The Double Cocoanut of the Seychelles Islands.

The history of the Seychelles Cocoanut *(Lodoicea Sechellarum*, Labill.*)* is most curious. There is not a botanist who has not read about it over and over again, not a traveller to Madagascar, Réunion, or Mauritius, who has not viewed with astonishment its enormous, black, two-lobed fruit, a character that has given rise to names as strange as they are French. Ordinarily it is called "Coco de mer," because it is carried away by tidal currents and deposited on distant shores where it occasionally germinates and grows well; it is also called, "Maldive cocoanut" as it is found in those islands, transported thither undoubtedly by some current; "Solomon's cocoanut" "double cocoanut," are also names by which it is known, besides others; Rumphius mentions it in his Herbarium Amboinense as *Cocos maldivicus*, and alludes to the more or less fabulous stories about its supposed virtues—in one place it was used as an antidote to poison; in another, it was a wonderful specific against colic, apoplexy, paralysis, &c.

Without giving too much credence to the probability of these properties, it appears certain that the fruit of this palm tree fetched a high price. Travellers who were able to get it, paid £ 6 to £ 12 for a single fruit, while the largest specimens went for as high a figure as £ 18.

Precious vessels or cups were made out of the shell, and were used to hold tobacco, or betelnut. In the Maldives, the king made it a royal property, in order to present it to his favourites and the theft of one of these cocoanuts was a capital crime.

Vague ideas prevailed for a long time concerning the appearance of this tree in its native country, its size, leaves, stem, &c. But the discovery of the Seychelles islands in 1743 put an

end to these doubts. People soon found out that it was indigenous on the islands of Praslin, Curieuse and Ronde. Sonnerat described it botanically in his Voyage to New-Guinea, and brought it with him to Réunion. Commerson continued the observation and then Labillardière, who gave it its present name, and then Quean de Quincy, Governor of the Seychelles; but it was not until Messrs. Harrison and Telfair were enabled to send flowers and fruit preserved in spirits to Sir W. M. Hooker at Kew, that the complete botanical study of this curious plant could be undertaken.

The Lodoicea is found on the mountainous parts of the three islands mentioned above, where it grows on rocky soil in company with *Cocos nucifera*. Its majestic stem, 50 to 70 feet high as a rule, sometimes reaches twice this height, crowned with a magnificent head of leaves sixteen feet long and more. Travellers describe its appearance as noble, but somewhat melancholy. The young leaves while still undeveloped and rolled up at the top of the stem are edible, like those of the *Areca oleracea*; they are also pickled when fully grown, the broad handsome leaves frequently numbering more than a hundred on a single tree, are used in roofing, hat making, and even for thin walls. The midrib is made into brooms and baskets; the felt-like down which covers the young leaves is much valued for making pillows and mattresses

The stem is made into pipes for irrigation, or furnishes building wood, or planks for boxes.

The fruit is not merely an object of superstition or curiosity; many useful and durable articles are made out of the nut, such as dishes, plates, bowls and cups. It is frequently used for storing drinking water, each shell holding about three quarts.

When ripe, one of these enormous nuts weighs as much as 40 lbs., and measures 50 inches round, and 15 inches long. At first it was thought that they ripened annually, but more recent observations have established the fact that they take many years, probably nine or ten, to ripen.

When the ripe fruit is subjected to a temperature resembling that of the Seychelles, it germinates readily and grows quickly. During the first few years, the young plant does not in the least resemble the adult tree; it is more like some of the *Pritchardias* of the Pacific.

As soon as the stem is fairly formed, its base is rounded, and fits into a natural bowl or socket, which is pierced by numerous small oval holes, with hollow tubes corresponding on the outside. The roots pass through these holes and tubes, and penetrate the ground, but they never become attached to the bowl, thus having a free play and allowing the tree to sway about in the wind, a very necessary provision against violent gales. The stem forms a splendid column, perfectly straight like an iron pillar, and covered with the old leaf scars. The leaves are covered with a

thick down before they unfold, and when fully expanded are fan shaped, ten feet long by five feet wide, though sometimes they attain a length of 20 feet and a breadth of 10.

The colour of the leaves is shining light green, and when they fade, they bend and hang downwards along the stem before falling. The crown of foliage generally contains twenty leaves, but this number may run up to a hundred according to certain travellers, and then the whole tree forms the most splendid object it is possible to behold.

The tree is dicecious. At the age of thirty years, it first puts forth its blossoms, the males forming enormous catkins three feet long and three inches in diameter, while the females are set on a strong zigzag stalk, covered with large reddish brown scales.

The fruit externally is covered with a thick fibrous husk, like the ordinary cocoanut. The inside, before the fruit is ripe, is formed of a kind of firm transparent jelly. Each fruit contains usually one, sometimes two or three, nuts with hard black shells, and divided at the top into two or more deep lobes.

The fruit of the Lodoicea has germinated more than once in hot houses. The first time was at Glasgow, but the young plant did not survive. Quite recently germination has been successful in the museum of Paris, and the young plants are doing well up to date; it remains to be seen how they will fare subsequently. It would be most interesting to be able to cultivate this remarkable palm in our colony.

(Extract translated from the 'Révue Agricole' of Mauritius) by A. S.