

CHAPTER VI

THE COCOPALM

South Florida is the only part of the mainland of the United States of North America where the cocopalms and mahogany naturally grow. If properly protected in youth they can be grown in the Everglades region. No man can starve where the cocopalms grow. All these little West Indian islands to the south of us, of many sovereignties and long suffering, because of exploitation and proselyting, some for years just pawns on the chessboard of fate, some committing suicide or slowly dying because of infections from within and without, should if possible, unite under the flag of the waving palm, the real emblem of strength, productivity, and beauty.

The most useful tree of all the world is this cocopalms because it feeds the largest number. Three hundred million people use it for food in some form almost daily and half a million tons of its oil are consumed every year in the North Temperate Zone in the form of soap, hair-oil, butter, and other articles. It is favored as a shampoo wherever hair is washed. The word "coco" is said to come from the Portuguese, meaning "monkey face", because of the fancied resemblance of the eyes of the husked nut to the face of a monkey.

The cocopalms is not found in the wild state; its original home is unknown. The Tropics of the world is now its home; it encircles the globe. The Tropics cover a central band around the earth three thousand miles wide and twenty thousand miles in girth. The Glades are just inside the northern edge of it. A large portion of this territory in the limits of the so-called

Torrid Zone is elevated and constantly cold. The cocopalm sticks to the part of it which is alkaline and frost free. One of the largest privately owned groves in the world is on Biscayne Key, to me one of the most marvelous sights in South Florida. It is one of the finest cocals in the Western Hemisphere. The cocopalm is just as much at home here as elsewhere and there are some evidences that the place of its origin might have been somewhere in the Caribbean Region, not far from Panama. It was, no doubt, freely distributed along the coasts of tropical countries to furnish oil for the hair and for lamps and lighthouses. The grove from which Palm Beach gets its name was started from the wreck of a Spanish ship with a cargo of nuts in 1879. South Florida is the only part of the mainland of the United States where it grows and on the Pacific Coast, one must travel fully five hundred miles down the Mexican Shore to find it.

From the standpoint of utility, it leads the procession in the plant world. One must live with it a long time to fully know it, but to most newcomers it has a rugged exotic beauty that attracts and fascinates. With its glistening leaves in the moonlight, silhouetted against the sky or reflected in the sea, it typifies the Tropics. A coral strand or ocean atoll looks deserted, incomplete and sterile without it. It does not demand the sea or salt, but thrives in rich, moist alkaline soil. Some of the best cocopalm groves in the world are nowhere near the sea or salt. Old sailors want to be buried in the shade of a cocopalm by the seashore, and rightly so, since this beneficent tree has, no doubt, saved many shipwrecked mariners from death by hunger and thirst. No doubt, there are many cocopalms that shade the bones of buccaneers and pirates on tropic shores.

Unlike the aristocratic royal, the cocopalm is plebian. It leans toward the water, probably because the soil has washed away on the seaside, causing the roots to be fewer and weaker. It is thus easy to climb

and has ridges where the massive leaves have been shed, which give to the barefooted native a good foothold. It is a fitting shade to the hut of a fisherman, for with his sponge-hook he can pull down at any time, a green nut and garner without cost a cool, sweet, fresh, invigorating, nourishing drink from Nature's own distillery. This liquid is under pressure and squirts like soda-pop when the nut is in the soft stage, and is a favorite food with persons who have stomach troubles. It often succeeds when other foods fail. When a child is born in the South Seas, a few more cocopalms and breadfruit are planted and thus the fear of starvation, the worst of wolves, is kept forever from the door. When the mother's milk fails in the South Sea Islands, the babies are reared on the jelly of young coconuts.

The white meat of the ripe nut is the **copra** of commerce used in a hundred or more ways and when ground very fine, forms a cream which is delicious on fruits. **Coconut-snow** is a rich breakfast food. When mixed with fruit juices, it forms a balanced ration. Ice cream flavored with fresh coconut is popular, and rightly so, because it is a delicious and nutritious food and is quite the equal of the other two great tropical flavorings, vanilla and chocolate. In many parts of the Tropics you can see chickens, goats, dogs, pigs and pickaninnies all feeding in the same yard at the same time on the white meat of the coconut. The pork of pigs fed on coconut is of superior quality and flavor. Set the nuts in beds slant-wise, eyes up, but not too deep. Cover them with trash, rotten seaweed is good, keep them moist and they will soon sprout.

It has been pictured in the past as a perfect adaptation to the seashore. What the date is to desert, the cocopalm is to the tropic shore. Although the date must have its head in the fires of Heaven, its feet are in water. The oily nut floats high and long in water. The husk protects it from breaking when it falls on the hard sand or rocky beach. If it conforms to the

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old time formula, it floats and floats until washed on some muddy shore which the coral-polyps, the waves, and the mangroves have been many a year in the making. Soon the little palm springs from one of the three eyes in the end of the nut. The leaves are at first simple, but later form into great compound fronds fifteen or more feet in length. In a few years, seldom under five, it produces bunches of nuts in all stages for many years. Then the mangrove island becomes fit for some smoky-colored, semi-nude sea-islander who from the palm, can garner the necessities of life with a few of the luxuries on the side. With a homemade guitar and a homemade cigar and a homemade hammock of sisal, he can rest in bliss in the shade of the palms. With the fish in the sea and the turtles that lay on the beach, starvation is not possible. Man's ultimate wants are shelter, food, and drink. The cocopalm supplies them all and then some. An ordinary coconut will probably weigh six pounds. The best groves of cocopalms on this hemisphere are in eastern Nicaragua. They continuously bear an average of one hundred and seventy large, full nuts per palm throughout the year and have leaves twenty-five feet long in that rich land of heavy rainfall.

It is a shame to spoil a good story and to upset a time-honored example of perfect adaptation, but there are many who believe that the coconut does not float far, that it soon loses its vitality when soaked in salt water, that it rarely sprouts when washed on the beach, and that it has been spread around the globe solely by the hand of man. The waves wash the tree half over, break over it, bang great booms against it and its lusty fronds rustle and tussle in gales, but it lives on to a ripe old age and carries on in spite of abuse, and does more than its share in furnishing food and shelter and in breaking the force of tempestuous winds. Each healthy palm is guyed to the ground by three thousand or more tough, wire-like

roots which feed in the coral rock and coral sand on the brackish shore.

In parts of the Tropics the flower stalks are cut while green and tender and to the stub of the stem is attached a light bamboo trough. Several of these may be thus treated and several troughs thus led to gourds or calabashes awaiting the liquid which oozes out and tickles down in the form of a snappy cider or toddy. Think of a bungalow closely surrounded by cocopalms with bamboo conduits leading this cidery juice slowly but continuously into a pitcher on the kitchen table! This palm is the source of sugar in the Far East, also of alcohol. The strong drink "arrack" is supposed to be concocted from palm-sugar. Fresh palm sugar, called "jaggery," is quite as good and quite as full of flavor as the famous product of the maple tree.

From the outside of the nut comes the husk, from the fiber of which cordage and coco-matting are manufactured. This husk is hard to remove unless you know how, but there is a crab in the South Seas that has learned the trick. This matting has long been preferred for church aisles and office floors. Rope from this fiber does not deteriorate quickly when wet. It can be pressed into a board resembling leather. The hard shells are often beautifully carved and used for utensils of various kinds. On the shells of these nuts tribal records are often exquisitely and accurately carved. Except for the laws, palm-butter would soon become, if not already, a serious rival to animal butter.

The wood called porcupine-wood, because of its spiny appearance, is hard on tools and of little value. Like the rest of the palms, it has only one terminal bud. When this is killed by accident or disease, the tree dies.

There are those who grow very fond of cocopalms when grouped by the shimmering, particolored sea of the Tropics with many things, dear to the heart of

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the native, such as saponillas, guavas, limes, pineapples, soursops, starapples and other fruits, growing in their protective shade.

The cocopalm and other trees such as the mahogany, mango, avocado, and breadfruit, love the coral islands and so do the natives of the South Seas who carry rich dirt from volcanic regions to cover the jagged limestone in their gardens of everbearing plants. Cattle eat the leaves and the husks are fine for fuel.

Binding the leaves around the stem there is a natural cloth which has been used for many purposes. This may have suggested the weaving of cloth to primitive man. There are hundreds of little islands near to us where the cocopalm and breadfruit grow, the two greatest food gifts of Nature to man.