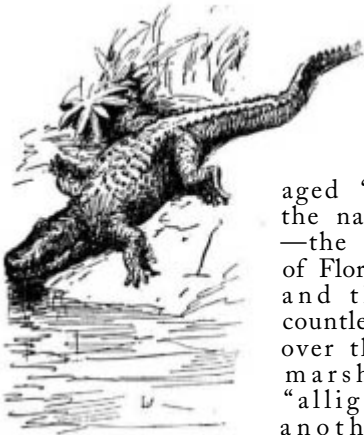


A NORTHERN GIRL'S "HUNTIN' OF A 'GAITAH.'"



BY MARION PRYDE QUAY.



WITHIN the memory of the middle-aged "Crackers,"—as the natives are called—the vast pine-lands of Florida were seamed and threaded with countless trails leading over the grass-grown marshes from one "alligator hole" to another. Now one seldom finds them, and

a big alligator is a rare discovery.

This sudden disappearance is owing chiefly to the Seminole Indian. Florida is his "happy hunting ground." Where a white man cannot go, he lives and thrives. He is a nomad, and all through the pine-lands one finds the ashes of his camp-fire, the ridge-pole of his dismantled tent, signs always that the country about has been hunted over, and the "alligator holes" robbed of their booty.

Alligator skins are the Seminole's chief article of barter. They are brought in for miles and traded at the scattered country stores for gaudily colored bandanna handkerchiefs—which are made into a sort of turban—beads, ammunition, knives, etc.; and owing to this near-by depletion the "sob" of the 'gator" grows less in the land.

With the disappearing of the alligator comes an added zest to the hunt. It lends difficulty to the already existing danger and difficulty. Danger and the charm of coming close to Nature, with all her mysteries and moods, are the magnets which for countless ages have drawn men forth from the haunts of men, to slay and spare not.

S—L—, on the Indian River is a settlement of about a dozen houses: To the right are a few low cottages given over each year to the Northern followers of Izaak Walton, who come South in search of tarpon and winter fishing. In front the wide lovely Indian River stretches away, fringed with palms and weird mangrove trees and pulsing to every heart-beat of the ocean. At the other points of the compass the "Florida Cracker" hath his habitation, and flourisheth like a green bay tree.

It was from one of our house party, Clarence, our guide, fisherman and general factotum, that I learned that here one might go a "huntin' of a 'gaitah" with a reasonable hope of finding one.

One morning I had wandered down to the dock before breakfast and was leaning over the railing, drawing in long breaths of fresh morning air, and viewing the heavens with a would-be fisherman's eye for any sign unfavorable to the plans we had made for the day. Clarence was polishing up the boats

and arranging the fishing tackle. The weather was calm and hot and sunshiny, and the river lay so motionless and still that one could hear the faint splash of leaping fish and mark where they had fallen.

"Good morning, Clarence," I called. "A good day for Spanish mackerel; no breeze and no clouds. I think we can count on rare sport out at sea."

Clarence stood still and surveyed the horizon carefully.

"A good day fo' mack'rel, suah, Miss," he said, "and you all suah to get lots of fish; but hit's a bettah day, by *fah*, fo' 'gaitahs."

I examined Clarence carefully for any sign of, suppressed amusement—a faintest trace of guile.

"Alligator-hunting, Clarence," I said blandly; "and where would one find them? Here? In the river?"

"*Not yere*, Miss," Clarence laughed amusedly. "Inland huntin' fo' 'gaitahs. Too much salt yere—tho' they do come occasional'. Th'ah some of 'em back in th' country—big uns. You all'd ought to go a huntin' of 'em. I can c'yar yo' wheah yo' suah get a 'gaitah," and Clarence sat down and mused.

He told me stories of 'gators and 'gator hunts, of hair-breadth escapes and odd experiences? until the breakfast bell rang, and I hurried away, filled with a' desire to enroll myself in the lists of those valiant hunters who "seek the bubble reputation, even at the alligator's mouth." Reputation there would be, should we be fortunate, I discovered that of twenty men who had gone alligator-hunting from the settlement in the last two years, only two had been successful. My thirst for the fray fired my cousin, V— to an answering enthusiasm, and she decided to go with me as aid and general voucher for all the tales I *hoped* to tell when we came back. We had several protracted meetings with Clarence in the next few days, and discussed plans and probabilities with a delightful sense of mystery.

There are two ways to hunt alligators. One is to take a small boat and a guide and row up one of the fresh-water streams. Here, lying flat down in the bottom of the boat in the broiling sun, with your rifle cocked and ready for instant action, you calmly allow the mosquitoes to devour you, while you strain your eyes in the blinding light and pa-

tiently watch for two little diamond points on the water and may be a tiny rough place—not larger than your hand.—for that is what your alligator will look like if you see him. Clarence told me that he went out for four successive days with one man, and each day they lay in the sun for hours at a time and never caught a glimpse of a 'gator. Then the man tired of the snort.

The other and more dangerous way is to drive out to the "alligator holes," where an encounter with a 'gator, becomes almost a hand-to-hand fight, as you are on foot and actually in the same water with him. Altogether, at the "holes" one needs a cooler head, and good marksmanship is a necessity. On the latter score, fortunately, I had not much hesitation as I had shot more or less all my life, and knew that I could depend upon the accuracy of my aim.

Inland hunting in the end proved more attractive, and having decided this important question, we arranged with Clarence and with Aiden, his brother—who is a veritable Nimrod—to go with us, provide a conveyance, etc. Then and not until then, we laid our plans before the house party, who amused themselves for the remainder of the evening launching at us dainty shafts of sarcasm and sparkling witticisms, which left us inwardly saddened, but outwardly, most valiant and bold.

The morning of our hunt dawned bright and lovely, and at nine the guides were waiting for us with a two-seated wagon and a "one-time" mustang. They had with them a gun to shoot any moccasin we might encounter, a huge flask of whiskey as an antidote for snake-bites, and two long poles and hooks to land our alligator. We added a kodak, to photograph the spoils, and my rifle and ammunition. I used a Winchester repeating rifle of the '92 model, with 38-calibre, long-distance cartridges.

We drove back into the country for about a mile, over a sandy uninteresting road, which grew suddenly lovely as we reached a small stream, one of the many that drain the swamps. There was a big alligator track along one bank, a long, wet-looking streak through the sand, which Clarence pointed out, and the spirits of hunts-women awoke within us and our hearts beat high! Evidently we were on the trail,

Following the little stream, we drove directly through the pine forest, where the ground was thickly overgrown with palmettos, and came out upon a big, swampy, grassy space, with a circle of willows in the center—our first "alligator hole."

The "alligator holes" are at once curious and lovely. All through the pine-lands there runs a network of marshy ground covered with shallow swamp water and overgrown with tall; willowy, saw-grass. Here and there the waters deepen into little open ponds, and to these the name "alligator hole" is given. The name really refers to the holes the alligators tunnel out in the bottom of the pond, and into which they creep when startled. Here they can lie, safely stowed away, for hours without coming to the surface for air. The ponds are covered with water-lilies and fringed about with willows, which stand out boldly against the wide, flat monotony of the swamps and are very picturesque. Each hole should boast two or three alligators and many tiny ones; and its waters, together with the waters of the swamp around it, are infested with moccasins, only a little less deadly than the Southern rattlesnake.

Clarence and Aiden went to reconnoiter for game. They shot two moccasins not two feet away from us, and we saw some fifteen others, but no alligator; so we stowed the snakes away in the wagon as trophies and set off for another hole. We reached it after an hour's driving, and Clarence went again to look for alligators. He disappeared in the grass, and we could see his head now and again above it. As we reached the hole a flock of blue heron rose from the willows and sailed away, and a white owl cut the air with its lonely cry. We felt how small a part of creation we were in the wilderness, it all looked so wide and lonely, the swamp and all around us pathless forest,

The guide came back in a few moments, all excitement. He had discovered an alligator. He had crept in quite close to the pool without seeing a sign of our quarry, and had just risen to shout to me that there were none to be found, when a huge one, which he had failed to see, and which was sunning itself among the lily pads, jumped out and snapped at him. The boy still looked rather white and shaky. He had thrown him-

self back on the grass to escape, and the alligator had sunk.

"A fo'teen-foot 'gaitah, *suab*."

I was to come at once.

I came—I jumped out of the wagon into two feet of cold, oozy swamp water, put a dozen cartridges into my rifle and waded off through the swamp, with V— diligently waving good wishes in the distance,

Clarence kept a close lookout for snakes, and we slipped along as quietly as one can slip through saw-grass, taller than your head, and water which is one moment deep and the next shallow. Finally we reached the hole and I stood and looked at it and felt that cold wave of excitement go over me, which shivers up and down your back and tingles to your very finger-tips. This was alligator-hunting! The black pool of water held all sorts of possibilities for me, and I watched and waited with bated breath.

I waited a long time. I was growing disheartened and weary before I finally saw an alligator; and yet, when he did come, he came so quietly that it was with a little shock of surprise that I looked across the pool and saw him slyly peeping out from beneath a lily leaf. There had been no faintest sound, not the slightest ripple on the water, but there he was. I could just see his eyes, two bright spots, and could imagine his long, dark shape beneath the water. My longing to fire was scarcely controllable and my fingers fairly trembled on the trigger of my rifle; but I was so afraid he might be small and that I might frighten away my big "gaitah" by the report, if I shot, that I sent the guide around the pool to discover his size. Clarence disappeared, and after what seemed an age of waiting, I saw him creep out on the other side, bend over—then he slipped and fell, and my "gaitah" quietly sank. I could have wept bitter tears of disappointment. It was the big alligator and it would have been such an easy shot. They tried to bring him up again by imitating the sob of an alligator—"grunting him up," they call it—but in spite of all lures it was an hour before another one appeared. This time I was not too curious as to his size—I fired and he rolled his length over in the water, the inglorious length of three and a half feet!

What a fall was there, my countrymen! He was a "gaitah," however, and better at least than none, so Clarence hooked him out, and as it was quite late, we waded off to the wagon and V—. That demure maiden, when she saw me gave way to inexplicable and unrestrained mirth.

"My dear," she said, when she could, "do you mean to tell me you shot that monster in *those*?"

"*Those*" were my veil and gloves, and I had—shades of departed hunters forgive!—I had shot my first alligator in my gloves and veil; I was too much excited to notice them.

We drove slowly home after that, fully determined to come again; and over the renewed derision that greeted us upon our arrival I will charitably draw a veil.

That evening I sat on the front steps and plucked the burrs from my hunting skirt. This I did to show to all whom it might concern the supreme indifference with which I received the various wise saws leveled at me by "the party," who also sat on the front steps and were fast making life a burden to me.

Into this scene of agony, there came "Jeems" Ruggles.

"Jeems" Ruggles is our neighboring "Cracker" to the left, and he who knoweth not "Jeems" knoweth not S—L—. This evening he shambled barefooted out of his front gate, with his long, sunburned hair floating back from his brown face, his faded blue shirt widely open at the neck, his trousers short and equally faded, his shoes tied by their strings around his neck.

"Jeems" came along the beach and leaned on our front gate, and I welcomed his advent with joy. Here was relief!

"Good evening, Mr. Ruggles," I said, with a beaming smile,

"Jeems" smiled back as beamingly and swung on the gate.

"By gravvy, Miss Z—" he said, "I year yo' been 'gaitah huntin' this mahn-in'!"

I received this remark in stony silence.

"And I year," "Jeems" continued as beamingly, "I year, yo' on'y got a no-'count 'gaitah, and by gravvy, Miss Z—, it's too bad. I jest stopped to tell yo'—yo' bein' dis'poin'ted 'at way—'at my chillun they got a *pet* 'gaitah down yere in the rivah and they done

got him tied to a stake; and, by gravvy! if yo' would like to shoot *him*—he cahn't get away, yo' know, no how, and whenst yo' miss him, yo' can jest fiah away some moah."

I rose and fled, and "the party" laughed loud and long. Mr. Ruggles may have meant well, but after that encounter *nothing* Could have kept me from going out for alligators the next day!

We started at the same hour the next morning, and went directly to the farthest pool. When we arrived, Clarence and I crept up, talking in whispers, but there were no fresh trails and no alligators to be seen, except a tiny one, which Aiden caught and shook, head down, until its sobs of grief resounded over the water—all to no avail; and the guides, after examining the "hole," gave up any hope of getting me a quiet shot. The alligator had probably heard us as we crept through the saw-grass; and sunk, frightened, to its tunnel in the pool. The only thing left to do was to try to stir him up with a landing-hook, a dangerous proceeding. A long spiked hook is fastened to a heavy pole, and the entire pool is sounded. When the alligator is struck, he generally comes up with a headlong rush, which creates general havoc.

Clarence cautioned me to be ready to fire at once, as a minute's delay might be fatal, and to be careful in my aim, as I might, in my excitement, shoot him or Aiden. I steadied my nerves for serious work.

One may fire at an alligator half asleep and floating among lily pads, with stoical calm, if one is an experienced hunter; but when you know that the beast, if he comes at all, will come angry, open-mouthed and meaning fight; that he is big; that you are literally in the same water with him, and that water is his element and not yours—the situation yields matter for consideration. Aiden and Clarence prodded and pushed and pushed and prodded with their long spiked poles, but only stirred up lily stems and old logs. Finally, I grew wearied with the long nervous strain of watching, and was just about to call to Clarence to come away, when there was a splash! a yell!—they had struck him, and he came out with his enormous mouth wide open—with a hiss, a jump and a snap, breaking the poles and scattering everything right and left! He

looked tremendous! I fired, and he rolled over on the water dead. An eight-and-a-half-foot 'gator, and I had shot him.

Oh, the rapture of it all! I laughed and shouted with delight! Then I stood off and surveyed his big bulk with feelings of pride and vain-glory. Clarence's raptures were all for the shot. The bullet had struck the 'gator just between the eyes, and killed him instantly. The skull of an alligator is very thick, and there are just two small spots where one can hit and kill him—one is between the eyes, and the other, a side shot, is just beneath the ear.

The guides dragged the beast out, curled him up in the wagon, and covered him over with willow boughs, as he was a rather gory-looking object. We gave three ringing cheers and fired a salute, and then with infinite glee set off for S—L—. We fired other salutes as we drove in, and hearing them, "the party" gathered in amazement to receive us. Then the neighborhood assembled as the news of our exploit spread, and before them all we stretched out our eight-and-a-half-foot alligator and stood back with negligent ease to receive congratulations.

That evening, after dinner, "Jeems" Ruggles again swung on our front gate and again he beamed.

"Good evenin', Miss Z—. By gravvy, I year yo' cert'ny got a 'gaitah."

I smiled graciously.

"And I jest stopped yere to say 'at I reckon my chillun kin keep thar pet 'gaitah—yo' won't want him *much*."

"I sha'n't want the 'gator, Mr. Ruggles, thank you," I said; "and tell your children for me, that if their live alligator brings them as much pleasure as my dead one has given me, they have a

treasure and would better keep him." Then I smiled forgiveness on "the party," and "Jeems" betook himself off.

We started North the next morning, and Clarence surprised and delighted me by appearing with the skin of my alligator, which he had taken off at night that I might have it to take home with me. He brought me, too, the bullet I had used. The entire settlement gathered to see us off, and as we stood at the back of our car waiting for the express to come and carry us away, we felt very much lionized.

Our train came at last. The car was coupled on with a bump, and we waved good-bye to our "Cracker" friends. As we moved, the last words we heard were, from Clarence: "Come down next yeah, Miss Z— and I'll give yo' a shot at a beah"; from Aiden, "Come down and shoot a wile-cat."

I have my alligator skin tanned as a trophy, I have my memories—a constantly recurring pleasure—and I am going back to add to my experiences a "beah hunt" with Clarence and a shot at a "wile-cat" with Aiden.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my "Cracker" friends. While they are a law unto themselves, this is a quality that develops in the people of any unreclaimed, thinly settled country. It springs up of necessity—in self-defence. I found them always manly, courteous, kind-hearted, and full of resources for the furthering of any pleasure we might plan. They have a rich vein of natural, original humor, and are brave with an unconscious fearlessness most attractive. We felt that we were safe with them always, under any circumstances—even in the midst of the dangers attending the "huntin' of a 'gaitah."

