was to be "another Coral Gables" or was "next to the right of way of the new railroad" or was to be a "twenty-million-dollar city." The stories of prodigious profits made in Florida land were sufficient bait. A lot in the business center of Miami Beach had sold for \$800 in the early days of the development and had resold for \$150,000 in 1924. For a strip of land in Palm Beach a New York lawyer had been offered \$240,000 some eight or ten years before the boom; in 1923 he finally accepted \$800,000 for it; the next year the strip of land was broken up into building lots and disposed of at an aggregate price of \$1,500,000; and in 1925 there were those who claimed that its value had risen to \$4,000,000. A poor woman who had bought a piece of land near Miami in 1896 for \$25 was able to sell it in 1925 for \$150,000. Such tales were legion; every visitor to the Gold Coast could pick them up by the dozen; and many if not most of them were quite true—though the profits were largely on paper. No wonder the rush for Florida land justified the current anecdote of a native saying

to a visitor, "Want to buy a lot?" and the visitor at once replying, "Sold."

Speculation was easy—and quick. No long delays while titles were being investigated and deeds recorded; such tiresome formalities were postponed. The prevalent method of sale was thus described by Walter C. Hill of the Retail Credit Company of Atlanta in the Inspection Report issued by his concern: "Lots are bought from blueprints. They look better that way. . . . Around Miami, subdivisions, except the very large ones, are often sold out the first day of sale. Advertisements appear describing the location, extent, special features, and approximate price of the lots. Reservations are accepted. This requires a check for 10 per cent of the price of the lot the buyer expects to select. On the first day of sale, at the promoter's office in town, the reservations are called out in order, and the buyer steps up and, from a beautifully drawn blueprint, with lots and dimensions and prices clearly shown, selects a lot or lots, gets a receipt in the form of a 'binder' describing it, and has the thrill of seeing 'Sold' stamped in the blue-lined square which represents his lot, a space usually fifty by a hundred feet of Florida soil or swamp. There are instances where these first-day sales have gone into several millions of dollars. And the prices! . . . Inside lots from \$8,000 to \$20,000. Water-front lots from \$15,000 to \$25,000. Seashore lots from \$20,000 to \$75,000. And these are not in Miami. They are miles out—ten miles out, fifteen miles out, and thirty miles out."

The binder, of course, did not complete the transaction. But few people worried much about the further payments which were to come. Nine buyers out of ten bought their lots with only one idea, to resell, and hoped to pass along their binders to other people at a neat profit before even the first payment fell due at the end of thirty days. There was an immense traffic in binders—immense and profitable.



Steadily, during that feverish summer and autumn of 1925, the hatching of new plans for vast developments continued. A great many of them, apparently, were intended to be occupied by what the advertisers of Miami Beach called "America's wealthiest sportsmen, devotees of yachting and the other expensive sports," and the advertisers of Boca Raton called "the world of international wealth that dominates finance and industry . . . that sets fashions . . . the world of large affairs, smart society and leisured ease." Few of those in the land-rush seemed to question whether there would be enough devotees of yachting and men and women of leisured ease to go round.

Everywhere vast new hotels, apartment houses, casinos were being projected. At the height of the fury of building a visitor to West Palm Beach noticed a large vacant lot almost completely covered with bathtubs. The tubs had apparently been there some time; the crates which surrounded them were well weathered. The lot, he was informed, was to be the site of "one of the most magnificent apartment buildings in the South"—but the freight embargo had held up the contractor's building material and only the bathtubs had arrived! Throughout Florida resounded the slogans and hyperboles of boundless confidence. The advertising columns shrieked with them, those swollen advertising columns which enabled the *Miami Daily News*, one day in the summer of 1925, to print an issue of 504 pages, the largest in newspaper history, and enabled the *Miami Herald* to carry a larger volume of advertising in 1925 than any paper anywhere had ever before carried in a year. Miami was not only "The Wonder City," it was also "The Fair White Goddess of Cities," "The World's Playground," and "The City Invincible." Fort Lauderdale became "The Tropical Wonderland," Orlando "The City Beautiful," and Sanford "The City Substantial."

Daily the turgid stream of rhetoric poured forth to the glory of Florida. It reached its climax, perhaps, in the joint Proclamation issued by the mayors of Miami, Miami Beach, Hialeah, and Coral Gables (who modestly referred to their county as "the most Richly Blessed Community of the most Bountifully Endowed State of the most Highly Enterprising People of the Universe"), setting forth the last day of 1925 and the first two days of 1926 as "The Fiesta of the American Tropics"—"our Season of Fiesta when Love, Good Fellowship, Merrymaking, and Wholesome Sport shall prevail throughout Our Domains." The mayors promised that there would be dancing: "that our Broad Boulevards, our Beautiful Plazas and Ballroom Floors, our Patios, Clubs and Hostelries shall be the scenes where Radiant Terp-sichore and her Sparkling Devotees shall follow with Graceful Tread the Measure of the Dance." They promised much more, to the extent of a page of flatulent text sprinkled with capitals; but especially they promised "that through our Streets and Avenues shall wind a glorious Pageantry of Sublime Beauty Depicting in Floral Loveliness the Blessing Bestowed upon us by Friendly Sun, Gracious Rain, and Soothing Tropic Wind."

Presumably the fiesta was successful, with its full quota of Sparkling Devotees and Sublime Beauty. But by New-Year's Day of 1926 the suspicion was beginning to insinuate itself into the minds of the merrymakers that new buyers of land were no longer so plentiful as they had been in September and October, that a good many of those who held binders were exceedingly anxious to dispose of their stake in the most Richly Blessed Community, and that Friendly Sun and Gracious Rain were not going to be able, unassisted, to complete the payments on lots. The influx of winter visitors had not been quite up to expectations. Perhaps the boom was due for a "healthy breathing-time."

## § 3

As a matter of fact, it was due for a good deal more than that. It began obviously to collapse in the spring and summer of 1926. People who held binders and had failed to get rid of them were defaulting right and left on their payments. One man who had sold acreage early in 1925 for twelve dollars an acre, and had cursed himself for his stupidity when it was resold later in the year for seventeen dollars, and then thirty dollars, and finally sixty dollars an acre, was surprised a year or two afterward to find that the entire series of subsequent purchases was in default, that he could not recover the money still due him, and that his only redress was to take his land back again. There were cases in which the land not only came back to the original owner, but came back burdened with taxes and assessments which amounted to more than the cash he had received for it; and furthermore he found his land blighted with a half-completed development.

Just as it began to be clear that a wholesale deflation was inevitable, two hurricanes showed what a Soothing Tropic Wind could do when it got a running start from the West Indies.

No malevolent Providence bent upon the teaching of humility could have struck with a more precise aim than the second and worst of these Florida hurricanes. It concentrated upon the exact region where the boom had been noisiest and most hysterical—the region about Miami. Hitting the Gold Coast early in the morning of September 18, 1926, it piled the waters of Biscayne Bay into the lovely Venetian developments, deposited a five-masted steel schooner high in the street at Coral Gables, tossed big steam yachts upon the avenues of Miami, picked up trees, lumber, pipes, tiles, débris, and even small automobiles and

sent them crashing into the houses, ripped the roofs off thousands of jerry-built cottages and villas, almost wiped out the town of Moore Haven on Lake Okeechobee, and left behind it some four hundred dead, sixty-three hundred injured, and fifty thousand homeless. Valiantly the Floridians insisted that the damage was not irreparable; so valiantly, in fact, that the head of the American Red Cross, John Barton Payne, was quoted as charging that the officials of the state had "practically destroyed" the national Red Cross campaign for relief of the homeless. Mayor Romfh of Miami declared that he saw no reason "why this city should not entertain her winter visitors the coming season as comfortably as in past seasons." But the Soothing Tropic Wind had had its revenge; it had destroyed the remnants of the Florida boom.

By 1927, according to Homer B. Vanderblue, most of the elaborate real-estate offices on Flagler Street in Miami were either closed or practically empty; the Davis Islands project, "bankrupt and unfinished," had been taken over by a syndicate organized by Stone & Webster; and many Florida cities, including Miami, were having difficulty collecting their taxes. By 1928 Henry S. Villard, writing in *The Nation*, thus described the approach to Miami by road: "Dead subdivisions line the highway, their pompous names half-obliterated on crumbling stucco gates. Lonely white-way lights stand guard over miles of cement sidewalks, where grass and palmetto take the place of homes that were to be. . . . Whole sections of outlying subdivisions are composed of unoccupied houses, past which one speeds on broad thoroughfares as if traversing a city in the grip of death." In 1928 there were thirty-one bank failures in Florida; in 1929 there were fifty-seven; in both of these years the liabilities of the failed banks reached greater totals than were recorded for any other state in the Union. The Mediterranean fruit-fly added to the gravity of the local economic situation in

1929 by ravaging the citrus crop. Bank clearings for Miami, which had climbed sensationally to over a billion dollars in 1925, marched sadly downhill again:

1925 . . . . .	\$1,066,528,000
1926 . . . . .	632,867,000
1927 . . . . .	260,039,000
1928 . . . . .	143,364,000
1929 . . . . .	142,316,000

And those were the very years when elsewhere in the country prosperity was triumphant! By the middle of 1930, after the general business depression had set in, no less than twenty-six Florida cities had gone into default of principal or interest on their bonds, the heaviest defaults being those of West Palm Beach, Miami, Sanford, and Lake Worth; and even Miami, which had a minor issue of bonds maturing in August, 1930, confessed its inability to redeem them and asked the bondholders for an extension.

The cheerful custom of incorporating real-estate developments as "cities" and financing the construction of all manner of improvements with "tax-free municipal bonds," as well as the custom on the part of development corporations of issuing real-estate bonds secured by new structures located in the boom territory, were showing weaknesses unimagined by the inspired dreamers of 1925. Most of the millions piled up in paper profits had melted away, many of the millions sunk in developments had been sunk for good and all, the vast inverted pyramid of credit had toppled to earth, and the lesson of the economic falsity of a scheme of land values based upon grandiose plans, preposterous expectations, and hot air had been taught in a long agony of deflation.

For comfort there were only a few saving facts to cling to. Florida still had her climate, her natural resources. The people of Florida still had energy and determination, and having recovered from their debauch of hope, were learning

from the relentless discipline of events. Not all Northerners who had moved to Florida in the days of plenty had departed in the days of adversity. Far from it: the census of 1930, in fact, gave Florida an increase in population of over 50 per cent since 1920—a larger increase than that of any other state except California—and showed that in the same interval Miami had grown by nearly 400 per cent. Florida still had a future; there was no doubt of that, sharp as the pains of enforced postponement were. Nor, for that matter, were the people of Florida alone blameworthy for the insanity of 1925. They, perhaps, had done most of the shouting, but the hysteria which had centered in their state had been a national hysteria, enormously increased by the influx of outlanders intent upon making easy money.

#### § 4

The Florida boom, in fact, was only one—and by all odds the most spectacular—of a series of land and building booms during the Post-war Decade, each of which had its marked effect upon the national economy and the national life.

At the very outset of the decade there had been a sensational market in farm lands, caused by the phenomenal prices brought by wheat and other crops during and immediately after the war. Prices of farm property leaped, thousands of mortgages and loans were based upon these exaggerated values, and when the bottom dropped out of the agricultural markets in 1920-21, the distress of the farmers was intensified by the fact that in innumerable cases they could not get money enough from their crops to cover the interest due at the bank or to pay the taxes which were now levied on the increased valuation. Thousands of country banks, saddled with mortgages and loans in default, ultimately went to the wall. In one of the great agricultural states, the average earnings of *all* the national and state banks

during the years 1924-29, a time of great prosperity for the country at large, were less than  $1\frac{1}{2}$  per cent; and in seven states of the country, between 40 and 50 per cent of the banks which had been in business prior to 1920 had failed before 1929. Just how many of these failures were directly attributable to the undisciplined rise and subsequent fall in real-estate prices it is, of course, impossible to say; but undoubtedly many of the little country banks which suffered so acutely would never have gone down to ruin if there had been no boom in farm lands.

All through the decade, but especially during and immediately after the Florida fever, there was an epidemic of ambitious schemes hatched by promoters and boosters to bring prosperity to various American cities, towns, and resorts, by presenting each of them, in sumptuous advertisements, circulars, and press copy put out by hustling chambers of commerce, as the "center of a rising industrial empire" or as the "new playground of America's rich." Some of these ventures prospered; in California, for example, where the technic of boosting had been brought to poetic perfection long years previously, concerted campaigns brought industries, winter visitors, summer visitors, and good fortune for the business man and the hotel-keeper alike. It was estimated that a million people a year went to California "just to look and play"—and, of course, to spend money. But not all such ventures could prosper, the number of factories and of wealthy vacationists being unhappily limited. City after city, hoping to attract industries within its limits, eloquently pointed out its "advantages" and tried to "make its personality felt" and to "carry its constructive message to the American people"; but at length it began to dawn upon the boosters that attracting industries bore some resemblance to robbing Peter to pay Paul, and that if all of them were converted to boosting, each of them was as likely to find itself in the rôle of Peter as in that of

Paul. And exactly as the developers of the tropical wonderlands of Florida had learned that there were more land-speculators able and willing to gamble in houses intended for the polo-playing class than there were members of this class, so also those who carved out playgrounds for the rich in North Carolina or elsewhere learned to their ultimate sorrow that the rich could not play everywhere at once. And once more the downfall of their bright hopes had financial repercussions, as bankrupt developments led to the closing of bank after bank.

Again, all through the decade, but especially during its middle years, there was a boom in suburban lands outside virtually every American city. As four million discouraged Americans left the farms, and the percentage of city-dwellers in the United States increased from 51.4 to 57.6, and the cities grew in size and in stridency, and urban traffic became more noisy and congested, and new high buildings cut off the city-dweller's light and air, the drift of families from the cities to the urban-rural compromise of the neighboring countryside became more rapid. Here again the automobile played its part in changing the conditions of American life, by bringing within easy range of the suburban railroad station, and thus of the big city, great stretches of woodland and field which a few years before had seemed remote and inaccessible. Attractive suburbs grew with amazing speed, blossoming out with brand-new Colonial farmhouses (with attached garage), Tudor cottages (with age-old sagging roofs constructed by inserting wedge-shaped blocks of wood at the ends of the roof-trees), and Spanish stucco haciendas (with built-in radios). Once more the real-estate developer had his golden opportunity. The old Jackson farm with its orchards and daisy-fields was staked out in lots and attacked by the steam-shovel and became Jacobean Heights or Colonial Terrace or Alhambra Gardens, with paved roads, twentieth-century com-



forts, Old World charm, and land for sale on easy payments.

On the immediate outskirts of great cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Detroit huge tracts were less luxuriously developed. The Borough of Queens, just across the East River from New York, grew vastly and hideously: its population more than doubled during the decade, reaching a total of over a million. Outside Detroit immense districts were subdivided and numerous lots in them were bought by people so poor that they secured permits to build "garage dwellings"—temporary one-room shacks—and lived in them for years without ever building real houses. So furious was the competition among developers that it was estimated that in a single year there were subdivided in the Chicago region enough lots to accommodate the growth of the city for twenty years to come (at the rate at which it had previously grown), and that by the end of the decade enough lots had been staked out between Patchogue, Long Island, and the New York City limits to house the entire metropolitan population of six millions.

For a time the Florida boom had a picturesque influence on suburban developments. Many of them went Venetian. There was, for example, American Venice, thirty-four miles from New York on Long Island, where the first bridge to be built was "a replica of the famous Della Paglia Bridge at Venice," and the whole scene, according to the promoters, "recalls the famous city of the Doges, only more charming—and more homelike." "To live at American Venice," chanted one of the advertisements of this proposed retreat for stockbrokers and insurance salesmen, "is to quaff the very Wine of Life. . . . A turquoise lagoon under an aquamarine sky! Lazy gondolas! Beautiful Italian gardens! . . . And, ever present, the waters of the Great South Bay lapping lazily all day upon a beach as white and fine as the soul of a little child." And there was Biltmore Shores, also de-

veloped on Long Island (by William Fox of the movies and Jacob Frankel of the clothing business), where, in 1926, "an artistic system of canals and waterways" was advertised as being "in progress of completion."

The Venetian phase of the suburban boom was of short duration: after 1926 the mention of lagoons introduced painful thoughts into the minds of prospective purchasers. But the suburban boom itself did not begin to languish in most localities until 1928 or 1929. By that time many suburbs were plainly overbuilt: as one drove out along the highways, one began to notice houses that must have stood long untenanted, shops with staring vacant windows, districts blighted with half-finished and abandoned "improvements"; one heard of suburban apartment houses which had changed hands again and again as mortgages were foreclosed, or of householders in uncompleted subdivisions who were groaning under a naïvely unexpected burden of taxes and assessments. Yet even then it was clear that, like Florida, the suburb had a future. The need of men and women for space and freedom, as well as for access to the centers of population, had not come to an end.

The final phase of the real-estate boom of the nineteen-twenties centered in the cities themselves. To picture what happened to the American sky line during those years, compare a 1920 airplane view of almost any large city with one taken in 1930. There is scarcely a city which does not show a bright new cluster of skyscrapers at its center. The tower-building mania reached its climax in New York—since towers in the metropolis are a potent advertisement—and particularly in the Grand Central district of New York. Here the building boom attained immense proportions, coming to its peak of intensity in 1928. New pinnacles shot into the air forty stories, fifty stories, and more; between 1918 and 1930 the amount of space available for office use in large modern buildings in that district was multiplied approxi-

mately by ten. In a photograph of uptown New York taken from the neighborhood of the East River early in 1931, the twenty most conspicuous structures were all products of the Post-war Decade. The tallest two of all, to be sure, were not completed until after the panic of 1929; by the time the splendid shining tower of the Empire State Building stood clear of scaffolding there were apple salesmen shivering on the curbstone below. Yet it was none the less a monument to the abounding confidence of the days in which it was conceived.

The confidence had been excessive. Skyscrapers had been over-produced. In the spring of 1931 it was reliably stated that some 17 per cent of the space in the big office buildings of the Grand Central district, and some 40 per cent of that in the big office buildings of the Plaza district farther uptown, was not bringing in a return; owners of new skyscrapers were inveigling business concerns into occupying vacant floors by offering them space rent-free for a period or by assuming their leases in other buildings; and financiers were shaking their heads over the precarious condition of many realty investments in New York. The metropolis, too, had a future, but speculative enthusiasm had carried it upward a little too fast.

## § 5

After the Florida hurricane, real-estate speculation lost most of its interest for the ordinary man and woman. Few of them were much concerned, except as householders or as spectators, with the building of suburban developments or of forty-story experiments in modernist architecture. Yet the national speculative fever which had turned their eyes and their cash to the Florida Gold Coast in 1925 was not chilled; it was merely checked. Florida house-lots were a bad bet? Very well, then, said a public still enthralled by the

radiant possibilities of Coolidge Prosperity: what else was there to bet on? Before long a new wave of popular speculation was accumulating momentum. Not in real-estate this time; in something quite different. The focus of speculative infection shifted from Flagler Street, Miami, to Broad and Wall Streets, New York. The Big Bull Market was getting under way.