

## CHAPTER VII.

### A BEAR-HUNT ON THE BEACH.



**T**HIS chapter has been assigned to the Historian, who is an enthusiastic hunter as well as fisherman. He says:—

The termini of the beaches on either side of the inlet were two long points of sand, with the channel between, and a sand-bar over which the waves break high. On the north of the entrance lies the wreck of a steamer; on the south, the beach stretches away till lost in the distance, and above it hover thousands of terns, gulls, and pelicans.

On the southern spit, during the War of the Rebellion, a large number of Southern refugees encamped, among whom was our guide, Jim Scobie.

The inlet has three channels after breaking through the beach: one to the north and west, one to the southwest, the third due west,—a beautiful water-way, winding between banks of mangrove-trees.

The beaches were covered with shells, thickly strewn with Portuguese men-o'-war, and delicately cut sea-weeds.

We camped here two days, finding the best fishing we had ever met with. The first day was passed in fishing, drying our stores, and shooting the rarest of the sea-birds that hovered in clouds above the bar, and swam in the surf.

The memory of that day's sport will not soon fade away. Bass, sheep's-head, crevalli,—all bit well, and fully sustained the reputation accorded this inlet as the best fishing-ground on the coast. Jim had been hunting in the scrub along the sand-ridge, and returned to the boat as I hauled in my last fish. There was blood on his face,—blood on his hands, hair, and rifle. His shirt and pants were torn and likewise bloody. In reply to my questions he remarked in a careless way that he had run afoul of a catamount, and that

"the beast had showed fight." When I requested him to bring along his catamount, he said that it was out there in the sand, and that if I wanted it I might get it. Though I had doubts of the existence of said catamount, I went as directed, and did actually find one, — a beautiful creature, about four feet in length, curiously spotted and striped, and with tufted ears. Jim had discovered four of them, and had wounded one and then captured him.

I again got out my photographic apparatus, and won the undying love of our guide by photographing him in the act of harpooning a shark.

It was just here that I encamped one night two years ago. Jim was with me, and performed a feat that many men would shrink from. The captain of a little schooner had got his anchor caught beneath a sunken mangrove, and was going to cut his cable and leave it, when Jim volunteered to dive for and get it up. The water was alive with sharks, — this place is noted for them, — and the anchor was twenty feet under water; but Jim, after giving me instructions in case he was attacked, dove repeatedly, with the sharks swarming about our little boat, and a rapid current running, till he had accomplished his purpose. So it was peculiarly fitting that I should photograph him in this heroic attitude of harpooning the dreaded monster of the deep.

But to return to the catamounts. There were plenty of them in the scrub, Jim averred, and all we need do to get a full line of specimens was to go into the scrub and hunt for them. This we did, but were not fortunate enough to find any; and the Antiquarian, when he returned to the boat, laid aside his gun and vowed he would devote himself solely to historical research and antiquities. But I was not satisfied. Having been here before, I knew that the beach scrub contained game enough to supply us not only with specimens but with meat for our larder. As a result of this conviction that there was sport ahead if we would only hunt for it, we encountered the following adventure.

Leaving the camp in charge of the Antiquarian, at sunset of the second day, Jim and I walked far up the beach, with our rifles. Why we went there, and what we got there, will appear below.

Beneath my feet, as I write, is a bear-skin, with long hair, shaggy and black; though from its appearance a hunter could tell that it was not a bear of the North, — its coat of fur is too thin, and it has not the gloss of the winter coat of a Northern bear. But it is the skin of a bear, for all that; and the sight of it carries me back to the second night of that camp on the Florida beach.

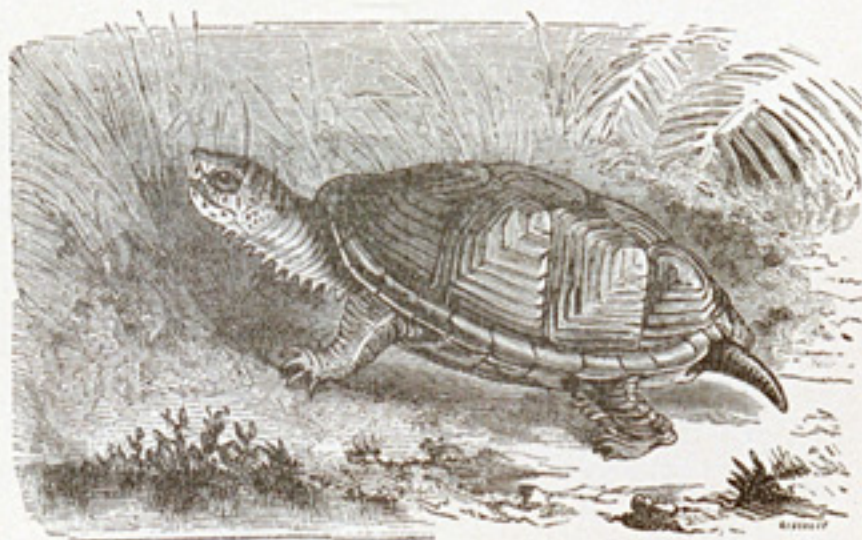
I had posted myself on the beach half a mile from camp, and Jim had chosen a position at an equal distance on the other side. Bears had begun to visit the beach in numbers, in search of turtle-eggs; during the day we had traced the



"BIRDS THAT HOVERED IN CLOUDS ABOVE THE BAR."

footsteps of three, and there was promise of great sport during the night. There was nothing simpler than the mode of hunting them: in their wanderings in search of eggs the bears followed the beach, examining a track of turtle here, stopping to dig there, — if successful, not travelling far; but if not, sometimes covering many miles. To get a shot at a bear, it was only necessary to choose a suitable ambush, possess yourself with patience, keep quiet, and pot the animal as he came along. It seemed simple and easy enough — But I anticipate.

An hour after sunset I was at my station, my rifle (which I had carefully cleaned and oiled in the afternoon) held in my hand, a dozen spare cartridges



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in a convenient pocket. I did not doubt my ability to kill a bear. So many times had I listened to the tales of hunters who had killed them, — who represented it the easiest thing possible, — that I had already slain many, in imagination.

I sat down there in perfect calmness, arranged the thick scrub that screened me from the observation of anything on the beach, and waited and listened. The moon, which left the water at sunset, mounted higher and higher, until it nearly reached the zenith, and I knew it was near midnight; and still no bear.

The measured beat of the ocean, as its waters fell heavily on the shore, lulled me to sleep at last, with its monotonous poundings. It was a glorious June night, warm and dewless; the perfume of palmetto blossoms and wild verbena hung heavy on the air.

Wrapped in my blanket, my rifle in the hollow of my arm, I leaned against a clump of bushes and fell asleep. With the consciousness, however, that it was my duty to keep awake, it was impossible to sleep soundly. Now and then I would awake and peer above the bushes, then relapse into slumber. The third or fourth time that I did this, as I was about settling myself back in my nest, I fancied I caught a glimpse of some object up the beach. Thinking that it was some creation of my sleepy brain, I yet ventured to assure myself by another glance, and was startled indeed to perceive a great black form slowly moving towards me. In an instant every sense was alert, and my heart was pounding away with an energy that nearly suffocated me.

That bear—for it was a bear—when he first hove in sight was a long distance off; but he soon decreased it, though he seemed to walk slowly. And how he loomed up! I had never imagined a bear could attain such a size. In my excited imagination he grew a foot in height for every rod he advanced; now he was as large as a donkey, now as large as a cow, and now he reached the dimensions of a small house. He grew so large as to obstruct the sea altogether, and I could see nothing but a strip of white sand, with that huge object moving swiftly down it to devour me.

Then I saw what a fool I had been to place myself in such a situation! Thoughts of safety had taken the place of those of glory to be obtained in the slaying of a bear, and I heartily wished myself back in camp. But this was impossible; a movement in any direction would betray me, and I could do nothing less than sit still, and, if too cowardly to fire, let the bear pass. Jim would then have a shot at him. This thought stirred me and touched me in a tender spot,—my pride. If I suffered that bear to pass without an attempt to stop him, I should never hear the last of it,—all Indian River would know of it.

Not a hundred yards away from me, the bear stopped. He sniffed carefully along the sand, followed a trail he seemed to have found along the beach to the dry sand near the bank, and commenced to dig. He worked industriously, scooping the sand out with his paws, and sending it flying over him in a shower. In watching him my excitement somewhat lessened. To be sure, there was still the same danger of discovery as before; but the bear seemed so unconcerned that I could not be otherwise than reassured at his indifference. I even caught myself searching in his dark form for the most vulnerable place for a bullet. From time to time I raised myself to fire; but my hands trembled so with eagerness (not unmixed with fear, I confess) that I dared not trust myself. "Not yet," I whispered; "wait till he is engaged in devouring the eggs, then plug him."



His industry was rewarded; for he soon came to a layer of eggs, and then proceeded more cautiously, drawing out one at a time with his huge paws, and laying them on the sand outside the hole. His head and half his body were immersed in the hole, from which he occasionally backed out to get a better foothold and to survey the eggs he had thrown out.

At it he went again, throwing out eggs and sand. Suddenly he stopped and gave a growl, at the same time retreating from the hole. Looking from him up the beach, following the direction his nose was pointing, I saw another black figure approaching, — another bear!

At this I began to be nervous again; for I had laid my plans to dispose of this bear neatly, but to take care of two bears with only one rifle was out of the question. The bear beneath me seemed alarmed also, but only on account of his eggs; he quickly turned to them and commenced to stow them away in a hurry, standing over them with one paw out ready for a blow, and an eye turned over his shoulder, like a greedy pig at a trough.

The oncoming bear seemed to scent plunder in the air; for he soon broke into a trot, lumbering over the sand at a rapid rate. He approached, and seemed disposed to join in the feast, — a disposition that bear number one was inclined to resent, and he turned upon him with a growl and a snap that plainly told number two to go off and dig his own eggs. With such dainties right before his eyes, bear number two very naturally objected to moving on; or rather he wholly ignored number one's presence, and pushed by and seized an egg. Such an infringement of number one's rights provoked him beyond the powers of endurance, and he drew off and hit number two a sounding slap on the nose. Recovering from this, the latter rushed at his adversary with such vigor that he recoiled; but quickly regained his feet, and threw his arms around number two in a fraternal hug that made his bones crack. Wrapped in a close embrace, biting, hugging, they rolled over and over on the sand. The eggs were hopelessly crushed and mixed with sand; but the bears seemed to have forgotten the object for which they were fighting, and now went on for the pleasure of it.

At last they went plump into the hole number one had dug for the eggs. One of them backed out and commenced kicking in sand, as if hoping to bury his foe alive. This the other did not relish, and scrambled out sneezing, made a dash at number one (or number two, I could not tell which, they were so hopelessly mixed), and strove to pitch him into the pit.

Then ensued a struggle of longer duration than the first. They at once changed their tactics, and commenced a sparring-match, using their great paws so skilfully that neither was able to get in a blow at the other.

As yet they had not suspected my presence. But suddenly one dropped on all-fours, ran a few steps, and quickly raised himself, sniffing the air suspiciously. As he stood there with glaring little eyes and foaming jaws, which, when opened, disclosed a red and cavernous throat, I trembled a little at the thought of what he might be able to do to me if we came into close quarters. I had made up my mind what to do while they were fighting: I would shoot the first one offering me a good chance. The opportunity had come; both bears seemed to have dismissed all thoughts of fighting, and were on the *qui-vive* for some common enemy. One of them was on his haunches, his fore-paws dropped, his head raised as if in the act of listening.

Sighting carefully at a little white spot on his breast, I fired. Then in all haste I withdrew my rifle, extracted the empty shell, and inserted a loaded cartridge. This was done before the smoke had cleared enough to allow me to see the effect of my shot.

It had not been exactly as I had expected. The bear I had fired at had fallen, all in a heap; he hardly kicked. But the other bear, instead of running away as I had hoped and expected he would, had not moved a foot.

He stood as though petrified; only a moment, though. He recovered from his astonishment, and went up and sniffed the fallen bear. Then it seemed to dawn upon him that that was a dangerous locality, and he started down the beach in a hurry. In my exultation, I could not help rising and sending a bullet after him. Foolish act! He at once stopped, looked around, gave a savage bite at his hip where my ball had struck him without disabling, and turned towards me with as much eagerness in his actions as he had before displayed in getting away.

Here was a dilemma! In my haste, in my flurry, I could not get a cartridge into my rifle. He was within twenty yards of me, — the cartridge would not go in; ten yards, — it still stuck; not twenty feet away, and he was pawing at the crumbling bank below me. I was rapidly revolving in my brain where I should fly to, when the cartridge slipped in. Instinctively I snapped the lock, pointed the muzzle, and pulled the trigger. That settled him, and he toppled over just as his claws had grasped a firm support of roots that would have enabled him to gain the bank on which I stood.

The tables now seemed turned. I was master of the field without a scratch. I laughed to myself over my previous fears, and declared I would as soon kill another bear as not.

Two bears in one night! What a hero this would make me! The hunters of the river would respect me more, and address me less patronizingly than heretofore. Two bears with three shots! Two — Here I stopped in my





"TOTING" THE BEAR.

exultant speech, as my eye fell upon the place where the first bear had fallen. He was not there! He was *on the bank*, not many rods below me; and as I discovered him, he broke into a run, not away from me, but after me.

Leaping to the beach, I ran with all the speed I possessed, — exerted every muscle to keep ahead of the brute that, despite his wound, could yet run tremendously. The beach was my race-course; if I had taken to the scrub the bear would have overtaken me in ten minutes. Along the hard sand I ran for life. The bear was gaining. I was tempted to throw aside my rifle, which was a weight to carry, but clung to it, hoping I might gain one precious moment in which to load it. My strength was going, and the bear's, notwithstanding his wound, seemed gaining.

I turned a curve in the beach, and there I saw my companion, not fifty yards away. He was equal to the test, and did not run, but waited. None too soon was he found, — as I reached him, I fell. He darted out. The bear stopped, — balanced himself on his legs a moment to regard this new foe. It was a fatal pause, and gave Jim the opportunity desired. A shot, and all was over. Two bears were ours, — two bears, which we cut up and skinned and "toted" to our camp before the morning fairly dawned.

The Antiquarian was very much provoked with us for leaving him alone all night, but readily forgave us when he saw our game. He did not, indeed, give credence to my story of the shooting, — in truth, I could hardly believe it myself, the events of the night had been so strange and hurried.

It might have been from envy of my good luck that my friend professed to doubt; but there was no gainsaying the evidence, — we had the bears, and Jim gave me the credit of shooting them. That was glory enough for one night; and I was better satisfied, perhaps, than the Antiquarian.