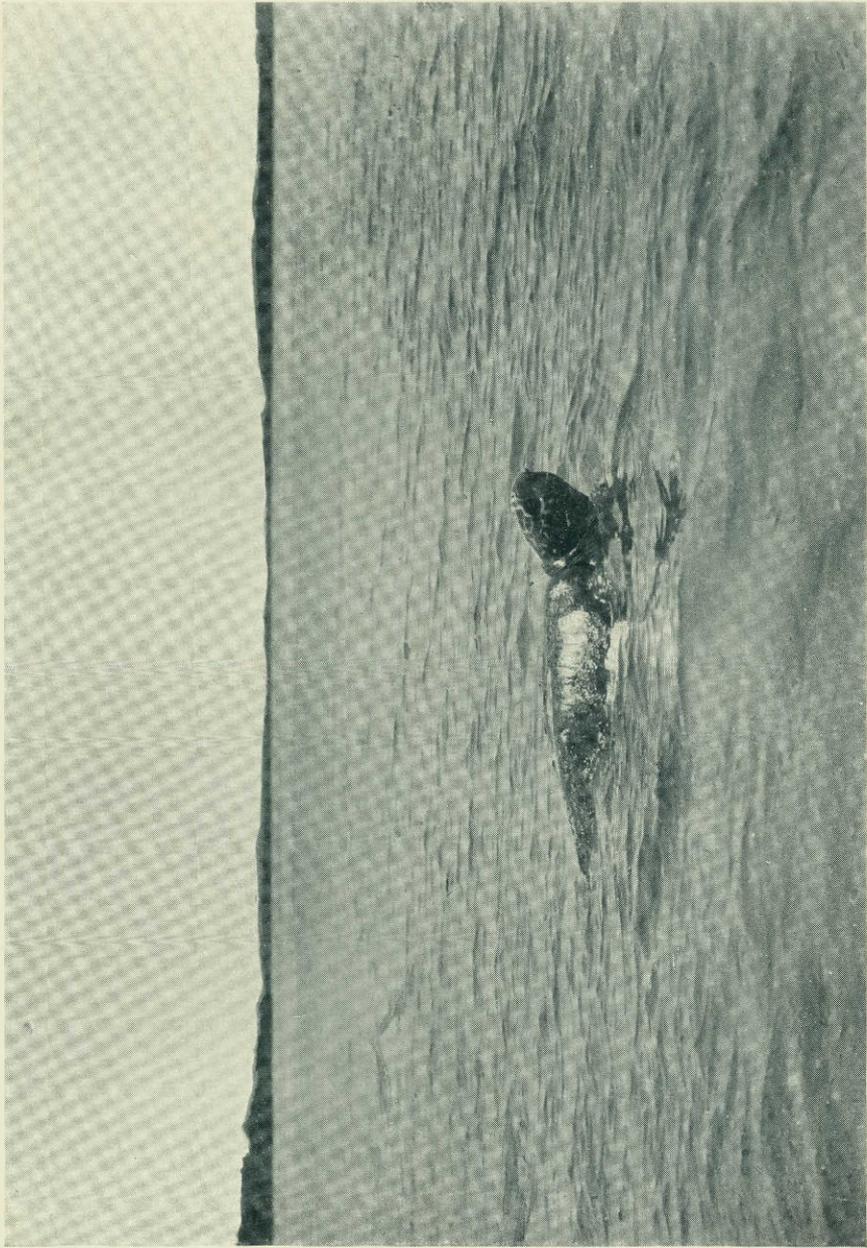


CHAPTER VIII

The Loggerhead Turtle



A TURTLE SWIMMING.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LOGGERHEAD TURTLE

ONE of the favourite objects of the harpoon in those waters is the loggerhead turtle, and as the procedure differs in some respects from that followed in the pursuit of the unprofitable ray, I will attempt to give some account of the way in which amateurs spear their turtle. If you must catch your turtle before you cook him, you must as surely find one before you can spear him. Turtles are in the habit of coming up for a breather somewhere about slack water, and at such times they may be seen basking lazily at the surface.

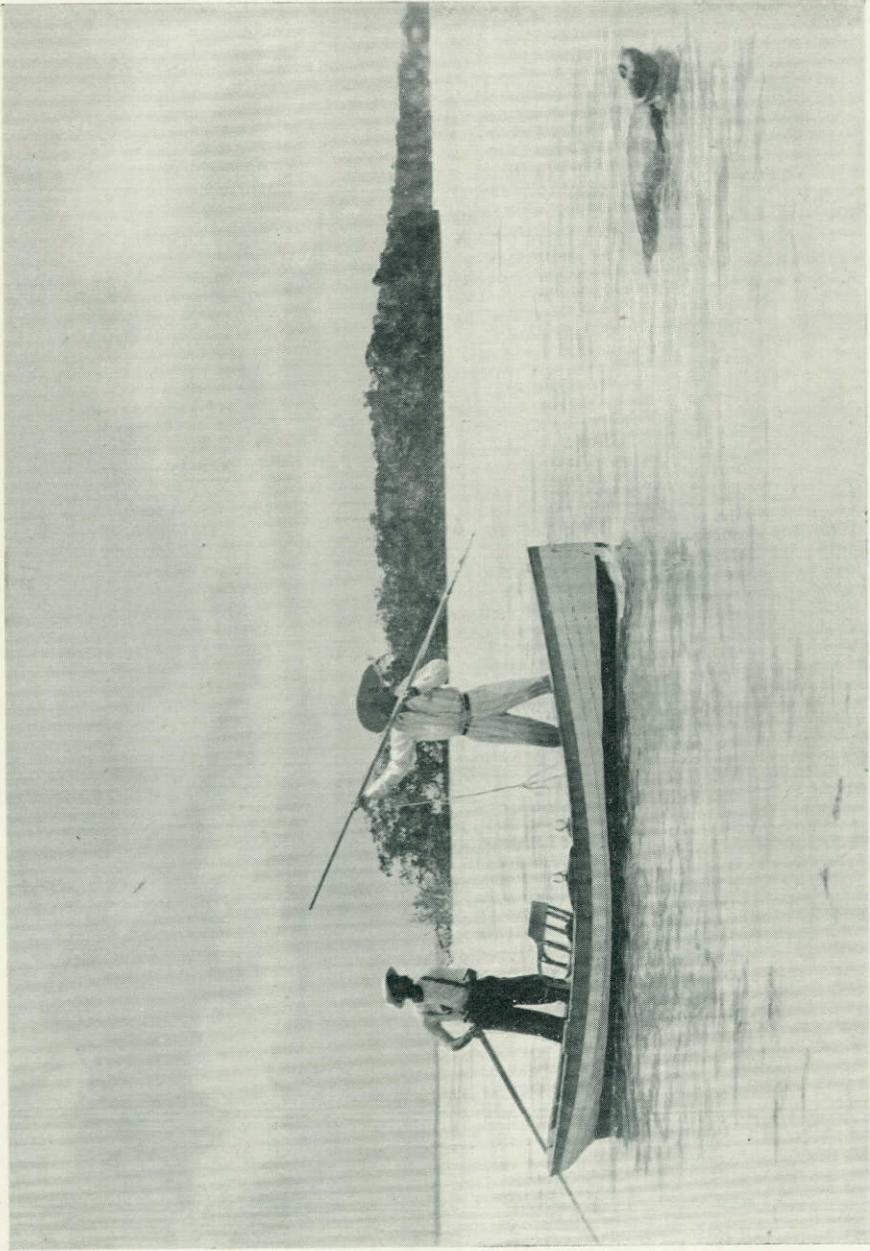
A small and sharp harpoon is necessary to penetrate the turtle's shell, and it is important to make this change in your equipment if you go from rays to turtles. All being ready, your guide paddles you as quietly as possible into the pass, and you must get in the way of standing motionless in the bow in

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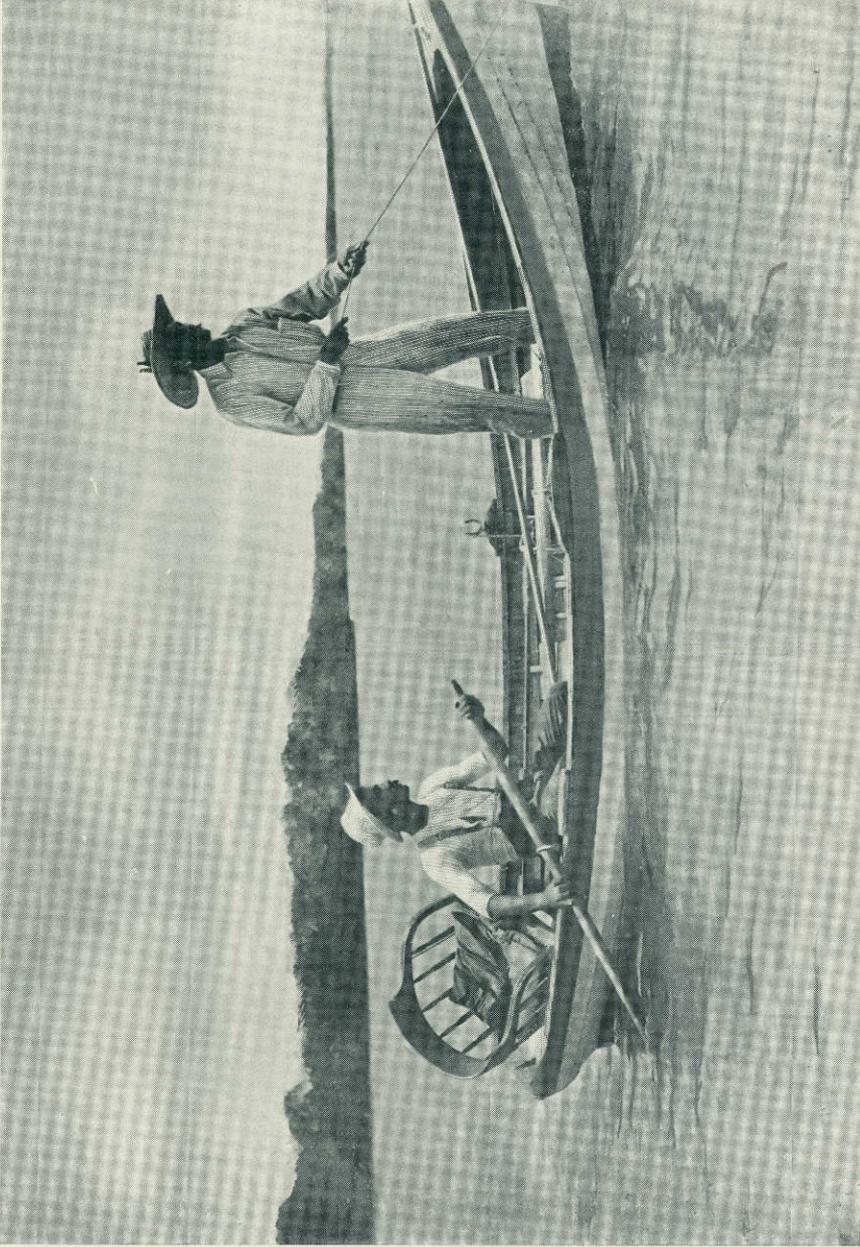
a slight lop, for roughish weather is undoubtedly the best for turtle-spearing.

At length you see a great loggerhead some three hundred yards ahead on the port bow. The loggerhead turtle is the most common on this coast ; the more delicate green turtle is the rarest ; and between them in point of numbers comes the leathery species. It is most important, when you have sighted a turtle, to creep up as close and as quickly as possible, without making the slightest noise. You must even stand quite steady and crouch without kicking the boat, as the least disturbance may send the turtle to the bottom. The great thing is to restrain yourself from letting drive with the harpoon until the most favourable moment, and the most favourable moment is that at which you are closest to your quarry, so that it may feel the full force of the harpoon.

If, when you are within reach, the turtle shows signs of diving, in with the harpoon ; otherwise, get a little nearer. Now put all your back into the cast, and the barbed point goes clipping through the shell. You think that it did not penetrate very far ? Well, your instinct is probably correct, so it will be as well to fix another dart ready and, playing him gently the while, strike again the moment he comes up to breathe. He may remain beneath the surface fully twenty minutes, on the move the whole while, but he will soon want air after that time has elapsed. If you were sure of having struck the barb well home, the more usual course



HARPOONING A TURTLE.



PLAYING A TURTLE.

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would be to haul in at once ; but it is sometimes safe to give the case the benefit of the doubt, and to handle the captive gingerly at first, until a second blow has made things doubly sure.

Up he comes at last ; a second barb is driven into shell and flesh ; and now, being quite sure that there is a firm hold, you alter your tactics and haul boldly. As he comes floundering to the surface you seize one flipper (careful ! that beak, which is fashioned to crush the strongest shells, could easily nip your hand off at the wrist !) while the guide lays hold of the other. You both keep well on the opposite side of the boat to prevent her collapsing, and the turtle, weighing 200 lb., is finally lifted in tail first and laid on his back. You are very careful to keep your legs out of his way, for the flippers hit hard and the male's nails tear deep. Blindly in his impotent wrath he flounders, striking out in all directions and chipping away planks like matchwood if he gets the chance.

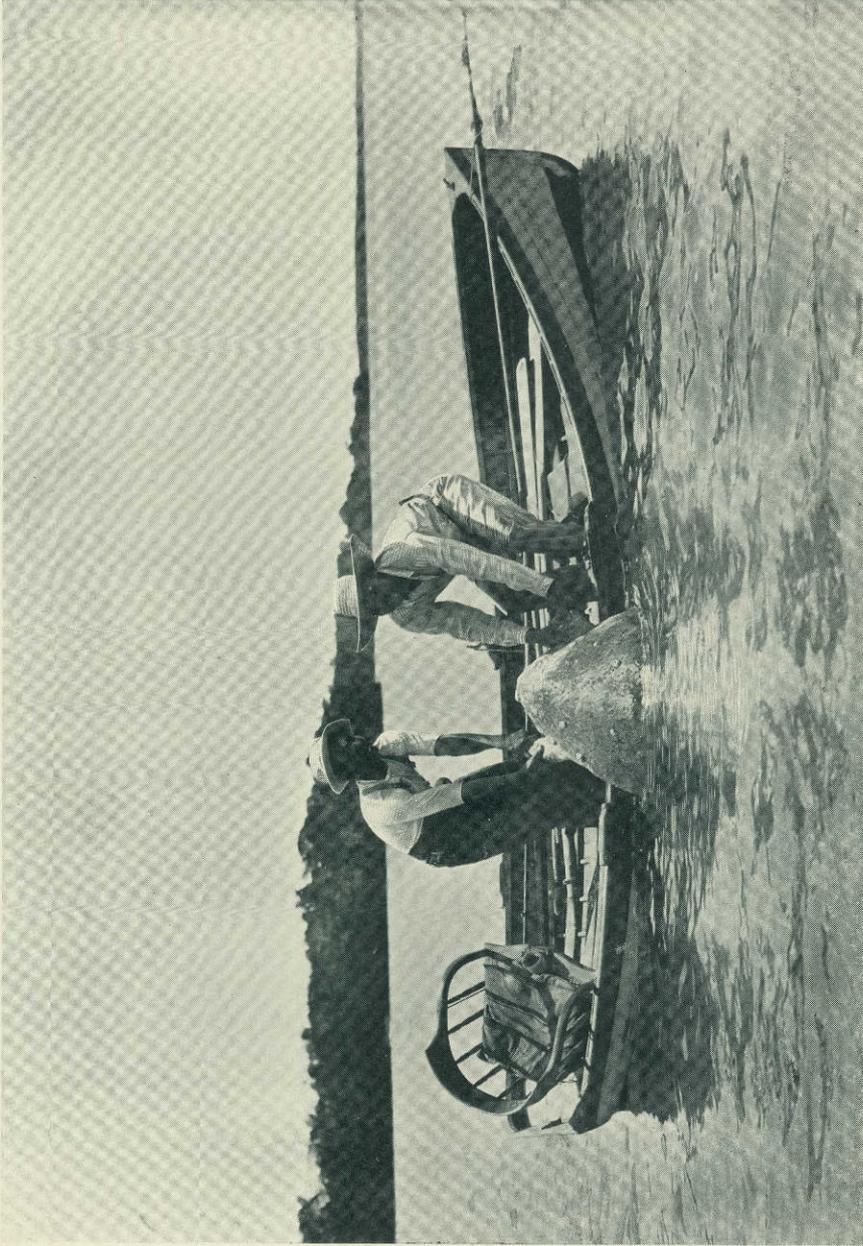
Before hoisting in a turtle, see that your oars are properly stowed away. We once landed a heavy loggerhead upon an oar half drawn into the boat, with the result that it was driven through the bottom, and the accident discovered only when the boat was a third full of water. In spite of hard bailing, by the time the turtle had been shifted, and the guide had whipped off his shirt and stuffed it into the hole, the boat was in a sinking condition, and the turtle had most of the fun to itself.

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Though its reputation is deservedly less than that of its green relative, the loggerhead nevertheless makes excellent soup, but you have to dress your own turtle if you want to utilise it in this way. The first thing is to kill it, and killing a turtle is easier to write than to do. Its head must be cut off at any cost, and the particular cost to avoid is having your fingers nipped off. Always bear in mind that the shell is a very important part of the skeleton ; the ribs and neck are firmly joined to it. The big bones fore and aft, as well as the shoulder blades and pelvis, are separate ; otherwise all the solid parts and the shell are one. I am not desiring to discourse on the anatomy of the turtle, but this unity with the shell is worth remembering by any one attempting to remove the head.

To get at the turtle's best meat you have to cut round the margin of the under plates and lift up the lid. Even then, unless you have some experience of the composition of the animal, it is by no means easy to be sure that you have struck the liver, and not some other part that you do not want. A turtle is one of those creatures that do not seem nearly dead when you have killed them. When the turtles are pairing, by the way, nothing will drive them from each other's company, and there can under the circumstances be no possible sport or advantage in killing them, particularly as the male is then unfit for food.

Such are some of the fruits of harpooning. It will be found a pleasant change, exercising a new combination of the senses



HOISTING A TURTLE ON BOARD.

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and muscles, and requiring some skill ; but it is, of course, only a bastard form of sport, and is usually resorted to on days when the tarpon will not feed, or the tide is too strong for fishing. The turtle is the only useful animal taken on that coast by such means, and there is this excuse for harpooning your turtle that you cannot get them in any other way. The turtle's cousin on land, the gophir tortoise, which is common enough in those parts, is said to be taken in a very curious way, though, as the animal is useless, few put it to the test. This tortoise lives in underground burrows, not unlike rabbit earths, and its abundance may be judged by the number of such burrows. Into these the natives say they drop a ball attached to a string, a sudden intrusion that infuriates the occupant of the burrow, who, in his slow and sure fashion, pursues it into daylight, and is then easily secured. I hand on the story for what the cautious reader may think it worth. Personally, I am not much inclined, from my limited knowledge of reptile habits, to credit it.

The turtles come ashore in the warm May nights to lay their eggs, and the female, as soon as she touches land, raises her head and peers cautiously around to see that the coast is clear. Satisfied on this point, she scrambles on to the dry sand and above high-water mark, scrapes a hole and therein deposits her eggs, covers them up, and returns to the sea. Three sittings she will lay each season, and many a banquet is thus provided for racoons. It is at this laying

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season that so many turtles are procured for the market, and many a loggerhead finds its way into the real green turtle soup.

In their wanderings below the surface they not infrequently get foul of a line, but, so hard is their skin, that the hook seldom penetrates. Some idea of the toughness of the skin may be formed when it is mentioned that even the strongest men can with difficulty pierce it with a gaff. When they chance to foul a line they are generally played for about half an hour, after which they show once and then go free. On one occasion the harpooner of the party slowly and cautiously approached a basking loggerhead, his right arm poised, his weapon ready to strike. Then, slowly, it was lowered; the turtle must have been dead at least a week. Yells of laughter greeted his discovery, for the decaying reptile had drifted down the whole line of boats, reaching him the last, and had even deceived one or two of their inmates into fetching out their gaffs.