

CHAPTER V.

A HUNT FOR TURTLE-EGGS.



LD Jim Scobie, the panther hunter, took a hold upon our affections at once by his blunt, honest ways, and won our admiration by his great skill in sailing our boat and in hunting. So we made a bargain with him to go with us to the end of Indian River Lagoon, sail our boat, provide the camp with game, and act as our guide.

Jim only asked for time to run over to his little hut and place a stick against the door, after he had got his rifle and haversack; and it was early in the morning that we set sail from the live-oak camps, and made directly for the "haul-over." This "haul-over" is the point where the two great water-systems of the East Florida coast, the Mosquito Lagoon and the Indian River, approach nearest. There used to be a path here, over which the early navigators hauled their boats from one lagoon to the other; but now there is a canal, dug by Government, and boats of light draught can go through with little detention.

There are several orange groves on this lagoon, both wild and cultivated. We entered the canal about noon one day, passing the first stake half a mile north, and standing away southeast till opposite the canal. The eastern end is invisible till directly at its mouth, owing to bushes and sand-bars. The canal is about half a mile long and twelve feet wide. Connecting the Indian River Lagoon with the Mosquito, it forms with them an inside route of water travel over one hundred and eighty miles in length. The water was at the highest when we entered, yet we barely passed through, drawing but a foot. Fallen coquina has narrowed the passage to seven feet in some places. The coquina is curiously hollowed by the water, leaving overhanging arches supported by



"A PANTHER CREPT STEALTHILY UP."

fantastically wrought pillars. The kingfisher has driven his shafts into the rock, and then occupied them. A large tree, with table-shaped top, stands near the eastern end, and can be seen a long way, forming a conspicuous landmark. There is good camping-ground near here, and an abundance of fish and ducks close by. Deer and bear range the hammocks north.

We camped that night at Andrew Jackson's. Andrew had the neatest little orange grove on the river. Close by, two miles, is the famous Dummitt orange grove, so often described. Captain Dummitt, the original owner of this grove, is now dead. He was an old resident, and highly respected. The grove is now owned by his three daughters and two others. It is about sixteen miles from the canal to the head of the river, and ten miles to Sand Point, upon the west bank of the river.

In these lagoons and at the inlets, where openings are found to the ocean, the water really swarms with fish. The mullet were most abundant, swimming in shoals, and taken only by the cast-net, as they will not bite the hook.

Many of the fish found in Florida have Spanish names, such as the crevalli, which sometimes weigh seven pounds apiece, and the pompano, taken by the net. Then there are the blue-fish, which afford excellent sport, the sargent-fish, jew-fish, bass, or red-fish, salt-water trout, red-snapper, sheep's-head, king-fish, toad-fish, croaker, and blow-fish.

The shark, especially in the deep channels and in the breakers on the beach, were very ravenous, and would frequently bite a large bass in two, after it was caught, and while it was being hauled in.

A walk on the ocean beach revealed many new and curious denizens of the sea, washed upon the shore, or recently caught. None attracted their attention more curious than the quaint porcupine fish (*Diodon hystrix*), which, when freshly found, looked like an inflated pin-cushion.

Sea-shells of many varieties are cast up here by the waves, and several vegetable products of the West Indies, as cocoanuts and sea-beans. These latter grow in the forests in the West India islands, fall into the streams, and are carried by the currents to the shores of Florida. There they are found in great numbers, collected, polished, and sold by curiosity-venders to tourists as watch-charms and ornaments. Probably no more fragile form of sea-life came before their notice than that known as the sea-butterfly. A ramble anywhere along the beach on the ocean side of the ridge gave numerous specimens to be added to the collections of the Historian and the Antiquarian.

In the groves and gardens there were not only oranges, but lemons, limes, citrons, pawpaws, guavas, shaddocks, pine-apples, peaches, pomegranates, alligator pears, and bananas.

The scrub and thickets were alive with small birds, and the air with larger ones, — gulls, terns, and pelicans; while the eagles and fish-hawks were just beginning to construct their bulky nests of sticks.

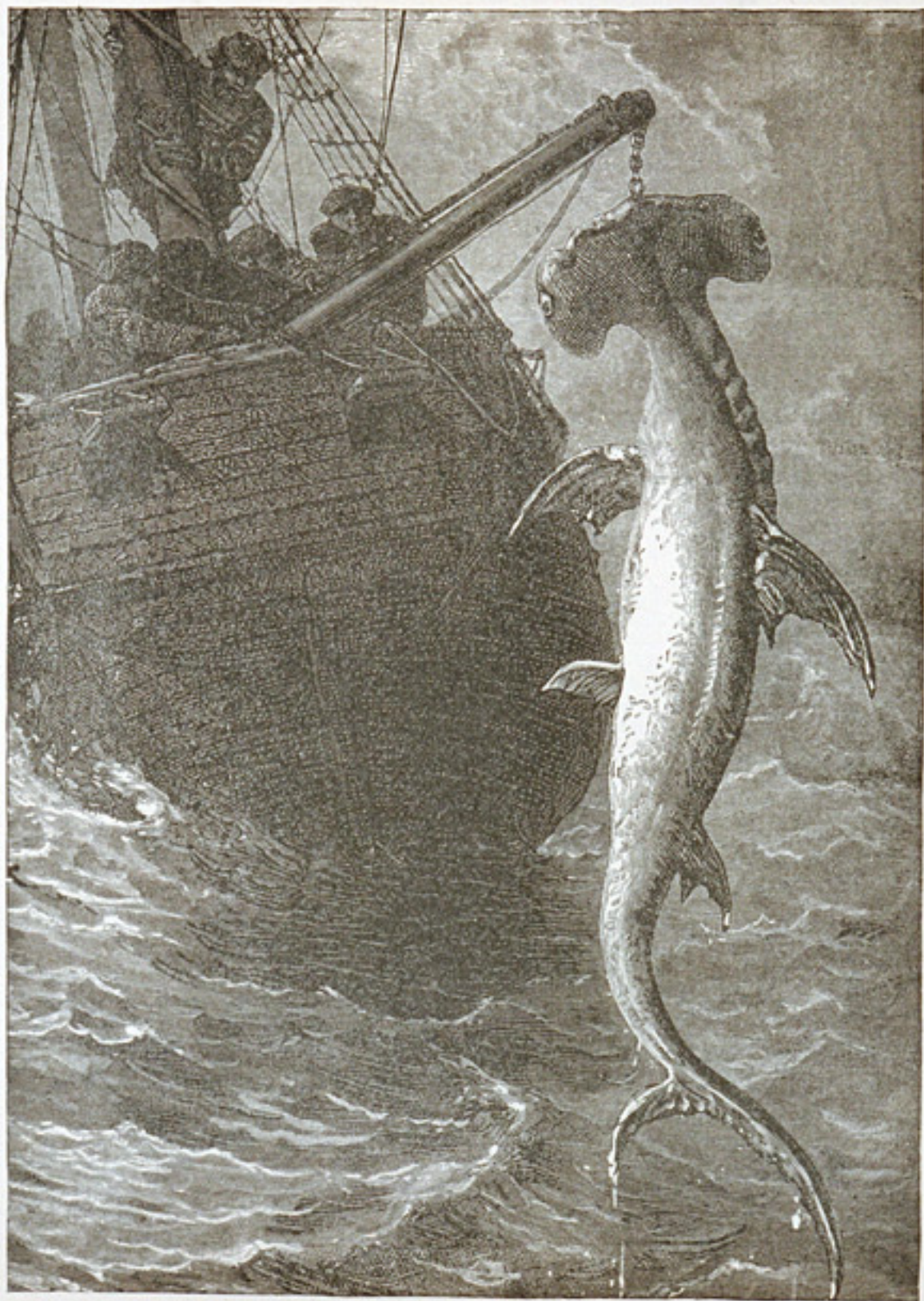
On the beach the turtles would soon begin to lay their eggs. The season for turtles' eggs begins, generally, in May or June; but Jim, our guide, was confident that we could find some this early if we should care to make a search on the ocean beach. Jim had come in from an interview with one of the settlers, and had been informed that turtles had been seen on the beach.

It is a wonderful region, — that long stretch of sand that separates the lagoons of the east coast of Florida from the ocean. It is nearly three hundred miles in length, broken here and there by a river that forces itself through, — in some places five miles in breadth, in others but a few hundred yards across. It is mainly covered with scrub and low trees, interspersed with saw-palmetto and thorny plants, and is the home of many deer, wild-cats, panthers at times, and hordes of raccoons and 'possums. Rattlesnakes are often met with here, and make things lively for an inexperienced hunter who hears their rattle for the first time.

This was good news that Jim brought us, — that bears were walking the beach, — for bears never walk the ocean beach without an object, and that object is *turtle-eggs*. The bears live in the great cypress swamps of the west side of the river, crossing to the coast at the season of turtle-laying, never a week too soon or too late. They are good swimmers, but are sometimes overtaken and killed in the water. Only the week before, one had been pursued by some men in a boat. The men caught up with him, and one of them made a blow at him with a hatchet, when he turned about and attacked the boat, getting one paw over the rail. The men were frightened and desisted, wisely concluding it better to let him escape than to run the risk of swamping the boat.

To return to the camp: "Bears is walkin'," said Jim, "and turtles is crawlin'; and if we don't give both a lively time, jest put me down for an apple-blossom." When Jim was particularly sanguine about anything, he always made the modest request to be recorded as an apple-blossom in case of failure.

We ate breakfast, and then took our guns and went to the beach, where the great waves came in tumultuously and dashed up the smooth sand. He walked ahead, and I followed in his tracks until we reached a spot where the sand was softer, and we sank ankle-deep. "There! don't you see them tracks, jest like you'd stuck the top of your head in the sand? Them's bear-tracks. Now look here," continued he, going farther down, and calling my attention to



FISHING FOR THE HAMMER-FISH.

a broad trail that led up from the water to near the border of beach-grass, "that's a turtle-track."

Two deep grooves were drawn in the sand by the turtle's fins as it had drawn its heavy body up the sand, between which was a broad furrow made by the body itself. The turtle had floundered over the sand with apparently aimless intent, and had gone back to the sea without depositing her eggs, seemingly not satisfied with the spot.

The bear had come up from the south along the beach, and had stopped here and dug in several places, misled by the turtle's trail into the belief that she had laid her eggs here; from this point he had gone off into the scrub to look for oysters on the river-shore, Jim said. "No matter; they'll both be back to-night somewhere within a half a mile of this very place: the turtle'll be back to lay her eggs, the bear'll be back to look after the turtle, and we — we'll be here to look after the bear." Saying which, with a chuckle, Jim led the way up the beach to look for fresh tracks.

We found another trail, but no eggs, though all our observations showed us that there was a good prospect for the night. There was a moon that night, — a moon that flooded even the dark grove where our hammocks were hung; and as we reached the beach equipped for spending at least half a night on the sand, it was almost as light as day. It was about eight o'clock when we reached the spot we had first examined. I was posted there, and Jim hastened on a mile farther.

A tangled mass of scrub palmetto, with thick roots and broad leaves, overhung an excavation in a sand-bank; near and beneath this, in a hollow and in deep shade, I took my seat. No sound broke upon the air except that of the surf; not a living or moving object was in sight in all the long stretch of beach I could command on either side of me.

Spreading an old coat upon the sand, I sat down with my gun across my knee and waited. Our desire was to get the turtle as she left for the sea after leaving her eggs, and also to identify the exact spot in which she placed them. After the eggs are once buried in the sand, this is no easy matter, as there is nothing to indicate their presence. Experienced egg-collectors walk the beach, in the season, with long rods in their hands, with which they probe the sand; they can tell by the looseness or firmness of the sand whether it has been recently disturbed, and at once dig when they find a difference in the resistance offered.

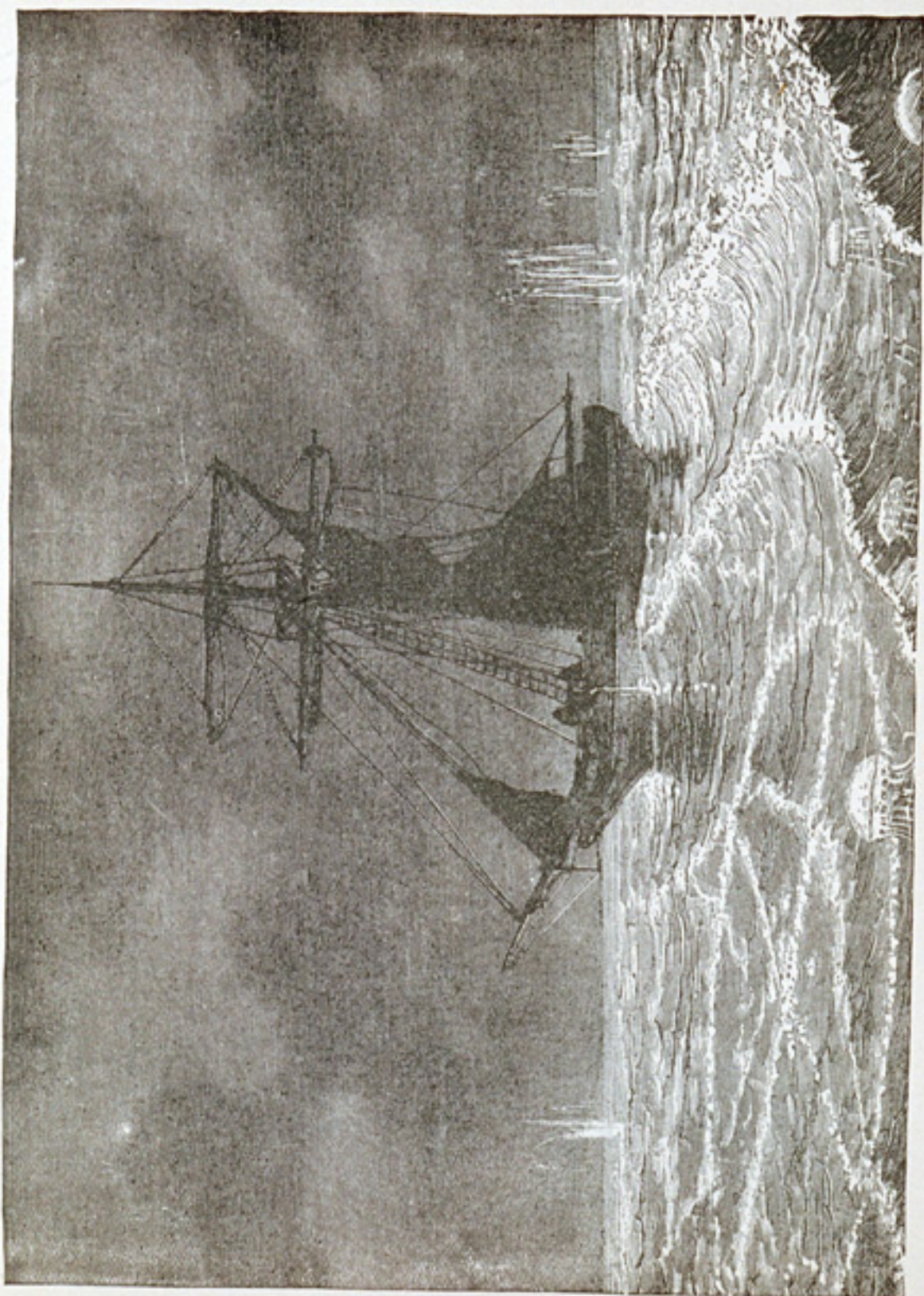
One hour, two hours, I waited. It was getting cold, and I was growing tired. Up and down the beach I looked, and saw nothing but the white surf and sand. Nothing? A dark object at that moment seemed to rest in the surf.

Watching it, I defined it growing into shape, and emerge upon the sand. Very slowly it moved up the sand; inch by inch its huge bulk was carried on, till it was half-way up the beach. It was three hundred yards away; but I did not seek to lessen the distance between us, for fear it would return to the sea at sight of me. When it had reached its destination and begun to dig, would be the safest period.



"SEIZING A FLIPPER AND LAYING HOLD BENEATH THE UPPER SHELL."

At last it seemed to have settled upon a spot to its mind, and commenced to fling the sand about with its hind flippers. Soon it had nearly hidden itself, and had dug a burrow, by the time I reached it, nearly three feet deep. At my approach it protruded its head and gave utterance to a hissing noise, but did not offer to escape, and I stood watching it while it laid its eggs in the hole. This took a long while, for there must have been nearly a hundred, and I was beginning to get impatient, when it seemed to conclude it had done its



PHOSPHORESCENCE AT SEA.

duty for that night, and crawled out of the hole. It then carefully covered the eggs with sand, smoothing the place of deposit over with as much care as though one of her enemies had not been watching her all the time, and then prepared to depart.

"Now, madam," thought I, "is my turn,—my turn to turn you over!" The sea-turtles, once turned upon their backs, cannot regain their feet; consequently it is only necessary to turn one over to capture it for good and all. Seizing a flipper, and laying hold beneath the upper shell, I bore my strength against it; but in vain,—I could not make it budge an inch. The turtle was not inactive all this time; for it was scratching desperately, throwing up great showers of sand, which nearly blinded me, and all the while working its way towards the sea.

I shouted for Jim; but he was far out of hearing, and I was obliged to struggle on alone. It was humiliating to have to give up. I could at least, I thought, prevent the turtle from reaching the water till Jim's arrival. But though I exerted all my strength, she gradually lessened the distance between herself and the water, and finally was within a rod of it.

A thought struck me: if I could shoot her in the head, I might wound her badly enough to stop her, if it did not kill. I started up the beach for my gun, where I had left it leaning against the bank, seized it, and darted back—just as the water closed over the turtle's back.

This was an awful disappointment; our turtle-steaks had gone to sea, but the eggs were left. Digging them out, however, was not so easily nor so quickly done as I had imagined it would be. With my hands I could not begin to make the progress the turtle had made with her flippers; but after a while they lay uncovered, and I drew out, one after another, eight dozen eggs. These eggs were about two inches in diameter, white, covered with a leathery skin; they are not so good, in my opinion, as the eggs of a fowl, having a *mealy* feeling in the mouth.

I laid the eggs in a pile, and waited for Jim. It was an hour before he came along, swinging in his hand an opossum he had captured in the scrub. His disappointment was great; but when I showed him the track of the turtle, and the evidences of our struggle, he agreed that the turtle must have been an immense one, and that he could have done no better himself, alone and unassisted. He then took off his jacket, tied up the sleeves, and filled it with the turtle-eggs, and we carried them to camp between us.

He remarked to me, as we marched along: "The bear ain't been here to-night, that's cert'in; but he's goin' to be here to-morrer. I'm willin' to bet a heap on it."

Jim was always willing to "bet a heap on to-morrer." He looked forward cheerfully to "to-morrer" as a time of possible pleasure.

We did not give Jim that coveted "to-morrer," not being so sanguine as he was; but a fair wind springing up, we set sail the next night for Sand Point, on the western bank of the Indian River.