

The Comical Cocoanut.

BY THOMAS E. CURTIS.



HE man who first thought of turning the shells and husks of cocoanuts into caricatures of the human features had a true sense of humour. We do not know who he was or where he

hailed from, but if he were living now he would probably be as old as the cocoanut palm itself, which doubtless dates back to the Flood. He was the pioneer in his art, and his disciples have been almost as numerous as the cargo of the Ark.

But without elaborating further on the artist, let us look at his work. In the words of the showman, we first call your attention, ladies and gentlemen, to the Ally Sloper of the cocoanut world—a fine and noble specimen of the cocoanut carver's art, with a rubicund and highly-developed nose that immediately reminds you of the immortal Ally. The collar, deftly chiselled at the base of the husk, and painted white to give contrast, may, perhaps, mislead you, and make you think that the artist intended to caricature an aged English statesman in the style so common to the caricaturists of recent years. But it is not so. You will note how the bald-headedness of the man is skilfully suggested by a few stray fibres of the husk loosely flowing backwards, and some day, perhaps, you will like to see the original of

this funny picture. It is in the possession of Messrs. Phillip Phillips and Co., of King Street and Mitre Street, Aldgate, E.C., the well-known London fruit merchants. Out of the millions of cocoanuts which they have imported, and the thousands of carved cocoanuts they have seen, this is, perhaps, the best.

In Florida, where such cocoanuts galore may be found by the traveller, they are called "Florida natives," and the name, in many cases, is singularly appropriate. For the early inhabitants of Florida were Indians, and the natives in the illustration below, sent to us by Mrs. C. N. Holt, of Orange Park, Cly Co., Florida, certainly bear no slight resemblance to the facial characteristics of the Indians. The face on the right, with its big mouth and almond eyes, is a remarkable representation of stolid slyness and cunning;

and the second man on the left, with the cigar in his mouth, would make you think that the buccaneer of old had come to life again.

We have all seen, at some time or other, the "lightning caricaturist," who, from any mark or line drawn at haphazard on a piece of paper by a spectator, is able immediately to make a portrait of some well-known personage. Well, the cocoanut-carver, with his sharp knife and scissors, goes to work in much the same way. The fruit of the cocoanut palm, by virtue of the variations in its



ALLY SLOPER, THE KING OF CARVED COCOANUTS.
From a Photograph.



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FIVE "FLORIDA NATIVES."

[Photograph.]

shape, lends itself easily to facial variations, and the peculiarities of the husk or "shuck" may be accentuated at will. If we look again at the five cocoanuts at the bottom of the first page we may note the great difference between the first two faces on the left. There is, again, a noticeable difference between Nos. 3 and 4 (counting from the left). The fibre of the coconut is cleverly utilized for moustaches and beards, and a few dabs of highly-coloured paint, applied to the lips, eyes, mouth, and nose, give the crowning touch to the work.

In Florida there is a regular business done in these carved

cocoanut "shies" on Bank Holidays do not display a few carved cocoanuts as special prizes to the lucky shots.

On this page we may note a curious variation in the conventional carved cocoanut. The pictures are four in number, and seem to be four different cocoanuts. But, in reality, there is one nut only, as may be judged from the picture in the lower centre of the page. The faces, ugly and hideous, reminiscent of the crude wooden images that heathens call their gods, are separated by a small circular depression in which still another smaller face is carved. All the faces are dissimilar. The eyes



THE COCOANUT WITH THREE FACES.
From Photographs.



cocoanuts, thousands of visitors from the north taking them home as souvenirs of the "Sunny South." This is not to say that all are taken away, for thousands remain in shop windows to attract the public and to please the small fry, who gaze at them as enviously as they do at ginger-cakes and marbles. Yet the Londoner does not need to go afield to see them. He can find them in Whitechapel any day, where fruiterers display them as curiosities and as a hint that the nuts are to be found within. It is a constant cause of wonder to us that the men who run the

are made with buttons, and long strips of husk, torn away from the nut and bound together at the top, form a common head-dress for these curious and repellent faces. It is remarkable how the deep reddish brownness of the husk suggests the dark skin of natives of the tropics, from which these cocoanuts come.

Nearly all the nuts are imported in the husk, and are then stripped from the husk by men with fine-pointed chisels. Many of these men are so expert that they can open from 1,000 to 1,200 cocoanuts a day. The uses to which the

fruit is put are manifold. The outer husk yields coir, the shell is used for water-vessels, the milk makes a native drink, and the white meat of the nut makes cocoanut oil. Twelve millions are taken each year into the United Kingdom alone, and thousands of these are in great demand at holiday time, at fairs, race-courses, and Bank Holiday gatherings throughout the land.

We have already obtained a general idea of the common form in which cocoanuts are carved, and have called it an "art" by courtesy. As a matter of fact, there is really nothing æsthetic in the faces we have seen. But in the accompanying reproduction there is a quality which, in two senses, singles out the carved cocoanut from the common herd. It is an artistic attempt to represent a horse's head and mane, and the skill with which the carver's tool has fashioned the mouth, teeth, eyes, and forehead of the animal is indeed remarkable. This is another of the



HORSE'S HEAD CARVED IN A COCOANUT.
From a Photograph.

prizes belonging to Messrs. Phillip Phillips and Co., and while not perhaps so striking from the popular point of view as the other pictures, it deserves the attention of those who do not look down upon artistic attempt in small things.

There is little more that need be said about the comical cocoanut, except that it does not cost much to buy. The cost varies, of course, with the elaborateness of the design. Ten, fifteen, twenty-five cents—those are the prices of the commoner varieties in Florida, where the majority of them are made. Their value for advertisement is shown by the fact that the illustration with which we conclude this article was once used in a time-table issued by the great Plant System, a network of rail-ways and steamship lines in the southern United States, and attracted attention

to one of the curiosities of the Everglade State, through which their system runs. It was an idea that might well be followed by other enterprising lines.



From a

SOME MORE "FLORIDA NATIVES,"

[Photograph.]