

CHAPTER V.

THE LIME AND SAPODILLA, COMMONLY CALLED "SOURS AND DILLIES."



IF I VISIT a conch farmer on the Florida Keys and the conversation will soon drift to the condition of his "sours and dillies."

The "sours" or limes were planted long ago mainly for their acid juice which was cherished by seafaring folk to combat scurvy, while "dillies," the short for sapodillas, were grown because they have always been held in high esteem by the natives, both black and white, of the Florida Keys and the Bahama Islands.

The buccaneerish taint in my blood got the upper hand when I bought a farm on the Keys, well stocked with limes, sapodillas, and coco palms, and a sloop which I named *The Dilly*. Since then my interest in sours and dillies has grown, in spite of devastating storms, tricky commission men, and long droughts.

These two fruits grow together on the Keys among lime rocks of coral origin, where soil is often so scarce that on some acres, which one could easily select without wandering far, a man would have to scrape with a spoon for a whole day to get a barrow load. The rocks stick up as though the bones of mother earth were dry and bare, without skin or flesh of any kind.

In the crevices of the rock there is some soil, and from the porous rock itself the plant must derive nourishment. At any rate, the lime tree produces sour limes, and the sapodilla tree sweet sapodillas, in great abundance.

If one plows this soil he must use dynamite, and all weeding is done with a machete or a sailor's sheathknife.

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In a moist season the little lime, hardly more than a seedling, is planted in a rock crevice or pot-hole. If the ocean keeps its place and the weeds are kept in check, the lime tree will thrive and in three years will blossom and fruit—a fruit with a delicious refreshing aroma which puts the lemon to shame. The lemon is a coarse, thick-skinned, rough, raggy and acrid product compared with the lime. School children in Boston eat limes pickled in salt-water, at recess. The lime is a naturally refined and delicate acid fruit.

The lime is a spiny, semi-wild crop, although a spineless variety from Trinidad is being tried. It stands no frost and will not flourish if too carefully tended. No fertilizer except a little half-rotted seaweed, and no cultivation except a couple of weedings a year, are needed. Heavy crops of fruit are produced almost every summer, often with a light winter crop, and the limes from the Keys are especially cherished because, unlike mainland limes, they will carry long distances without deterioration.

The lime is thin-skinned, full of juice in proportion to rag, of a delicate inimitable aroma, and once a lime-convert the epicure forever after spurns the lemon.

There is little trouble in getting them picked in spite of the mosquitoes and their needle-like thorns.

The lime is in active demand because there is an unquenchable desire—the awful thirst which besets the American people in the summer time. Great pyramids of limes may be seen at almost every soda fountain where limeades are in vogue or at the club where the gin-rickey holds sway. A whole lime for a glass with the thin aromatic rind thrown in is the rule. For that reason big limes are not wanted, and then, limes are usually bought by the barrel and sold by the dozen.

My crop last year on about four acres of land amounted to two hundred and some barrels. A flour barrel is the standard and holds about one hundred and twenty-five dozen limes. They netted me on the average \$3.50 a barrel. They probably retailed at twenty cents a dozen, costing the consumer about

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twenty-five dollars a barrel—a fair instance of the abysmal gulf between the consumer and producer.

Limejuice has other uses than assuaging thirst. In the form of citric acid it is extensively used in manufacturing establishments.

A little lime juice put in the water in which meat is boiled renders it more tender and palatable.

Added to desserts, other fruits, jams, etc., it brings out their peculiar flavors and removes flatness.

It offsets hardness in water.

With salt it will clean brass and remove stains from the hands.

It improves and whitens boiled rice and sago. It is a soothing application to irritations caused by insect bites. It is better than vinegar as a salad dressing. It makes a cleansing tooth-wash diluted with water. It is good for the liver, useful in fevers, and they say a little limejuice in the water you drink is sure death to the typhoid bacillus!

And so I manage my lime plantation—a kind of *laissez-faire* system—but it pays a good interest. A new-comer would hardly notice it in passing. A colored man called Parson Jones, otherwise known as the Sultan of Caesar's Creek, has an eye on it. Every month or so I meet him in town, but his good wife, who picks limes also, has not been away from home for three years. Three or four times a year when we want to bathe in the briny parti-colored waters of the Keys or seek plunder on beachcombing expeditions along the shores, I drop in to look over my plantation and pick some green coconuts for the refreshing liquid which they contain. My only concern is in summer, awaiting returns from shipments. Sometimes the sales are disappointing, especially in the region of New York, if a ship has arrived with a cargo of "sour," each wrapped in brown paper, from the island of Santo Domingo.

My sapodillas were planted because they yield a very sweet fruit and stand firm in the teeth of the gale. The trees are so dense and sturdy that they form a wind-shield and storm-break. Good dillies have a local sale of a penny each. Some are

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smooth, light brown, with a pink blush on one side, but many resemble a rusty-coat apple. The colored gentry will invest in this luxury even when grits are low in the larder. And the raccoons are so fond of them that ripe dillies on the trees are seldom found.

But there is a future to the dilly beyond all this. The gum or milky juice of the tree is the basis of chewing-gum, and although the world at large may not be cognizant of this impending calamity, and although even the conservation commission has not considered it, we are on the verge of a chewing-gum famine. The price of this gum, called chicle, has risen, the quantity given in a cake of gum has been reduced to the severest minimum, and adulteration has reached its maximum. Still the demand is beyond the supply.

The man who plants limes, with sapodillas for a wind-break, is actually, but perhaps unwittingly and indirectly, furnishing important ingredients for two articles not destined to uplift mankind—the gin-rickey and chewing-gum.

In addition to yielding a sweet fruit and a valuable gum, the wood of the sapodilla tree is probably as near everlasting as wood can be, in fact it outlasts many metals. Lintels of zapote, or sapodilla wood, in the ruins of Mexico are still hard and sound, having endured many centuries, probably 3,000 years.

In a few years, no doubt, there will be many chicle plantations, under the control of companies inducing the unwary to part with their coin on the promise of great future returns, as in the case of rubber.

Even now chicle figures in American stock reports, and American chicle is bought and sold in Wall Street by the side of stock of other great corporations.



A PAPAWEA TREE FULL OF FRUIT.