

CHAPTER XXXIV

HOW TO FIND A TURTLE'S NEST—HABITS OF
THE TURTLE—TURNING TURTLES.

It was on the night of the 7th of May, that we speared fish by fire-light. George and I were so fascinated with it, that, only two or three nights afterwards, we begged the captain to indulge us with a renewal of the sport. It was by far the best in which we had engaged. We fancied it, not solely on account of the novelty of using short trident-like spears, instead of fish-hooks, but because the accompaniments were so charming. The ruddy glare of the fire; the glowing stretch of water; the dark shadows of the woods; the sight of the fish as they dart over the bottom,—all these circumstances combine to render the scene in the highest degree picturesque.

Our first excursion was our last, for the captain could not be prevailed upon to go again,

and he would not let us take the boat at night. We had ample amends, however, in some new enterprises which I must describe.

One morning, about the middle of the month, George and I did not go with the schooner on her morning cruise, but rowed off, ashore, to have a day's fishing and gunning. The tide was rising, and had almost reached high-water-mark. We were rowing along one of the beaches, when George said to me :

"Fred, do you see that mark on the sand, between the edge of the beach-grass, and where the water is now? Do you know what that is?"

"No," said I, "what is it?"

"Guess," he answered.

"A piece of brushwood, or perhaps drift-timber, that has scraped down the beach at the last ebb."

"No it is n't," said he; "it's the track of a turtle. There's a turtle's nest near there."

"A turtle's nest," shouted I, pulling on one oar, so as to bring the boat's head on the beach. "I'm bound to have it."

We jumped on shore, and George whittled a straight stick, so as to make it more slender, and adding a sharp point to it, he went opposite to the place where the mark appeared on the beach, and walked about, carefully examining

the sand above high-water-mark. At last, he said :

“Here it is. Now come here before I disturb the sand, and I’ll show you how to find a turtle’s nest. The Conchs taught me ; and what they do n’t know about fishing, turtling, and eggng, is n’t worth knowing. You must know that turtles choose a moonlight night and high-water to come upon the beach to lay their eggs. How they can tell it’s a moonlight night, I can understand, but how they know it’s high-water is a peg beyond me. It takes them only a few minutes to lay their eggs, and then, down they souse into the water. But as they come up at the top of high-water, the tide falls a little before they can get away, so they leave their tracks on the beach below high-water-mark. The next tide washes them all away, but we came across this place before the tide had risen again. The tracks are one sign. The other is this. Do you see a kind of crescent, cut into the loose sand among this beach-grass, above high-water-mark? That’s the place the turtle touches with the hind end of its shell, as it turns to go back to the water, after it has covered its eggs, and smoothed the sand over them. If we had been ten minutes later, the tide would have washed away the tracks on the beach ; and if there had been any wind, this loose sand

would have shifted so that there would n't have been any sign at all here."

"I think that you had better set about finding the nest," said I. "It would be a joke, if, after all your directions for finding turtles' eggs, you could n't find any."

"You never mind," replied George, good-humoredly, "I have to take your instruction every day, and it's my turn now. You don't know every thing. I'm just as sure that there's a turtle's nest where that crescent in the sand is—well, now look!"

Hereupon, he commenced to punch the sand with the sharp stick, and every now and then examined the point of it. After jobbing it down several times to the depth of about a foot, he held the point towards me, and said, triumphantly,

"What do you call that?"

"It looks exceedingly like egg," said I.

"That's just what it is," he replied, going down on his hands and knees, and commencing to dig a hole in the sand.

I followed his example; and when we had dug to the depth of a little over a foot, we came to the eggs.

"Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty," cried I, in amazement. "Why, here is another layer un-

derneath; sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety. Why, there are over a hundred!"

We found a hundred and seventy; and then George ran hastily along the beach to see if he could find any more turtle-tracks before the tide rose to high-water-mark. He found a place about two hundred yards off, and after the usual jobbing with the stick, we discovered the nest, and took a hundred and forty-one eggs. Three hundred and eleven eggs in two nests! We found a secure place in which we buried them slightly under the sand, to secure them against birds, and then went off on our projected expedition. In the evening, we stopped at the place, and carried the eggs aboard of the schooner.

On the following morning, when the schooner was under way, George and I were on deck talking over our good luck of the preceding day. The captain, hearing part of our conversation, joined us, and inquired how we would like to turn a turtle on the beach. "For then," continued he, "you will have the eggs, and the *hen* too."

It was agreed that we would go ashore that night, and turn turtle. The season being that when the turtles commence to lay, the captain was certain that we would capture at least one. He told me many interesting things

about turtles. It seems that, numerous as the eggs were in the nests which we found, they form only a portion of those laid by a turtle in the course of a season. The green-turtle lays three sets of eggs, two in May, and one in June. The sum-total of eggs is about two hundred and fifty. The hawksbill-turtle lays two sets of eggs, one in July, and one in August. The whole number of eggs laid is about three hundred. The loggerhead-turtle lays in May and June, three sets of eggs, which amount to about five hundred. The trunk-turtle lays three sets of eggs, which amount to about three hundred and fifty.

The habits of the turtles, in laying, are very different. The loggerhead and trunk turtles, being the largest and fiercest species, are not nearly so shy as the green and hawksbill turtles. The last two resort to the most unfrequented places, although the green-turtle penetrates the indentations on the coast. The hawksbill-turtle lays only on the wildest Keys, far distant from the main-land.

About nine o'clock that night, one of the quarter-boats was lowered, and the captain, George, and I, pulled by five oarsmen, rowed towards shore. The moon was full, and shone with that silvery lustre which sheds a beautifying influence upon the most commonplace

objects, and invests the really beautiful with a charm so mysterious and solemn, that the observer feels as if in a scene of enchantment.

Our keel soon grated on a beach which stretched away for two miles, with its white coral sand reflecting the soft light which bathed it throughout the whole of its graceful sweep. We leaped ashore, and hauled the boat above high-water-mark, until it was almost hidden among the beach-grass and low brushwood.

"Now," said Captain Bowers to the men, "scatter along the beach, about the same distance apart, just above high-water-mark; lie low, and don't make any noise. You Conchs understand the business better than I do, but you, Brady, if you've got any yarns to tell, keep them till you get aboard."

The five men walked off along the beach, and, occasionally, we could see one of them leave the party and disappear in the shadows of the brushwood above high-water-mark. At last, in the far distance, was discernible a single figure wending its way along the bright beach; then it vanished, and the scene lay silent and deserted in the silvery sheen of the moonlight.

The tide crept slowly up the beach, and commenced, with a gently plashing sound, to lave the jagged points of coral which cropped out of the sand just below high-water-mark.

"You must be very quiet, boys," whispered the captain, as we all crouched behind the high tufts of beach-grass. "If a turtle comes up near us, it will be off at the slightest noise."

"Aye, aye, sir," we whispered in reply, as we kept a strict watch on the beach.

"There is one," said the captain.

"Where? where?" we eagerly whispered.

"On the beach, about a quarter of a mile off," replied the captain; "near that dark-looking thing like a drift-log. Don't you see it move? there it shows."

We saw it, then, as the moonlight shone on its wet shell. In a few seconds it was out of sight.

"Now let me caution you again, boys," reiterated the captain. "Not a word above your breath."

The captain adjusted his night-glass, and commenced to examine the surface of the water.

"Pshaw!" said he at last, closing the slides of the telescope, and shutting it up. "We're not in luck to-night."

He had hardly uttered the words, before a prolonged, loud, and startling hiss, came from the water; and, as we crouched still lower, and looked between the tufts of beach-grass, we saw

the head of a turtle appearing above the surface of the sea.

"Hist!" said the captain; "lie as close as you can."

We obeyed his injunction, and, at the same time, kept our eyes directed towards the turtle, fearing that it might not land near us. But it swam rapidly towards shore, and dragged its unwieldy body out of the water. Its wet shell gleamed in the radiance of the moon-beams, like a silver shield. The monster stretched its neck out of its shell, to the full extent, and crawled sluggishly up on the beach-grass, just on the other side of the boat. The captain kept his forefinger to his lips, by way of enjoining silence, and we scarcely breathed. At last, the turtle made so much noise, that the captain cautiously arose and peered over the edge of the boat. Having apparently satisfied himself that we would be secure from observation, he touched us, and motioned to us to look over the boat. Raising our eyes just above the level of the boat's gunwale, we saw the turtle hard at work, scooping a hole with its hind flippers. As soon as it had collected a heap of sand, a violent flirt of the flippers scattered it in every direction. When the hole was about a foot and a half deep, the animal commenced to deposit its eggs. The

operation of digging being finished, and that of laying commenced, the captain ducked his head behind the boat, and saying, "Now's our chance," ran quickly around it. We followed at his heels, seized the turtle, and, by our united exertions, turned it on its back.

"I don't think that the men can beat this," said the captain. "It is one of the biggest that I ever saw. If we had n't caught it when it was laying, I'm not sure that we would have been able to turn it. When turtles are laying, which does not take more than ten minutes, they do not seem to be able to stop; but they are powerful things, and when they're making for the water, it's something of a job to turn them."

"Hollo! Hollo-o! Hollo-o-o-o-o!" shouted the captain, walking out on the beach, of which the rising tide had left but a narrow strip.

One after another, five dark objects emerged from the shadows, and commenced to move slowly towards us. By the time that the last man arrived, the first-comers, with our assistance, had hampered the turtle's flippers with a piece of marline. We lifted the turtle into the boat, and rowed to the place where one had been turned by a couple of the men. Its captor had accommodated it with a pillow of coral rock, a plan which is sometimes adopted to prevent

the animal from reversing its position. On a favorable slope, it sometimes uses its powerful neck to so great advantage as a lever, that it has been known to regain its liberty.

We hampered the second turtle in the same manner in which we had secured the first one, and lifted it into the boat. It was not more than two thirds of the size of the other. The aggregate weight of the two was probably about three hundred and fifty pounds.

"Well, Brady," said the captain to that individual, who was pulling the stroke-oar as we rowed off towards the schooner, "don't mind me, you must be nearly dead from having had to hold your tongue for two hours. What about the turtles in Ireland?"

"Well," said Brady, "there's this about toortle toorning in Ireland; it's pleasanter sport there nor here, for the muskatees."

"You own up, then," said the captain, "that you can't beat America in turtles, and you have n't got any mosquitoes?"

"Troth, no!" replied Brady; "the bigness of the toortles there would astonish ye, captain, and"—added he, with a sly glance at the captain—"the muskatees too; but they're amazin' kind-hearted be the side of the Flindly gallinippers."

The turtles were so heavy, that a tackle was

used to hoist them aboard of the schooner. The next day, one was despatched, and, with the eggs, served as our principal food for three or four days. The other turtle was put in a shady place, and brine was occasionally poured over its head and body. By pursuing this treatment, a turtle can be kept alive for a long time, without food, and yet preserve its healthful condition.