

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE COCO PALM.



IT IS so much better to call this tree the "coco palm" than the "cocoanut palm tree." There seems also no reason for spelling coconut with *a* in it. The source of this word is probably not known, but when no other source is plausible, ancient Greek or Latin is sought, and a possible origin is guessed at, for instance the Greek *kokkus*, a berry. As another instance the natives of the Bahamas are called "Conchs," apparently because they are fond of the shellfish called conch, from the Latin *concha*, a shell. It more than likely comes from a very old English word similarly spelled, meaning a "beach thief," or "beachcomber."

The use of an *a* in the word simply helps to confound it with cacao, coca, and a few other plant names with similar spelling. The Spanish call it *coco*, and the German *kokos-palme*. The generic name is *Cocos*, the specific name *nucifera*, and when Linnaeus called it nuciferous, or nut-bearing, he perpetuated in its name its most striking quality. The use of the word "perpetuated" is good, since *Cocos nucifera* is one of the few plant names which have not been changed a dozen or more times by ardent botanists.

From the standpoint of utility, the coco palm leads the procession in the tree world. As to beauty, that depends altogether on the character of your art education. I have heard both the royal palm and coco palm likened to huge feather dusters set on end over the landscape. This much is certain—a coral strand without coco palms would look like Father Time without his whiskers.



## THE EVERGLADES

In spite of the fact that the fruits of the royal palm are only used for pigfeed, this tree is more stately and aristocratic than the coco palm. It is perfectly straight, smooth, and columnar and well fitted for avenues leading up to Southern mansions. The coco palm, on the other hand, is plebeian. It bends accommodatingly at the start, and has pronounced ridges where the massive leaves have fallen away, which give the monkey-like pickaninny a good toehold.

It is a fitting shade to the hut of a fisherman, for with a long-handled sponge hook he can pull down at any time a green nut which yields a cool, sweet, fresh, invigorating drink from nature's own distillery. Strange to say, this liquid is under pressure and, although there is not the decided "pop" which is always looked for in the case of a soft drink, there is a good active "squirt" indicating that the water is fresh and the nut sound. Inside, under the shell, which in this stage is just beginning to harden, there is a layer of soft nutritious jelly.

The white meat of the ripe nut is used for candy, feed for animals, and, when ground very fine, makes a cream which is delicious on fruits, etc. I have seen chickens, goats, dogs, pigs, and pickaninnies all feeding in the same yard at the same time on the white meat of the coconut.

The coco palm is a queer tree—it seems to love the winds and salt of the seashore; yet some scientist has tried to prove that its home is inland on a high plateau in South America.

It has been pictured in times past as a perfect adaptation to the seashore. What the date is to the desert, the coco palm is to the strand. The hard shell of the nut is filled with a rich oily meat which floats high. The germ is protected and well supplied with nutriment for the days of its youth. On the outside of the shell there is a pad of fiber which protects it when it falls to the hard coral strand. The nut will not break when it falls; it bounds and rolls like a ball down the incline into the sea, and floats and floats and floats till washed on some muddy shore which the coral polyps, the waves, and the mangrove trees have been many a year in making. Then it is gradually covered with sand and seaweed by wind and wave. Soon the tree springs from



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one of the three eyes in the end of the nut. The leaves are at first simple, and in youth the tree needs shade, which it gets naturally from the bushes on the shore. Soon it throws out great compound leaves of woody texture, some of which are fully fifteen feet in length. Think of leaves fifteen feet long! In a few years, seldom under five, it bears a bunch of nuts, followed by other bunches in all stages of growth.

Then the mangrove island is fit for human habitation, fit for the home of some smoky colored, semi-nude sea-islander, who from this palm can garner all the necessities and a few of the luxuries of life. With the fish in the sea by the shore, and the turtles that lie and lay on the beach, starvation is not possible. Man's ultimate wants are shelter, food, and drink. The coco palm supplies them all, with more besides.

The Negro who lives in the shade of this useful tree has also fortunately developed a thick skull-shell, covered with a mat of tow. And well so, since the fall of a coconut from a sixty-foot palm is nigh like a ball from the cannon's mouth. A single fruit of the double coconut of the Seychelle Islands weighs from forty to fifty pounds. Our common coconut when green will weigh at least five pounds. Over in Brazil men wear bucklers of wood to protect themselves from the fall of the balls of Brazil-nuts. These actually plant themselves when they hit the soft, moist earth of the jungle.

Still there are scientists at work who have proved, to their own satisfaction at least, that the coconut does not float far, that it soon loses its vitality when soaked in salt water, that it rarely sprouts when washed upon the beach, and that it has been distributed completely round the globe mainly by the hand of man.

The waves wash the tree half over, break over it with great fury and bang great booms against it in times of storm, but it lives on and bears on in spite of abuse. Dig it up carefully and pet it with fertilizer, and it will more than likely turn yellow and die. Cut off its tough fibrous roots to the stub, and cut off its leaves, then stick it in the ground as you would plant a fence-post, and it will very likely live.



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In Porto Rico the water of the green coconut is relished by everybody. It is almost a national beverage, and a wholesome germ-free beverage it is—absolutely free from chemical adulteration and ptomaine poisoning. All through the day and late at night in Porto Rican cities may be heard the welcome call of the *coco-de-aqua* vender.

In some parts of the East the fruit stalks are cut while green and tender, and the stub is attached to a light bamboo trough. Several flower-stalks may be thus treated and several little troughs may be led to one spot where there is a receptacle in the form of a big gourd or calabash awaiting the liquid which oozes out and trickles down to form a cider or toddy.

Could one imagine a state more seraphic to the minds of many men than a hut closely surrounded by coco plams with bamboo conduits leading this cidery juice slowly, but continuously, into a receptacle on the kitchen table?

From the outside of the nut comes the husk or coir which is used for cordage and woven into tough matting for church aisles, office floors, etc.

The oil which is expressed from the copra, or dried meat of the nut, enters into butter, soap, etc.

The hard shells are carved and used for utensils of various kinds.

The trunk wood is poor and hard on tools. It is used, nevertheless, because it is cheap and answers the purpose, although, of course, a fine full-bearing coco palm is never cut for its wood. It is called "porcupine wood" because it has hard bundles of tissue in it which, when cut on the slant, appear like spines in the wood. The heart is spongy, but the outer layer, although rough, is tough and durable.

A coco palm usually bears a terrific weight of fruit, and bears it continuously, but if it fails the native hacks it or drives iron into it or cuts deep notches into the trunk, which at the same time facilitate climbing, and lo! it bears—bears because its vegetative activity has been restrained, and, like every other creature on earth, it strives all the more to perpetuate its kind.

Among the leaves around the stem there is a natural cloth, to



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be sure not woven with warp and woof, but of such a nature that primitive man could have easily taken the hint. I don't know whether this cloth is ever used for wearing apparel or not, certainly not in the majority of even remote regions where gunny sacks are plentiful.

There are those who grow passionately fond of the coco palm, especially when grouped by the shimmering particolored sea of the tropics. There is nothing sorrowful about them; in the breeze they never emit a whining tune as do the pines, but a



A CAMPHOR TREE.

lusty clattering and banging. I heard an old sailor once say that he wanted to be buried in the shade of a coco palm by the shore.

But like all good things on earth it has its tormentors. In parts of the West Indies it has fallen a prey to a fungous blight. Strong efforts are being used to check its spread, and close watch should be kept to prevent it from entering Florida from Cuba, since in south Florida there are many coco palms, and many acres of land where they can be successfully planted.





PICKING SAPODILLAS. (PHOTO BY PROF. JOHN CRAIG.)



A LIME TREE ON ELLIOTT'S KEY GROWING IN THE CORAL ROCK.  
(PHOTO BY PROF. JOHN CRAIG.)