

THE ALLIGATOR HUNTERS OF LOUISIANA.

IN THE LAGOONS OF THE TIDEWATER WILDERNESS.



MORE than thirty years ago information was brought from France to Louisiana to the effect that a large demand for the skins of alligators had sprung up in Paris. Occasional attempts to utilize this material had been made since the commencement of the century, but the alligator-hide industry had not materially advanced up to a date measured back by three decades.

The demand noted must have been inspired by some new application of the product in question. Whatever its cause, it proved to have been but a passing fancy among the Crispins of the French capital. It suddenly died out after a few thousand hides had been shipped from Louisiana. The alligator hunters, as a class, are not distinguished for their rapid acquisition of information. This fact I mean to demonstrate more clearly further on. They had been slowly, convinced of the value of the products to be derived from this new pursuit, and consequently had been dilatory in reaping the harvest before them. Thus, after they had once started to reap it, when occasion required, they were also late in learning, or realizing, that their hard-earned spoils had lost their market value. They finally, under protest, appreciated the situation, and stopped their work of wholesale slaughter after the entirely unnecessary sacrifice of many thousand poor saurians.

During the civil war the supply of ordinary leather in the South was chiefly held by army contractors. Barefooted soldiers marched and fought in the Southern armies. Many of the women and children at home were unshod. There was of necessity another raid made upon the alligators down in the "Gulf States." They were again, by hundreds, slaughtered for their hides. But the alligator has meat, too. Raw, it is of a rich pinkish-white hue; in good condition, it is well streaked with layers of firm white fat. Bacon and beef were even scarcer at that time than leather. Finally those who began by hunting them for their skins actually learned to like their flesh. In Louisiana and the southern parts of other "Gulf States" this meat was, among the lower classes, largely used as an article of diet during the closing years of the late war. In Louisiana the taste then acquired has in many instances outlived the

promptings of necessity. There are many people living in that State to-day who consider steaks cut from the thickest part of an alligator's tail as an especial *bonne bouche*.

With the cessation of hostilities, and the consequent free circulation of beef, bacon, and leather, the saurians were again left to enjoy a period of comparative repose. Their rest was, however, only temporary, as a few years later fickle Paris again called them from the modest seclusion to which they had willingly retired.

The French demand for their hides has grown apace. Now the scaly epidermis of the reptiles is manufactured wholesale into boots, shoes, trunks, traveling-bags, gun-cases, reticules, wallets, portemonnaies, and into every other form of objects in the construction of which leather composes the whole or a part. It seems difficult to understand why this material should supplant common leather except for some unaccountable freak of fashion.

As a matter of course an immense demand for the article has been created, and a large number of alligators are slaughtered every year. The market value of their hides is quoted in the daily commercial reports of the New Orleans papers. It is within bounds to say that, in Louisiana, more than five hundred men are busily engaged in killing and skinning alligators.

Before describing the alligator hunters, it would be well perhaps to give a short account of the habits and habitat of the reptiles themselves. It is probable that the name of our saurian was bestowed upon him by the old Spanish colonists, who termed him "el lagarto," the lizard.

The reptiles are found in every tidal bayou, dead lake and lagoon, and gloomy cypress swamp of Lower Louisiana. Their omnipresence in the region roundabout caused the first representative government of New Orleans to adopt the reptile as the chief figure in the seal of the city. For lack of proper engraving talent in Louisiana the authorities ordered the seal to be executed in Paris. The French artist cut a couchant *crocodile* basking on a bank, with hills in the background. The alligator is markedly different from his Oriental cousin; and New Orleans is ninety miles distant from the nearest hill; hence the seal was inconsistent. Yet it served its official purpose, and to this day is duly attached to the formal mu-

nicipal acts and contracts of the southern metropolis.

Eminent scientists had stated, I believe, that only one variety of the genus alligator existed in North America. It is now recognized, however, that there are two distinct varieties in Louisiana. One of these is extremely thick and stout for its length, smooth on the back, and covered with small octagonal scales about the size of a "nickel" coin. The other is knobby in the head and neck, with a horny, serrated back and rude diagonal-shaped scales; and its body is proportionately longer than that of the first. Doubting that these distinctions were simply sex peculiarities, in the summer of 1874 I called the attention of the late Professor Edward P. Fontaine to the subject. Professor Fontaine was a distinguished student of natural history, having devoted a lifetime to studying the fauna of the Southern States. On being furnished with the two specimens, he immediately pronounced the reptiles as belonging to markedly different classes. He was at that time busily engaged in preparing a work on natural history, illustrated by his own hand. He expressed great pleasure "at the prospect of correcting another of the many errors made in the classification of animal life in North America."¹

I have seen numerous specimens of our saurian no longer than an ordinary lead-pencil; this was in the season of their hatching. I have also seen a few living specimens about sixteen feet in length. In the autumn of 1875 I obtained for the late Effingham Lawrence, Member of Congress, and Commissioner from Louisiana to the Centennial Exhibition, the dried skin of an alligator which, after at least fifteen inches had been cut from the snout and skull, and ten inches from the end of the tail, still measured seventeen feet ten inches in length. Allowing more than six inches for shrinkage in drying, this monster of his kind, alive, must have measured more than twenty feet. He was killed in the lower part of Bayou Lafourche.

Probably the largest alligator ever seen in Louisiana was killed in a small lake on the plantation of H. J. Feltus in Concordia Parish. According to the statement of Mr. Feltus, now of Baton Rouge, this specimen measured twenty-two feet in length. The great reptile had long been famous for miles around, having destroyed numbers of hogs and hounds owned in the neighborhood of his retreat. He had become so wary, from the number of ineffectual shots fired at him, as to be almost unapproach-

able. Finally he fell a victim to a long shot fired from a Mississippi rifle in the hands of Mr. Feltus, who had persevered in hunting him, having been the greatest loser by his depredations. The huge carcass of this reptile was towed to the bank by a boat. It required the strength of a pair of mules and a stout rope to haul it ashore, where the measurement was made with the result noted above.

In the marshes of Louisiana the reptile, before it lays its eggs, scrapes together a pile of dead grass and peaty soil about eighteen inches high, or just high enough to escape tidal overflow. On this mound the eggs are deposited, and after being lightly covered by a layer of the same material, are left to be hatched by the heat of the sun. These eggs are a little smaller than goose-eggs, and are inclosed in a tough, leathery, cream-white covering in place of a shell. The female appears to linger near the nest in adjacent waters. A "creole" negro can hardly be induced to rob one of these nests, as the race seems to have a traditional superstition that one of the eggs contains a small bell, whose sounding will call up the "mother alligator" and stimulate her to acts of ungovernable ferocity and frenzied power.

In the uninhabited wilderness our saurian preys upon any wild quadruped it may catch swimming in or drinking from the waters of its retreat; or it feeds upon fish, crabs, and crayfish, or even at times on the bulbous roots of flags and other marsh grasses. In an inhabited region their taste acquires an Oriental improvement. In a measure they become comparatively epicurean. Once having tasted canine flesh, they prefer dogs to any other diet; hence alligators are death to hounds led across their favorite bayous in the chase. Old hounds often learn to appreciate at its worth this undesired partiality, and will never swim a bayou infested by their foes. Young dogs are not, however, always so well informed or wise; or their superior ardor after the quarry impels them rashly to dare the known perils in the case; thus some of the finest packs of young deerhounds in this State have been destroyed by alligators.

It is even alleged that the reptiles have a *penchant* for negro children. I have never seen any direct proof of this grave accusation; though I have frequently been a witness of the fact that a large alligator will persistently pursue and drive to the bank negro boys bathing in the waters of this region, and have never seen any such hostile demonstrations made against white youths in the same predicament. A negro man fishing from a raft of logs fastened to Myrtle Grove plantation landing, about forty years ago, while dangling his legs in the current of the Mississippi River, was

¹ The Century Dictionary (1889) says: "A true American crocodile, *Crocodylus americanus*, long overlooked or confounded with the alligator, has lately been found in Florida and the West Indies."—EDITOR.

seized in the calf of one leg by a supposed alligator. He hung on to the logs and shouted for help. Assistance came in a short time, he was dragged up on the raft, his assailant relinquishing its hold before rising to the surface. The negro died from the injuries

and lagoons near the Gulf Coast. The means of conveyance used was a fine Louisiana hunting "pirogue," just large enough to hold two hunters and their camp equipage, and light enough for two men to carry when occasion required. When loaded she re-



LANDING A MONSTER ALLIGATOR.

inflicted, but though his death was charged to the alligator race, no reptile of the kind ever rose to the surface of the water near at hand to confirm the validity of the indictment against its tribe. However, in that region its strange preference for colored humanity is traditional among all classes. On the other hand, governed by a presumed law of reprisal, negroes are often very fond of alligator. It would be very near the whole truth to state that there is not in Lower Louisiana a "creole" negro of mature age who is not intimately acquainted with the flavor of alligator meat. Many not only deem it delicious, but consider it a panacea for many of the diseases to which humanity falls heir, particularly for rheumatism and cognate affections. Our saurian shows a decided aversion to tainted or putrid meat, notoriously spurns carrion floating down the currents of the Mississippi, and would probably even despise game mellowed up to the perfection of creole gastronomy.

In the early fall of 1880 I started from the Myrtle Grove sugar plantation in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, on a hunting expedition in the tidewater wilderness of marshes, bayous,

quired almost the skill of an Indian or Eskimo to keep her from upsetting. This boat was propelled by paddles. Her chief motive power on this trip, and many other similar expeditions, was Tom H——. Tom was in his way a peculiarity. He was a short, slim, sunbrowned mulatto, with a huge shock of nearly straight hair and a prominent Roman nose. About forty-five years of age, he weighed probably less than one hundred pounds, and could carry over two hundredweight of game and hunting effects, though fifty pounds were "too heavy to tote" in other work. He prided himself particularly on three things: the tendency of his hair toward straightness; "a little tech of Injin blood," which he confidentially claimed to me he possessed, and which claim was backed by such plausible characteristics as an inordinate fondness for whisky, a passion for hunting and fishing encouraged at the cost of agricultural pursuits, and a certain taciturnity of speech when the supply of whisky was not sufficiently liberal to suit his alleged requirements; and his third and chief subject for self-gratulation was that he was not a "creole nigger"—that is, he was not

one of the numerous race of descendants of French, Spanish, or West Indian slaves so numerous in Louisiana. He was brought from Virginia to this parish in Louisiana when a little boy. In 1863 his "apprenticeship" ceased, and Tom now "paddles his own canoe," and mine too — for a consideration.

From the back of the plantation, going south-east through a three-mile canal, we quietly paddled into a still bayou in the great tidewater wilderness, on our way to a large stream called Bayou Gros Loutre by professional hunters. This is a large, deep "dead" bayou, about ten miles from Baratavia Bay. It is a part of the chain of the Bayous Dupont and Baratavia leading from Baratavia Bay up to the old "Portage" of the Lafitte Brothers, in Jefferson Parish on the Mississippi River, four miles above the New Orleans of 1812.

There are several bayous leading from the numerous bays and inlets on the Gulf Coast up to Baratavia Bayou, fifteen miles below New Orleans; hence the difficulty of the revenue officers intercepting Lafitte, or his associates, who brought their contraband goods in small boats through any one of the dead waterways of this labyrinth. They were thus safely delivered near the "Portage," or scattered among the confederated smugglers along the river below the city; for all of the extensive plantations in this region were, and are, connected with the noted bayou system by their large drainage canals. In fact, many of these same plantations thus obtained a considerable part of their slave labor from the enterprises of Lafitte and his band. When unmolested Lafitte carried his goods up from Baratavia Bay, first to the westward through Bayou St. Denis, thence through two lakes and an unnamed bayou to the Bayou Dupont, and from this into the Bayou Baratavia, and up that stream to the place of debarkation above the old town. Rigault, Jean Lafitte's principal lieutenant, was often in charge of these small cargoes of contraband goods.

The writer has hunted in these same tide-water bayous with Rigault, a grandson, and with other descendants of the veteran smuggler and gallant warrior of 1800-15. I believe Rigault now resides on Grand Isle, near the mouth of Baratavia Bay.

The sun was fast descending in the mellow October sky when Tom, tired probably of the monotonous though melodious "drip" of his paddle, pointed out some distance ahead a spacious shell-mound on the banks of the bayou as a very convenient place to camp. These mounds are peculiarities of the region, and its most striking feature. They are composed of immense piles of small shells shaped like clam-

shells, but it is not now possible to find in these waters a living mollusk of their apparently departed kind. The mounds rise like oases in a desert waste of reeds and rank grasses which, growing from a marsh periodically submerged by the tide, reach on every side in limitless fields of faded green and yellow to the distant horizon. This mound was densely shaded by a group of live-oaks festooned with pendent Spanish moss. Beneath the oaks was scattered, in clumps and clusters, a grove of stunted palmettos, some of whose trunks were grotesquely human in shape, and whose fronds of dark-green foliage, reaching out broad and stiff, resembled leaves of painted metal. As the sun was setting, the dreary waste around this mound seemed more desolate than a sea without a sail.

When the boat's bow grated on the sloping shells at the shore we jumped out, fastening her light painter to the gnarled roots of an isolated live-oak standing near the water's edge. The bank of shells ascended in an even incline, about a hundred feet broad, up to the main group of live-oaks and palmettos. Between these and the bayou the mound was white and bare of herbage. Near the center of this open space was a dark spot, where a few charred fagots and a little heap of ashes and calcined shells remained from a fire which had apparently died out a long time since. A few yards to the left of the remains of this fire appeared a deep excavation in the mound, with no expected heap at its edge. About twenty feet to the right of the charred sticks were seven or eight long skeletons laid in a row. They were the bones of dead alligators, picked by buzzards and marsh-rats, and finally polished by ants. I turned to Tom, asking him what it meant. He paused in his silent work of unloading the camp equipage, looked first at the charred fagots and the row of skeletons, then absently gazed for a longer time far down the bayou. He then answered:

"Well, you know, sir, 'fore de war, when I fust seed sech a sight, after I come back home and tole it, dey said dat was an allergaters' buryin'-place; dat when dey knowed dey was gwine to die, dey jest creeped outen de water, and crawled up on one of dese lonesome shell-mounds and died peaceful-like. I did n't respute it, but I studied on it, an' arter dat I seed what it was for myself. I comed up on a camp of allergater cotchers, and seed what dey was doing. Yes, sir; I tell you de allergater cotchers done camped here 'bout two months ago." As to the excavation, Tom explained that shell scows had carried away, more than thirty years ago, shells dug from this mound to pave the walks around the grounds of the "Gret House" on the plantation, "in Mr. Theodore Pack-



HUNTING FOR ALLIGATOR.

wood's time." These replies being satisfactory to all parties, Tom pitched camp, and afterward quietly cooked our supper.

As the night advanced the darkness almost added a sense of oppression to the surrounding desolation. The sky was moonless. The low monotone of the surf beating on the beach at Barataria, miles away, heightened the effect of the solitude. Occasionally the endless moan of the distant sea was interrupted by the melancholy whoop of the great blue night-heron, sounded in the bird's lazy, unseen flight to some favorite lagoon; or by the sullen, gurgling plunge of a garfish in the waters of the still and deep bayou. These waters, smooth

and black as the darkness itself where they remained unruffled, blazed with their characteristic weird phosphorescence, that shone and gave no light, when disturbed. The ripples and waves left in the track of large fish glowed with this light, that flashed forth so strange yet bore no reflection. The fading embers of our fire brought out in pale relief, from the dark-green foliage above, the long tresses and looped festoons of gray moss hanging on the live-oaks; while their dull-pink glow touched up with a coppery tint the broad, pointed, metallic-looking leaves of the palmettos, and made their contorted trunks assume more fantastic shapes against the background of black darkness be-

yond. The sense of loneliness is so great when camping out at night in the midst of this comparatively limitless and uninhabited waste that, by most people so situated, the hoot of an owl would be hailed as a sound of mirth.

However, we did not hear the bird of Minerva; but I started at the crack of a distant rifle. Tom, without turning from his seat, or rather squat, before the dying fire, whose embers he was then raking to get a coal for his pipe, said, "Dem 's alligator cotchers, 'way down de bayou." It was easy to distinguish the report heard as that of a rifle, for the boom of a duck-gun would have gone reverberating and rumbling over these marshes several seconds after the first detonation, while the small grooved bore fails to awaken an echo with its sharper report. After listening some time vainly for another shot, I proposed to Tom that we should paddle down the bayou to meet the "alligator cotchers." Without having much choice in the matter he quickly stopped puffing his successfully lighted pipe to give this proposition his eager assent. Soon the little boat, lightened of all its load of "plunder" except a "ten-gauge" breech-loader, was swiftly cleaving the waters of the winding bayou.

Two miles of this rapid and silent traveling brought in view a distant light hovering near the edge of the water. This mysterious yellow light grew at one moment into a circle half the size of the full moon when in the zenith; then it dwindled the next minute into the shape and appearance of a very small half moon with a broad, clearly marked band of light, like the tail of a comet, reaching out in the darkness. Afterward for a time it would disappear altogether, reappearing soon as a crescent with a comet's tail, going out at once or growing again to its full circular shape, losing its tail and gradually changing as before. Without any preface Tom quietly remarked, "Dat's a bull's-eye lantern"; then he suddenly shouted a shrill, prolonged hail, which certainly must have reached as far as the report of the rifle. He immediately afterward explained to me that this shout was "to keep dem alligator cotchers from shootin' our way."

The hail was duly answered, and going ahead for nearly half a mile, we were soon alongside a long skiff, against which Tom drew our smaller craft by holding the other boat's gunwale. This skiff was occupied by two men, who saluted us in Creole-French as we grated against the side of their boat. The man in the bow wore a "bull's-eye" or common deer-hunting lantern, containing a large convex lens in a tube a little shorter than its length of focus. The body of the lantern, standing vertically, was fastened to his cap by a band of leather, which passed through the metal

handle of the light, and, passing completely around his headgear, was fastened at the back by a buckle. The tube of the lamp, with the lens, stood out horizontally over the hunter's nose. The lamp inside, placed within the focus of the lens, sent out a long, gradually expanding beam of bright light; of course, when we saw the light, as at first, pointing directly toward us, the beam was invisible.

The light-bearer held in his hand a long small-bore rifle. His companion, sitting on a bench just aft of the middle of the boat, managed a pair of oars, with which he rowed face forward, thus shoving on his oars instead of pulling. His oars, instead of being placed in ordinary rowlocks, were lashed to single wooden thole-pins by a leather thong. This arrangement was to prevent noise in rowing, and served well the purpose of muffled locks. By the faint light reflected around from the changing beam of the dark-lantern it could be seen that both men were clad in the characteristic faded cotton-velveteen hunting-suits of the Louisiana swampers. Their Creole-French and broken English subsequently confirmed the first impression, that they belonged to that primitive Creole race of hunters and fishers who are as much the nomads of this wilderness as ever were the wandering Arabs in their own deserts.

The rifleman was a swarthy, grizzled old man. His countenance, in the dim, fitful light, would have fully justified a suspicion of lurking piracy in its possessor. He deserved it, however, no more than many of his ancestors, whose reputation, for half a century at least, was clouded by false and fabulous charges concerning the committal of the deepest crimes known on the highways of the sea. It would be a compliment to the intellect of the class to which he belonged to grant that it was even capable of the conception of such deeds. Time and tradition, however, will always place his community among the happiest, most ignorant, and most inoffensive in the world. The bolder bucaniers, with whom these people were once charged with collusion, lived on the sea-shore at Baratavia Island, Grand Isle, and the coast to the westward, while these Creole hunters have always even been afraid of the sea. The younger man called his elder companion Paul. I have met many of the denizens of this marsh wilderness, and never yet heard one called by a second, or surname. Possibly the title may be superfluous. The rifleman termed the rower "Colan" (a Creole abbreviation of Nicholas) when he addressed him at all, which was seldom. The younger man was more loquacious. He was brown as to the skin of his face and bared arms, and black as to the heavy mop of hair hanging even down to his bushy eyebrows;

and he held in his mouth a cigarette wrapped in brown paper, whenever relaxation from rowing permitted him to roll one.

On being asked the object of their singular expedition Colan answered, in a mixture of English, French, and Creole, "For kill li caymans" (kah-ee-mar)—which meant in

That was a night scene worthy of the pencil of Doré! A dim, desolate waste of marsh; dark and still waters, glowing here and there with streaks of pale phosphorescent light, where some ravenous fish pursued his prey, or dotted with the diamond brilliance of reflected stars; a silent, indistinct, gliding boat, rowed, with-



SHOOTING AN ALLIGATOR.

plain English to kill alligators. They readily consented to my joining them in this strange hunt if I and Tom would "restez parfaitement tranqui'." The reason for this extreme quiet, and especially for night-hunting, may be better understood when it is stated that the modern demand for alligator-skins has so stimulated the pursuit of these reptiles that, in many of their haunts, they have become wary and unapproachable by day.

I entered the skiff, taking a spare bench immediately behind the old alligator hunter. Tom, by request, remained in the pirogue, which was towed astern by a short line. The stout young oarsman resuming silence, as if by an effort, and vigorously puffing at a new cigarette, rolled during the interlude of conversation, gently lowered his oars in the water, and the long skiff crept slowly ahead, propelled by a noiseless power. The only indication that she moved at all was heard in the scarcely audible gurgle under her bow, or seen in the reflected stars dancing about where the blades of her muffled oars disturbed the water.

out the sound of oars, by a figure speechless as the ferryman of the Styx; a tall, gaunt form standing in the bow, from whose head reached forth, far out over the black waters, a sharply defined beam of ghastly light, which only made the surrounding darkness darker. The only sound heard was that endless monotone of the sea, rolling its long, ceaseless waves on the sands of Barataria Island.

"'Coutez donc!" exclaimed Paul; we all listened, but I could hear nothing except that hoarse boom of the distant surf.

"Cayman est ça," muttered the grim old rifleman. "Moins entend li," ejaculated Colan. A few moments later I distinguished a sound like the grunt of a wallowing hog, followed by a long, low, guttural groan, which I instantly recognized as the "bellowing" of a full-grown alligator. Colan headed the boat in the direction of the noise. The beam of light shone far ahead in an oval glow over the surface of the water. The bellowing gradually grew louder; then it ceased altogether. Soon in the center of the broad, dim disk of

light, projected by the lantern some distance beyond the bow of the skiff, glistened two points of brighter light, like the sparks of marsh glow-worms. As we approached them the two faintly glowing spots seemed to grow farther apart. At last they seemed to be separated by about eight inches of space, and to be located near the end of some long, dark, yet indistinct body floating near the surface.

"Oh! C'est grand cayman," ejaculated Colan, in a loud whisper.

The two lights instantly disappeared, and the long, dark body had sunk out of sight. The old rifleman, turning around with a gesture of deep disgust, threw the contracted beam of the lantern full on the rower's face; the latter's countenance became a study: it was suddenly *shrugged* into a depiction of dejection, contrition, and despair. The old man again flashed forth his beam over the waters, mumbling an imprecation at the stupidity of his colleague in thus unseasonably breaking silence, and emphasizing his mutterings with an occasional deep-breathed "sacré-é-é!" The oars were stopped, resting in the water; the skiff half turned, drifting in the sluggish tide; the long beam of the lantern, with its oval disk of dim light resting far out on the surface, swept slowly around over the waters looking for the two lost lights. Ten minutes or more thus passed, and suddenly the two lost sparks gleamed back in a new direction. A gentle, noiseless push on the port oar headed the skiff toward them again. "Doucement!" whispered Paul. His associate, still more gently, guided the boat to the left, till only one light shone from the obscure object in the water. This showed that he had got on its side, as was desired, because a forward shot always glances. Cautiously the silent oarsman again turned his craft to the right. Paul raised his long rifle ready to fire. The disk of the lantern on the water, contracting gradually, grew proportionately more brilliant. As it contracted the solitary light shining back on the water from its center became larger and brighter, till at last the eye of the great saurian glittered as if he had the "Koh-i-noor" itself in his head. Slowly, silently, nearer, the boat moved, till within ten yards of the reptile. The glow of the lantern flashed along the barrel of the rifle for a few seconds; then came the ringing report. The light on the water instantly went out, and the glow of the lantern, now shining in a circle only a few feet in diameter over the place where it disappeared, showed only a few foamy bubbles and little whirlpools. Thirty seconds passed in silence; then an immense dark form bounded from the depths below above the surface of the water, and rolling over on its back, showed the broad,

yellow-white belly of an enormous alligator. The shuddering reptile remained otherwise motionless for a few minutes; then, spasmodically stretching and stiffening its ugly legs and feet, and leaping half its length in the air, fell back again, beating the water with its tail in blows sounding as loud as the report of the weapon which had slain him. "Moi tué li," muttered Paul in an accent of quiet triumph. His associate, after a few exclamations of more voluble admiration, rolled another cigarette, and quietly turned his boat off in search of other game.

In a few hours of this hunting five alligators were shot. All were left in the water that night. Paul explained that their bodies would rise before morning; and, as his temporary camp was some distance down the bayou, he would catch them floating by in the slow, outgoing tide and tow them ashore.

Leaving the hunters, we returned to our own camp, which was reached shortly after midnight.

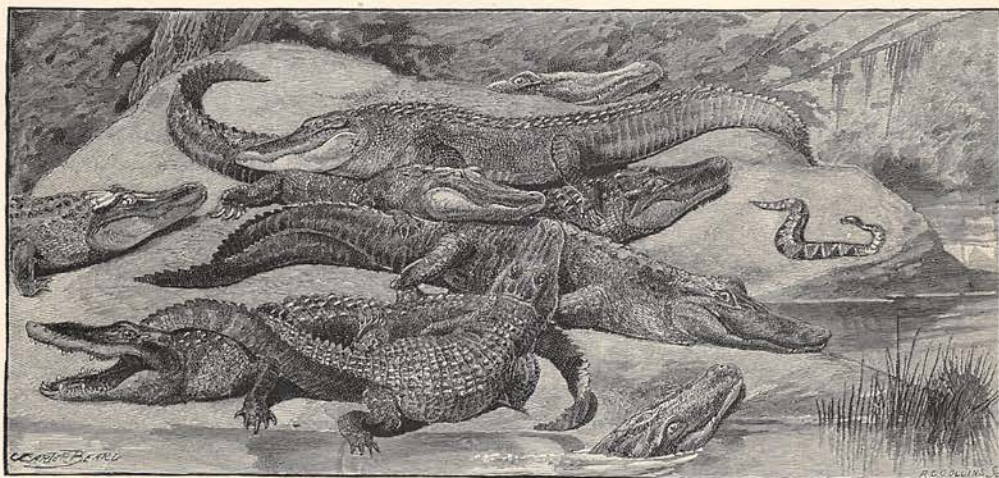
The next morning I visited the alligator slayers, who were encamped on a smaller shell-mound several miles distant. There I found that they had already secured all their game of the previous night. Some of the long carcasses lay floating in the water at the margin of the bayou, where they were secured by short lines tied to the stem of a stout mangrove bush or tree growing near the bank. Paul and Colan desisted from their work of skinning the largest reptile, which they had drawn ashore on the sloping shells, to salute us, and invite us to take some coffee. If the weather be dry, a small pot of hot coffee is at all times of day and night found near the embers of these hunters' camp-fires. Their place of shelter, in front of which they worked, was a temporary shed of newly cut palmetto-leaves raised on forked poles. Under the shed, protected from the dew, was part of a sack of salt, used for curing the hides—and some of the meat, too. All of the alligators had a hole in the head, immediately behind the eye, where the rifle-bullet had passed through the brain. The reptile they were engaged in skinning, Colan exultingly informed me, while wiping his bloody hands and wrapping another cigarette in brown paper, was the "grand cayman" of last night, which dived and rose again. It was apparently about sixteen feet long—as long as any living specimen I ever saw in Louisiana.

Slices of alligator meat, salted, were hanging around on the bushes, drying in the sun. The hunters explained to me that these were to be taken home and kept as bait for their crab-lines in the winter. This was plausible, for during the colder months they stretch long lines across the lakes and bayous in this region. At

intervals of a few feet, shorter cords, baited with pieces of alligator meat, are attached to the extended lines. The crab-fishers, in their boats, pass up and down these long lines, pulling in the baited cords with crabs attached. They

hunt for the "season," in which they had secured, salted down, and sold in the New Orleans market over three hundred hides.

When the first decided "norther" of the fall sets in, these hunters, in small squads, take to



A PEACEFUL HAUNT.

soon thus catch a skiff-load of the prized crustaceans, which are at once transported to New Orleans, and there sold, "by the basket," to market venders. Tom looked incredulous, but said nothing. He afterward remarked to me alone, "I don't respuite what dey say, sir; but I believes dey goes pardners wid de crabs eatin' dat meat, when game is sca'ce."

These men are alligator hunters only when the warm weather has driven game back to the breeding-places and feeding-grounds in the far north; or when the heated waters of the lakes and lagoons compel the fish to seek the more temperate currents of the open sea. They hunt alligators during the hot months. They live far up from the gulf, in rude palmetto-roofed shanties and huts made of split cypress boards, on the banks and bordering shell-mounds of Lake Salvador, Bayous des Allemands, St. Denis, Dupont, and Baratavia, and numerous other sluggish tidal streams and lakes in the great tidewater wilderness of Louisiana. Paul and Colan informed me that they lived at the junction of bayous Dupont and Baratavia and that this was their last alligator

their lighter pirogues, and turn to hunting ducks and snipe, or to fishing and crab-catching. In the spring, after the game has gone, they cultivate small truck-patches around their humble dwellings. Their summer occupation has already been pictured.

If these simple people were educated, the sphere of their wants would probably be enlarged, and they might be impelled to practise to some extent, in connection with small sea-going vessels coming near the coast, the "free-trade" methods so long successfully followed by bolder men on the coast islands, and carried on through the labyrinthian waterways of this same wilderness. But they are neither educated nor adventurous, and their wants are few. The region in which they reside is uninviting to more civilized communities. So they will remain, as they have been, for ages, unmolested by the inroads of a superior race, and in undisputed possession of their dismal, moss-draped cypress swamps; their lonely shell-mounds and live-oak groves; their desolate wastes of sea marsh; and their dead lakes and silent lagoons.

Andrews Wilkinson.

