

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MEN GO TURLING—THEY MEET AN ACQUAINTANCE TO WHOM THEY PAY MARKED ATTENTION—SOMETHING ABOUT TURTLES—WHAT SWITCHEL IS—A GARDEN ON THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA.



T blew a norther for three days after the day of which mention has been made in the last chapter. An unusually bright look-out was kept on the Reef, but nothing appeared to reward the vigilance of the wreckers.

On the fourth day, the weather was as clear as ever. In Florida, when the weather is fair, nothing can exceed its serenity. The temperature in the shade is delightful, the atmosphere the purest ether.

On the day to which I allude, after returning from our usual survey of the Reef, there happened to be nothing for the men to do, so they asked and received permission to go upon the

turtling expedition which had been projected on the afternoon of the capture of the jew-fish, and deferred until an occasion when the party could have ample time to prosecute their search. As I had finished my work for the afternoon, by the captain's terms according me leave at all times that my duties were finished, it was permissible for me to go with the turtlers, and I gladly joined their party. The men provided themselves with the usual gear, with one addition,—an instrument called a peg, used for striking the hawksbill turtle. The hawksbill turtle is found in considerable numbers in the waters of Florida. This is the turtle from which the shell called tortoise-shell is procured. The material is too valuable to be rudely perforated by the grains, if avoidable, and the use of the peg insures the capture of the animal with the least possible injury to its shell.

The peg is a very simple instrument, consisting merely of a sharp point of iron with a shoulder and socket. The manner of using it is precisely like that adopted with the grains. Instead of the grains, the socket of the peg is secured with a line, and placed on the end of a long pole. When the shell of a turtle is punctured by a blow from the peg, the hole closes slightly after the passage of the shoulder of the

instrument, which is thus fastened in the place. In fact, the operation of the peg in securing a turtle is more certain than that of the grains, for the great barbs of the latter often fracture a turtle's shell so materially as to cause the grains to "draw."

When the little turtles are hatching, under the influence of the sun, as fast as they extricate themselves from the sand in which, as eggs, they have reposed, their instinct at once carries them down to the water. I have sometimes seen dozens of them, little black objects, not much more than an inch in length, making their way towards the sea, while, collected all around, perched birds of prey, eagerly watching them, and restrained from devouring them only by my presence.

As we were rowing towards shore, I held my face close over the gunwale of the boat, examining the many objects, beautiful in form and color, that made a garden of the bottom of the sea; and it was not until we had passed the inlet, and our boat's keel commenced to touch the mud-flats, that I was obliged to relinquish my inspection of the bright borders of that dark, vast, mysterious, realm.

Our boat entered the inlet to the southward of the one in which Deal struck the jew-fish, and after passing the narrow line of Keys, I, for

the first time, found myself in the waters which form the broad and shallow bay between the Keys and the main-land.

The men were all agog to find a turtle. The line was coiled, the grains were adjusted on the pole, and the pole itself was carefully laid amidships, with the barbs pointed over the bow of the boat. Owing to the direction of the wind that had been prevailing for some time, the water was lower than usual, and the boat's keel dragged so heavily that the men unshipped their oars, and used them to pole the boat over the flats. We had progressed in this manner for twenty or thirty yards, when Linden sang out, Shark! and we perceived the dorsal fin of the animal appearing above the water on the flat, about a couple of hundred yards in advance of the boat.

In an instant, all thought of the turtling vanished. The boy-nature of the sailors, as well as their unrelenting hostility to the shark, instantly made them oblivious of every thing except the presence of the dark object ahead that floundered over the mud-flat in its efforts to work its way into deep water. The rudder was of no avail, now that the boat was almost as much on land as in the water, so it was unshipped, and the men stood on the thwarts, and poled vigorously with their oars, while I

put out a short scull, and added my mite of strength to aid in catching the monster.

The tremendous noise made by our shouting and splashing soon apprised the shark that enemies were near, and it alternately lashed the water with its tail, and violently wriggled as it used the most desperate efforts to elude the pursuit. Over some places, the water was deeper, and then the shark made better progress, then the water shoaled, and the shark found itself almost fast aground. But through or over whatever the shark went, whether favorable or unfavorable, it was the same for us; for following as we did in its wake, we made good speed where it had met deep water, and were retarded, almost in the same degree, where it had floundered over shallow spots. I say retarded almost in the same degree, because we steadily gained upon the shark, and our only fear now was, that it would reach a channel that was discernible ahead, in the direction in which it was swimming.

The men shouted and laughed and encouraged each other to increased exertion. I never saw a more exciting chase. The water began to deepen gradually, where the shark was, and it was observed to make better speed towards the deep channel, which, however, was still a considerable distance ahead. We almost lost

hope, the laughter died away, and the poling was, if possible, continued with increased vigor. After going a few yards further, the boat gradually felt more buoyant, and seemed nearly afloat. So was the shark, which had been in the same deep water for two or three minutes.

"Give it to her, boys! shouted Ruggles. "Lay down to it! Once more, my hearties! There she slides! Never say die!"

The gurgling of the water, as it commenced to ripple against the bow of the boat, and the rapidly shifting oar-blades used in poling, showed our increased progress through the water, even if we had not perceived that we were gaining upon the shark. But the channel was then only about seventy-five yards ahead of the boat, and the shark had the advantage of us by at least thirty yards, so that to catch it before reaching the edge of the channel, we would have had to make nearly twice its speed.

"Take your places, boys, and pull," sang out Ruggles.

Every man dropped into his place, except Linden, who stood in the bow and poised the harpoon, and Ruggles, who seized my little scull, and shoved and guided the boat with it. We came up with the shark when it was not more than fifteen yards distant from the edge

of the channel, and Linden drove the harpoon into its body.

Then ensued a scene that baffles description. The shark was still too much aground to run out the line, and it struggled on, lashing out desperately with its tail. The men, armed with axes, hatchets, and oars, leaped from the boat and attacked it, and, for a minute, there was so close a fight, accompanied with shouting and splashing, that it looked as if, in the excitement, the men could not avoid maiming each other. Presently, the shark ceased to be visible, and the turbid water failed to disclose its position.

Some one halloed, "Take care of your legs!" and then followed another scene of confusion, laughable to behold, as the men themselves perceived after they had tumbled head over heels into the boat; for they roared with laughter, until they were obliged to hold their sides from exhaustion.

Not a soul, however, ventured outside of the boat. The men waited patiently until the turbid water gradually became clear. As the gray clouds in the water slowly floated off, like fog dispersing before the influence of sunshine, a tinge of blood could be distinguished in it, and just below rested the carcass of the shark.

One of the men grappled it with the boat-hook, and pulled it towards him, when, as it lay along-side, it underwent critical examination. It was not of the most dangerous species, called the white-shark, but it was a dreadful looking creature, about fifteen feet in length, and furnished with formidable jaws and teeth.

It is erroneously supposed that the shark always uses several rows of teeth. It has several rows of teeth, but the inner ones lie flat, and seem to be designed by nature to provide the animal with the means of capturing its prey, in case of accident to the outer row.

Sailors are not always so merciful to a shark, as to deprive it of existence without subjecting it to prolonged torture. Regarding the animal as their most deadly enemy, they not infrequently catch it and fasten to it a billet of wood, to serve as a float. With this appendage, the shark finds it impossible to sink so as to procure food, and dies a lingering death of starvation. Whatever opinion one may entertain as to the propriety of killing a shark,—and I think there can be no difference of opinion as to the right of man to destroy an animal so rapacious,—there ought to be no difference of opinion as to the practice of torturing it. The object of killing it is to prevent future depredations,

and man's right and duty end with that act, which should be executed without the refinement of torture.

The chase had been so long and fatiguing, that the men felt like resting before starting on the turtling expedition, from which they had been diverted by discovering the shark. Besides, the party had made enough noise to frighten away any turtles, had they been in the vicinity. The men therefore sat down quietly in the boat, wiped the perspiration from their brows, and passed around a tin-cup filled with switchel from the keg.*

In the course of a quarter of an hour, they began to show signs of moving, and, by common consent, the boat was shoved off the flat into the deep channel, into which the shark had so nearly escaped.

Here, after a short consultation, it was determined to remain back of the Keys, and to row along the channel, until we arrived opposite to the next Key towards the southward.

I was allowed to steer, and Deal was stationed in the bow. With these dispositions, the four men at the oars gave way, and we shot rapidly along the deep channel. On this occasion, the boat had a yoke on her rudder, to which were

* Switchel is made of water, with a little molasses and vinegar.

attached long tiller-ropes, which enabled me to steer as I stood up in the stern-sheets and thus commanded a view of the whole bay.

We had rowed a mile, when Deal said:

"I see something ahead, but I can't make out yet what it is."

I strained my eyes in vain. I could not even see any thing. I still needed the practised eye which enabled Deal to see an object long before I could distinguish it, and then to recognize it, when to me it was only faintly visible.

What I have just said, was proved on this occasion. Deal sang out, "Turtle asleep on the water," at the very moment I could do no more than detect the object which he had for a long time seen.

"Ease your oars, and pull as even as you can," said Deal, after the men had rowed for some distance.

The boat glided noiselessly along, until we came within twenty yards of the turtle, when Deal whispered,

"Rest on your oars."

The boat glided on, and Deal's hand, brandishing the pole, gradually raised higher, until we were within five yards of the turtle. Then the turtle gave a nervous flirt as if it had suddenly awakened. But it was too late: Deal's well-poised lance left his hand, and pierced the

turtle's panoply, back-plate and breast-plate, through and through. There was little struggling. The wound was so severe as almost to paralyze the animal, which was dragged aboard and dispatched. It proved to be a small green-turtle of about fifteen pounds in weight.

This, the men considered a very small prize, although to me it seemed magnificent, and I could not sufficiently admire the animal. Every one is so familiar with the appearance of the green-turtle, that it needs no description here. I should say, however, that whatever points of beauty the green-turtle may have (and who can deny that the glossy, rounding shell, the symmetrically scaled flippers, the cream-colored throat, the white under-shell, are points of beauty), it possesses them, when fresh from the water, in a far higher degree than after it has made a long voyage, and lain for hours subjected to the heat, dust, and plaguing encountered in the streets of a city.

The men, as I said, not being quite satisfied with so small a turtle, decided to keep along the channel, which still continued to run towards the southward, about parallel with the line of Keys, and about a mile distant from them. After rowing for a considerable distance,

and finding nothing, we commenced to cross the flats, heading for one of the inlets that lead into the Reef Channel. Deal kept a lookout, and was soon rewarded by seeing something dash through the water.

"Green-turtle, boys!" he sang out, "give way strong. It's a buster."

I now understood steering so well, that I was permitted to retain my place at the tiller. When I did not see the turtle, I was guided by observing the direction that Deal's grains indicated. The flats, over which we were going, were much lower than the ones over which we had pursued the shark, and the boat did not draw enough water to make her touch bottom. The men gave way with a will, and sometimes we almost overtook the turtle, which seemed to swim by spurts. When we came within a few yards of it, it darted off with a quick cant to the right and then to the left; and so much, under these circumstances, does the swimming of a turtle resemble a bird's flight, that one can almost imagine that he sees a huge hawk, with out-stretched wings, darting over the bottom of the sea.

Rapid as the movements of the turtle were, they lacked continuous effort. Perhaps the animal became exhausted. Its flights became shorter and more spasmodic, until chancing to

come across a hole, it no doubt deemed itself comparatively safe in the obscurity of the deep water, for it stopped and remained motionless on the bottom. And, in truth, it was very nearly out of our reach, for as the boat passed over the spot, Deal was obliged to lean, in an awkward position, far over the bow, and plunge the pole perpendicularly at the dark object on the bottom.

But the stroke of a Conch is unerring, and the poor turtle was transfixed. It was off this time with all its remaining strength. The line spun out until it grew taut, and the boat commenced to be towed through the water. But as she was towed along, three of the men got into the bow, and slowly, hand over hand, hauled in the line, until the turtle, still towing us, was brought close to the bow. Then a tremendous struggle took place, and the turtle, with the aid of a hampering line and the strength of four men, was hoisted into the boat.

It was a fine animal, and must have weighed quite a hundred and fifty pounds, for I know that, when we reached the schooner, the men found it so heavy to pass up the side, that a tackle was lowered, and it was hoisted on deck amid the congratulations of the cap-

tain and cook. To us, often condemned for days to a diet of fish and salt provisions, the capture of a turtle meant more than the mere gratification of appetite. It meant **health.**