

CHAPTER IV.

A SEA STEED

UNDER Jim's tutelage Bob soon became a successful angler. He was more persevering than his teacher, his judgment was sounder, and his love of nature unusually sympathetic. As the schools of trout, crevale, and sheepshead grew more and more plentiful in the lagoon, his rod brought an increasing supply of dimes and quarters, for though Pritchard was soon satisfied, Mr. Brown, the wholesale fish dealer, was always ready to buy any amount.

Mr. Leach had obtained a satisfactory position at the fibre factory, and Mrs. Leach found plenty of laundry work at good prices. Things looked so promising that the family moved from the warehouse into a bungalow at the northern end of the town; a place bright with roses and well shaded. Its front sloped to a narrow beach and

a little pier ran out to the channel. As yet they had no boat to complete their comfort, but Bob laid by every week a certain per cent of his earnings toward the purchase of one.

In the meantime, as often as the weather permitted, he cruised about the lagoon in Jim's skiff, a leaky affair with a much-patched sail. It was a good enough craft for a landlubber to begin with. She was broad and heavy, and, if the wind were not too violent, as safe as a small boat could be. One person could easily handle her. Her light draft enabled her to go anyway, and when she did run aground on some high shoal, it was no trouble for the boys to push her off.

It was a new and fascinating life to Bob. He took to the water as if all his ancestors had been sea captains. He explored every nook and inlet for miles along the shore and learned the channels so well that he could run them on the darkest night. But it was, in a way, tame sailing, and as his confidence grew he longed to try the outer waters, where the lonely reefs and bars lay.

For such enterprises Jim was the best companion in the world. He could swim like a South

Sea Islander, sail a boat with his eyes shut, and knew by actual experience the conditions of tide and current about many of the reefs.

"I tell you what we'll do," he said to Bob; "we'll go turtling on Loggerhead Cay. They're laying now and we can make a haul. What we don't want we can sell dead easy."

Bob jumped at the suggestion. He had never seen one of the great turtles. He knew that once a year they came in from the far seas, a silent, armor-clad fleet, to lay their leathery eggs in the hot sand of the cays. To go turtle egging added an unexpected joy to the exploration of new waters.

"When shall we start?" he asked.

"What's the matter with this afternoon?" said Jim. "It's about a two-hour sail. We can take our supper along. There'll be a good moon, and night's the best time to find the turtles laying. I'll bring a rope. If we catch one we can stake it down and get Capt. Simons to go over for it with us the next day."

"That suits me," said Bob quickly. "I'll go home now and get a snack put up. Might bring old Bess along if you say so."

"Sure," replied Jim, who had no gun. "I'll meet you at the pier at five."

There was a steady westerly wind blowing, which suited their purpose perfectly. The *Mudhen*, as Jim's skiff was named, made good time across the lagoon, and rounding the bar, breasted gayly the bluer water outside. Though nicer sailing was required here, Jim's memory was good, and they threaded the rather tortuous channel to the cay without mishap, eating their supper before they landed on the strip of sand.

Jim had brought a couple of pointed sticks whose purpose he now explained.

"Wherever the sand looks soft or broken you poke your stick in," he said; "you'll know all right, one way or another, if there's eggs there. You'll feel 'em, or you'll see the point all thick and gummy with yellow yolk. Here, one of these pails is for you. Now we'll cross to the other side. That's where they land."

It was a soft yet brilliant Southern night. The far stars seemed to hang clear of the heavens like a penetrable veil of radiant dust. The swell of the great, orange-colored moon could be plainly seen, with some of those hazy veins which scien-

tists say are frost-cracks in her cold surface. Every dune and bit of wreckage on the broad bar stood out distinctly in her light, and a clump of frowsy-headed palms cast sharp-edged shadows on the sand. Those of the two boys walking along the hard-packed beach below high-water mark hobnobbed in front of them like two giant spectres.

“Now,” said Jim at last, “here’s where we split; you go north and I’ll go south. We’ll cover the ground in that way in less time. When you reach your end of the bar, come back and wait for me here.”

He stood a few moments watching Bob’s progress, then picked up his pail and stake and started toward the shelf of the beach. His round face was no longer smiling. There was a terrier-like concentration in its expression and in the forward thrust of his head, and as he zigzagged swiftly over the stretch of loose sand his movements had much of the nervous deftness of that gamy little animal.

As he trotted back and forth his stick tapped the sand like a blind man’s staff. It had made perhaps a hundred little pecks, when presently

he checked, and lowering the stick as delicately as if pricking a blister, drew it up and inspected the tip. It was gummy and glistening, and would have offended most people's noses.

"O-ho!" he chuckled. "That's pretty quick work."

With deft, hollowed hands he uncovered the leathery eggs. In the moonlight they looked like fat milk pearls; one hundred and twenty-five of them in two layers, with a wadding of sand between. The clutch just filled Jim's pail and he set it well above high-water mark, and resumed his quartering.

He had no more luck, however, and reached the southern end of the cay with his hopes for a fine haul completely dashed.

"I reckon I started out too well," he thought. "Good beginnings don't mean good endings always."

The night was warm and windless, and he was sweating profusely under his loose shirt. With a sigh of resignation he threw himself down on the sand, his face toward the sea. There had been little wind for several days, and the sea hardly stirred in its sleep. Now and then

its bosom lifted in a slow breath that sent a swell rolling in, to die upon the beach with a draw-out sigh. A film of stale, iridescent oil seemed to blanket the water thinly, flickering and passing from green to saffron and from saffron to rose as the tranquil heaving presented new surfaces to the moonlight.

Right in the midst of this subdued glitter and close in shore something black and wedge-shaped presently appeared. It came without a ripple, like a sudden rise of a water-logged timber. Then Jim saw it sink in the same stealthy fashion, as if it had withdrawn to weigh its estimate of the prospect in secret. Only a few moments elapsed, however, before it reappeared nearer shore.

Jim lay as motionless as the sand itself, and the turtle, after a long and wary inspection of the beach, swished through the shallow water and began to ascend the slope.

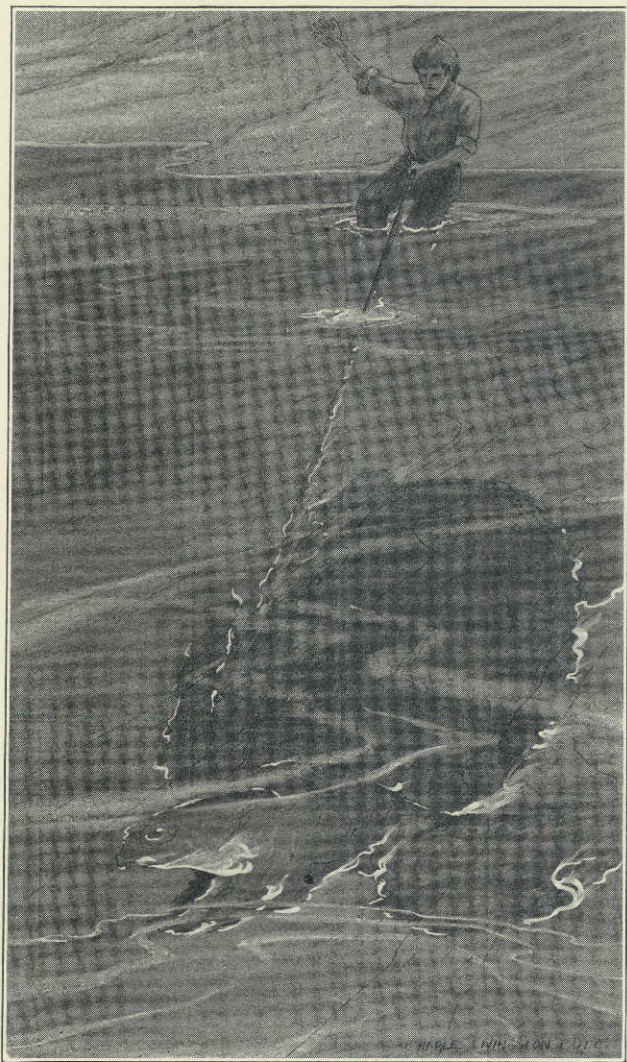
It was laborious work for the huge creature, but at last it gained the shelf of the beach and looked round with blar and weary eyes for a suitable nesting site. Then it saw Jim rising from the sand, and shrank inward into its shell

in quivering apprehension. A long dismal hiss escaped from its horny blowholes.

“Hello, old camel!” mocked Jim. “I’m right glad I was in when you called.” Then he rapped the shaking head smartly with his stick, and his voice broke to a threatening soprano. “You squat still now till I stake you down. I don’t want to lose you. I’m mighty fond of you—well done.”

He uncoiled the braided rawhide wound round his waist, and began to knot it about one of the big, musky hind flippers. The loggerhead’s baggy throat pulsed. Its round, hard eyes gleamed with an indignation it could not express vocally, for the great turtles are mute. It spun suddenly on its broad breastplate, almost knocking Jim off his feet, and with a powerful forward hunch started for the sea.

Jim dropped sitting upon the beach, his heels jammed into the sand, and both hands clutching the rawhide, one end of which was still tied about his body. His weight crippled the flipper to which he was fast, but the loggerhead seemed quite satisfied with what remained. Without any ap-



“ THE LOGGERHEAD PLUNGED INTO THE WATER.”

parent increase of effort she dragged the boy steadily down the slope.

“Bob, O, Bob!” bawled Jim. “Come quick! I’ve got one!”

“Pshaw!” he muttered, letting go with one hand and groping in his pocket. “Bob can’t hear me way off here, I reckon.”

He took out his knife and opened it. The turtle was already at the lip of the sea, but Jim hated to cut. Economy was inborn among his people, and it hurt him to lose so much good meat. It was not yet too late for Bob to be of service if he should arrive upon the scene.

No Bob came, however, and the loggerhead plunged into the water with a joyous splashing. Jim drew the knife quickly across the line. The next instant he dropped it with a cry of pain as the brine struck bitterly into a gash in his finger. Clutching and tearing uselessly at the sand, he was jerked into the water, down, down, down, a crisp singing in his ears and cold fingers prying at his lips. By one of fate’s malicious pranks the knife had somehow turned in his hand, and when he struck, it was the back of the blade that met the line!

At this part of the coast the sea lies warm and shoal above a great apron of submerged land fully half a mile wide. The loggerhead had hardly begun its dive when it reached bottom. Its flippers struck violently, and sent up a boiling cloud of sand. Confused and winded by the violence of its fright, it turned and slanted upward to the surface, where it lay puffing like a naphtha-launch, its limp flippers swinging with the sway of the water. A few seconds later Jim's streaming yellow head bobbed up close behind it.

The boy had the line tightly clutched in his hands, and hardly waiting to take the necessary breath, he pulled himself forward with a strong, quick pull. The fore part of the loggerhead sank instantly; but before she had gathered her trailing flippers under her, Jim was on her back, all ten fingers hooked about the thick front edge of the shell.

The loggerhead, for obvious reasons, has no enemy but man, and this particular loggerhead had led a long and pottering existence of unbroken peace. To say that she was frightened would do scant justice to her state of mind.

Down she went with a rush that tore white streaks through the water, but this time she did not strike the sand. She turned as she neared the bottom and skimmed along just above it. Her powerful flippers, working with a propeller-like motion, drove her along like the wind.

As she went she turned on her side, glancing this way and that like a scaling stone; but Jim clung to the broad carapace with the tenacity of a barnacle. He knew that if he were trailed again at the end of the rawhide he would soon drown. Three generations of coast dwellers had left him a legacy of pluck and coolness that made a man of him, and a strong one, in times of danger. Young as he was, Jim had been in peril before, but never had things looked so bad. Something cold and tense seemed to knot within his head. He must, if it were possible, draw up his knees to the centre of the shell and fashion his body into a sort of drag or breakwater. It was a trick which some of the "reefers" declared would invariably force a turtle to come to the surface.

It had sounded easy; but in the pens, if one failed, one had only to let go and come up with

no worse penalty than a derisive laugh from one's companions. It is different when one tries it out at sea, when life itself may be the price of a slip.

Something, however, must be done. Although in reality Jim had been below the surface but a few seconds, the force with which he was swept through the water and the efforts of the loggerhead to unseat him made it extremely difficult to hold his breath. A pair of iron hands seemed to press with terrible force against his lower ribs. His lungs shook like foul and sodden sponges within him. His legs, always hitching forward, were straightened again and again by the pressure of the water.

But Jim was almost as much at home in the sea as a fish, and at last, favored by a momentary slackening of the loggerhead's speed, his knees caught under him, and he straightened his body as much as the length of his arms permitted.

Either the trick succeeded or the turtle was again winded, for almost immediately she began a slow and grudging rise. Jim had enough spirit left in him to grin a tight-lipped, dimpled grin. Owing to the backward tilt of his body, he could

see the cheerful shimmer of moonlight on the surface. It danced like mercury, grew brighter and more dispersed.

Then his head shattered the silver film, and he shot the stale air from his lungs in a gulp that seemed to pull them into his throat.

"Um-n!" he panted. "I reckon we were right close to being late for *that* appointment."

The loggerhead, its dome just awash, moved seaward with a sudden accession of dignity. It was apparent that she did not intend to exert herself in any fancy diving until she was sure of deep water.

Jim glanced back over his shoulder, and the cabbage-palms seemed to him to have dwindled to the dimensions of hat pins stuck in a sand cushion. A lively and picturesque little wake of phosphorescence suggested that they might look even smaller in time.

Clinging to the shell with one hand, Jim picked at the knot with the other, but the swollen rawhide resisted his wet fingers. A sudden boyish outbreak of rage at his impotence swept over him, and he struck the loggerhead savagely on the head. The blows, aimed without intention, did

more than skin Jim's knuckles, for the creature swerved confusedly until its course lay parallel to the beach.

Jim's temper passed as quickly as it had come. Another blow might undo the good he had gained. As long as they held their present course he was within swimming distance of the shore.

His face, pale from fatigue and the cold moonlight, set precociously. He had nothing with which to cut the line nor could he use both hands at the knot and keep his seat. He turned his hot gaze downward. What if he gouged out those bleary eyes with his thumb or tore open the baggy throat!

Something desperate Jim was prepared to do. He leaned forward, his face drawn like a weasel's, when suddenly the inspiration came. He caught up the line, and thrusting it under the sullen beak, rasped it viciously back and forth.

"Bite, you mossback!" he snarled, reckless of the danger his fingers ran.

The loggerhead did bite, with a quick venomousness that was uncanny. A gush of fat bubbles gurgled up, and the keen, horny jaws sliced through the rope as if it were kelp. The next

moment the turtle dived and Jim unprepared, found himself gasping, but alone in the water.

He fell into the stroke, the long side-stroke he could maintain for an hour at a time, laying his course by the prim palms. He heard a faint "Halloo!" from Bob, returning down the beach, and grinned abstractedly.

It never occurred to him to ask for assistance. Such a swim was mere play in his two-piece costume, but a mischievous wish to frighten Bob made him lift his voice in a tremulous: "Coo-ee!"

He shook the water from his ears and listened for the answer.

"Halloo!" It came faintly. "Where are you?"

"Out here! In the water-r!"

A black blot was visible against the pallid gleam of the sand. It moved forward and was merged suddenly with the dark water. Was Bob, who couldn't swim a stroke, going to risk his life for him? Alarmed at the possible results of his foolishness Jim shot forward like a scared fish.

"I'm all right!" he shouted. "Stay where you are."

He made the water boil as he swam, and soon his feet touched sand and he stood up and waved his arms. There was Bob, yards out from the beach, half wading, half floundering toward him.

"Go back, you chump," said Jim. "I could swim home from here if I wanted to."

"You sure scared me," said Bob, up to his waist in the water. "What have you been up to, anyway?"

He was full of wonder and admiration when Jim explained.

"Golly, but that must have been fierce," he said. "You've got grit."

Jim laughed.

"Why, a thing like that's nothing to me. It's you that's got grit, trying to come out to me when you can't swim a stroke. It reminds me of the way you put your head down and butted into Hal Skillets. Have any luck?"

Bob had found two nests. His coat, tied together by the four corners, was fat with eggs. With the two full pails they had, Jim declared, a decent mess; enough to pay them for the trip.

"I reckon we might as well hike back to the skiff and go home," he said. "But I just would

like to pick up an old mossback on the way. I hate to be licked."

They saw nothing on the return walk, however, and, having packed the eggs safely in the bow, they spread the sail to the light breeze and began the long beat home.

Once a school of porpoises rushed across their bows, disturbing the silence with their loud puffing, and the swishing of agitated water, and one lonely drum-fish hugged their wake for a mile or more uttering his melancholy, booming grunt at regular intervals. It was a tedious trip. Both boys were tired and half asleep when they saw the pier stretching out its friendly length to them. They tied the painter to a bolt in the string piece and stumbled wearily to land.

It was the kind of weariness, however, that was very pleasant to Bob, at least. Every fresh experience in this new world tucked away in his retentive mind a bit of knowledge that seemed worth any amount of fatigue.