

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE BANANA AND THE PAPAWE.



NEVER cease to marvel at the banana and the papaw. Statisticians who have predicted a famine from the increase of population without a corresponding increase in the production of breadstuffs have neglected one potent factor—the banana.

The papaw or papaya is another succulent, quick-growing, prolific tropical fruit-producer, belonging in the same class of marvels with the banana, but is not related to it.

The banana has been the cause of the formation of steamship lines to the tropics; it has caused the building of railroads within the tropics; it has figured conspicuously in Spanish-American politics, and even the dreaded Black Hand is known to many as "the Society of the Banana." We are now importing \$12,000,000 worth of bananas annually.

The banana is marvelous because of its prolific nature, yet it forms no seeds, and the great bunch of foodstuff when not used by man or other animals simply rots, and the stalk which produced it dies to give space to another to repeat the performance.

With me the banana is a favorite crop. I dig a deep hole in moist soil or muck. Into this hole I empty my waste basket containing old letters, newspapers, returned manuscripts, etc.; also the kitchen barrel containing tin cans and other stuff that the chickens will not eat; then I throw in sweepings, rakings, old fertilizer bags, old iron, useless wood, bottles, and trash of any and every kind. On top of this I put a good forkful of stable manure and then some sand or muck. Then the banana root, often no bigger than your two fists, dry and lifeless-looking, after having been kicked about in the sun for a few days,

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waiting for planting time, is stuck into the ground and covered with a few inches of dirt.

In three months, if the weather is good, you may sit in the grateful shade of this big green-leaved plant. I almost called it a tree, because its stalk is as big as a man's leg and its foliage may be several feet above your head, but according to the definitions a tree must have a central *woody* axis, and to the banana there is no woody texture; it is all as soft as a cabbage and is usually completely consumed in a short time when left to chickens.

Within a year a bunch of fruit is produced which a man can hardly carry—a bunch so big that it often bends the plant to the ground unless propped by forked sticks. As soon as the bunch and stalk are cut, up shoots another and another. A dozen or more suckers are at the same time produced so that more and more may be planted. What an active chemical laboratory this plant is to form so much leaf and stalk and fruit from soil and atmosphere in less than a year!

It is a sight seldom forgotten to see picturesque Indians in Central America working in banana plantations where the plants have met to form a forest-like canopy. In Mexico there are young coffee trees in the shade of these banana plants. I have seen the semi-nude Karif women of British Honduras meet the ship far from shore with their dugouts loaded to the gunwales with bananas.

But the most marvelous kind of banana culture may be seen in the Bahamas, on the Island of Eleuthera. Here there are deep holes called "banana holes" some of which are fifty or sixty or more feet in depth. At the bottom of these holes is moist rich earth. They are just like deep dry wells. A banana root is planted in a basket of soil, which is lowered with a rope to the bottom. The root sprouts and the stem shoots up like magic till it reaches the top of the hole. Then the foliage spreads out in the sunshine like flowers in a vase. There it grows and forms its bunch protected from the wind in the cool moist recesses of the hole. The bunch is formed at the surface of the ground, so that the enterprising native has but to pull it over

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with boat or sponge hook, sever it from the stalk with his machete, and walk proudly home with a week's provender for himself and family on his head—a fitting illustration of man's mastery over nature.

Little wonder that the native of the tropics is a lover of leisure; little wonder that he rests content in his palm-thatched hut amid his beloved bananas.

A good papaw will bear a hundred or more melon-like fruits, a fruit to the axil of each leaf, ripe at the bottom and in all stages of development up to the bloom. The staminate and pistillate flowers are usually on separate plants, and the fruit varies a great deal in quality.

The fruit contains a large quantity of black, peppery seeds which may be removed *en masse*, as in the case of the cantaloup. A good papaw, cold and treated with sugar and lime-juice, is relished by many people on a par with a muskmelon. The seeds are usually scattered in the midst of rubbish during the rainy season. As soon as the plants begin to bloom, all but one or two staminate plants are destroyed. In the course of a few months one may begin to pick papaws every day or so.

Of course some people have to learn to like them, but one lady that I know, of good habits, will steal this fruit when buying and begging fail. She has for the papaw the same irresistible longing that the negro has for the watermelon.

Next in wonder to the prolific nature of this fruit is the marvelous fact that it contains a natural food-digester, a ferment now famous the world over as a medicine. Under various patent names it enters into the lists of many drug firms. By means of it men have already accumulated fortunes—not the producer, but the manufacturer and peddler who invent appealing names and have them patented.

I have before me a sample bottle containing one hundred pills for twenty-five cents. It is marked "Physician's sample. Our own preparation of the digestive juice of *Carica papaya* with willow charcoal." It is also marked a sure cure for dyspepsia or indigestion. I have often wondered where all this juice comes from. I have traveled in many parts of the tropics,

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but have never seen or heard of anybody collecting it, and the plant will not grow north of the frost line.

How fortunate the dweller in the tropics! If his meat is tough he can wrap it in papaw leaves over night and it will be tender in the morning. If his meal has disagreed with him, he can step into his back yard and pick and eat a papaw for dessert.

Both bananas and papaws, however, are picked when full, but still green. This must be done to save them from the rats and birds. The tropical planter has bananas to roast and bananas to fry, sweet bananas and acid bananas, big bananas and little bananas, yellow bananas and red bananas—in fact, varieties galore.

If his bananas are slow to ripen, he can hurry the process by putting the bunch in a barrel and filling the barrel with warm air and smoke. This is easily done by turning the barrel upside down, hanging the bunch to a nail in the bottom which is now the top, and building a small fire in the hole in the earth under it.

In a native school in India I have been told the pupils are fed almost exclusively on bananas. Bananas must be had at all times in proper condition. So they have a trench in the earth arranged in such a way that they can fill it with bananas, warm air, and smoke at any time and thus hasten the process of ripening.

The banana has been in a way the emancipator of the tropics. In many instances it has led the native out of thralldom. In many places from which bananas are not shipped he must work in the fields at a small recompense. At banana ports he can usually receive a cash payment for every full bunch. With bananas to eat and bananas to sell, the copper-colored native can rest in his home-made hammock, thump his home-made guitar, and smoke his home-made cigar with only one worry, and that is that he might at any time be forced to serve in the army of either the *de facto* or *de jure* government, for the cause of liberty. Even so he knows that the folks at home can live on the bananas and papaws and other fruits and vegetables growing in a semi-wild state around his bungalow.