

CHAPTER XVII.

ABOUT TURTLES.

IT was a huge turtle which Captain Sammy had captured, and when it was pulled in aboard of the *Pearl* its jaws opened and shut with a snap as it bit furiously at everything near it. Bobby was sure it weighed three or four hundred pounds, but Captain Sammy insisted that one-half of that sum would be about the correct figure, and as the weight was being discussed it occurred to him that the boys deserved a bit of a lecture on turtles.

“Now,” said Captain Sammy, assuming the same learned air he had worn during the talk about reefs, “what I want you to tell me is, what kind of a turtle that is.”

Up to this time the boys hardly knew that there was more than one species of turtles, and, with some hesitation, Dare confessed as much.

“Why, you boys don’t know nothin’ at all—nothin’ at all!” cried Captain Sammy, in tones of disdain. “Thought there wasn’t but one kind of turtle, eh? an’ you claim to have been brought up among civilized creeters! What was your

father thinkin' of, and how did he expect you was goin' to earn your own livin', if you didn't know anythin' about turtles?"

Dare was on the point of saying that, inasmuch as they did not intend to become turtlefishers, save for the few months they were in Florida, such knowledge was not of vital importance, although it might be useful. But he checked himself, and said instead,

"How many kinds are there, sir?"

"There's a good many kinds, and you ought to have known it," replied Captain Sammy, solemnly. "There's the hawksbill, for instance, that what is called the tortoise-shell comes from, an' there used to be a good many of them around here. They are the ones that only lay two sets of eggs—one in July, and one in August; and then they lay about one hundred and fifty at a time, or three hundred in all. Then there is the green turtle, and I've seen one that weighed over five hundred pounds; some folks say they do go as high as seven hundred, but about that you can have your opinion and I'll have mine. Green turtles commence with the egg business in May, spawning in that month and in June, and averaging about eighty eggs each time. That's the kind of turtles that make the best eating. Then there's a kind called the loggerhead—that's great on eggs; she lays three sets, at about the same time the green turtle does,

and when she gets through with her work she's laid five hundred. The trunk turtle ain't so far behind, although she only lays about three hundred and fifty eggs in the season."

The boys almost forgot their pirate under the berth in their surprise at the great number of eggs one turtle could lay, and they were about to ask some questions regarding the manner in which the eggs were deposited, when the little man continued:

"The loggerhead and trunk turtles are mighty savage creeters, and run a good deal larger in size than the others do; they lay their eggs anywhere around here. The green turtle is more shy, and she gets off where there isn't so much of a chance that any one will find her eggs; but I have known her to come right up on the coast here to make her nest. The hawksbill is the one that takes good care no one shall find her out, and when she wants to lay eggs she gets 'way off on the smallest keys. It's my opinion," and now Captain Sammy looked very wise, "that turtles are mighty knowing animals. I don't go so far as to say that they know jest what you are talking about, but they come pretty near it."

"How do they make their nests, sir?" asked Dare.

"Now, that's where their cunning comes in," said the little man, earnestly. "They don't come out till high-water on a moonlight night, and

they know when it's high water as well as I do. They go up just above the highest point of the tide, and scoop out a nest with their flippers in the sand. Then they commence to lay their eggs, doing it very quickly, and when they've done they cover them over with sand and go back into the water again. The sun hatches the eggs, you know, and when the little turtles come out they make a bee-line for the water. They ain't more than an inch long, and the birds gobble up as many of them as they can before they get into the sea."

"How deep are the nests?" asked Charley, wondering whether they might not remain there until it was time to hunt for such nests full of eggs as the captain had described.

"About a foot and a half deep, and it only takes the old turtle about ten minutes to fill it."

"Now, what kind of a turtle is this one?" asked Dare, pointing to the enormous fellow who was snapping savagely at everything near him.

"That? Why, that's a loggerhead, of course, and you ought to know it after all this talk," cried Captain Sammy, impatiently; and then, as if he had just noticed that the steamer had not started again, he shouted, "What do you mean by loafing around here? Get on at once, for, if nothing happens, we must anchor off Punta Rassa to-night."

Dare rushed to the pilot-house, Rogers and

Charley went to the engine-room, and Bobby was forced to help Captain Sammy in the preparation of turtle-soup for dinner.

Then the little craft dashed on through the water again, the captain coming out to give some directions as to the course when they were off Gasparilla Pass, and disappearing again until Gasparilla Island was left astern and the *Pearl* was off Boca Grande.

When he came on deck this time it was to summon Dare to dinner; and while the crew of the *Pearl* had turtle-soup the imprisoned pirate was forced to eat crackers, since soup could hardly be thrown to him under the berth.

When Dare went on deck they were just passing Lacosta Island, and Captain Sammy seated himself in the bow again.

Then Boca Captiva and Captiva Island were left astern, until, quite late in the afternoon, Sanibel Island was reached. The yacht swung gracefully around Point Ybel, up past Fort Dulany, and into San Carlos Harbor, anchoring off Punta Rassa a short time after nightfall.