

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Hop to Havana*

I HAVE a very fond regard for Florida, especially when New York is full of snow and ice and cold winds and synthetic Santas blowing on their blue fingers at street corners in between spells of rattling the collection box under the snoots of the citizens.

Getting down to cases, I have a very particularly fond regard for Miami at such a time of year, and if there is one spot in Miami that I dearly love to be in just around dusk it is the bright Southern Cross bar of the Key West Hotel. And by a strange coincidence that was just where I happened to be at this time I am going to tell you about.

It is a very cozy, intimate bar indeed, the Southern Cross.

And talking of being intimate. I was thinking along these lines concerning the blonde, who sat perched on the red-topped mushroom stool at the far end of the bar, just beyond where Harry was going into his voodoo act with a frosty cocktail shaker.

She would be about shoulder-high and slim without being planed down like a plank. She was wearing an evening gown, which hampered the view somewhat so far as her lower section went, but what it covered below the waistline it showed above it, and what it showed was plenty of what makes men leave home. She was, in fact, neatly assembled and all the essential parts were there.

For the rest of it, she had a wide mouth that looked all the time like it was cooking up a warm, sunny smile; blue eyes like a blonde ought to have, and a cute little snoot that I was prepared to bet real money would crinkle up when she finally brought that smile into the light.

She had looked along the bar at me when she came in and when she looked she looked in that certain way that said right out loud in Florida that I could buy her a drink if I liked.

I liked, okay. The only thing I didn't like was the jewelry