

CHAPTER II

Among the Alligators



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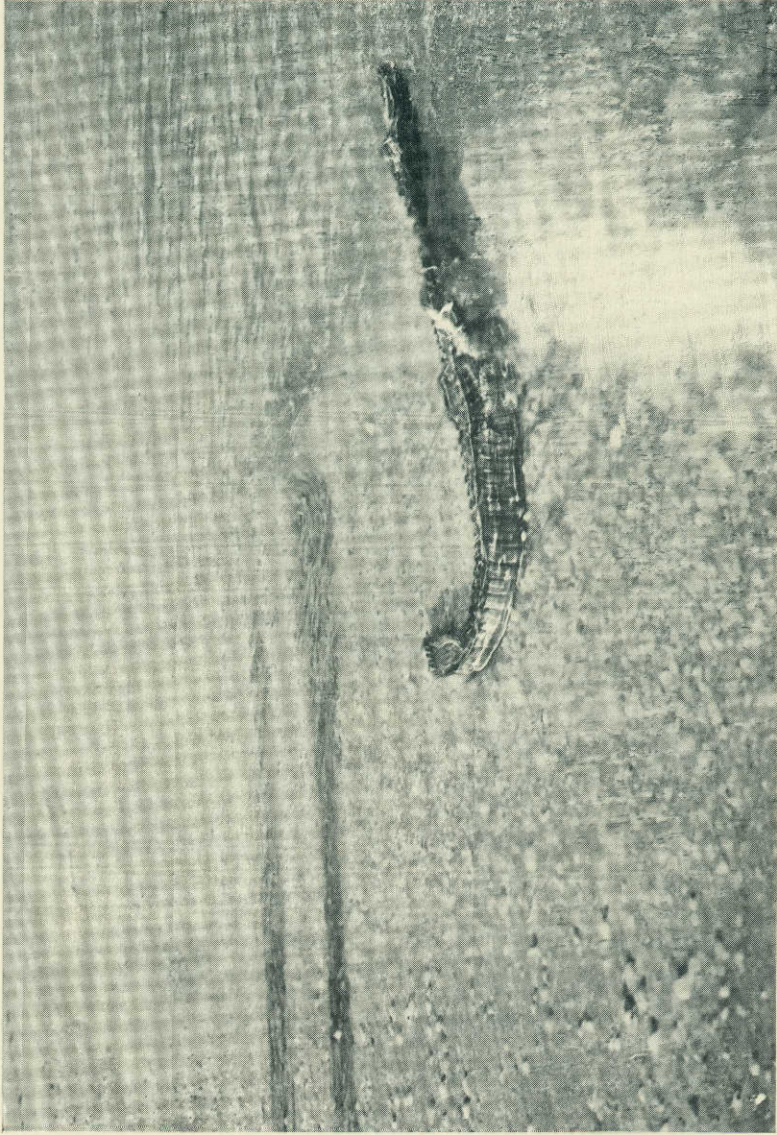
### AMONG THE ALLIGATORS

THE scenery of that coast will not be found prepossessing ; but some of the islands, though almost repellent from without, with their unvarying fringe of oyster-covered mangrove growth depending in the water, are really beautiful in the interior, where their vegetation presents a luxuriant medley of palms, yucca, cactus, indiarubber trees, and all the wealth of festooned creepers so characteristic of the sub-tropical forest. There are long avenues of cabbage palm, that curious proof of human patience, which leads men willingly to fell a plant fourteen inches thick for the sake of a nut-like heart measuring six inches by three. Many of the pools and swamps in the interior are still the haunts of alligators, though the ranks of those hideous reptiles have been greatly thinned by the professional skin hunters.

## Giant Fish of Florida

A 'gator hunt is not bad fun on an off day, even though the twelve-foot veterans are now few and far between. If pursued on the shore, the alligator will almost certainly make good its escape into the sea, though how it fares with the ever-attendant sharks has not yet been determined. The first requisite for an alligator hunt inland is to enlist the services of a professional hunter, which your guide can easily do, though the only obvious qualification of that official seems to lie in the sanguine but unrealisable assurance that he gives, that every submerged cave contains a quarry. The only equipment for this "sport" is a strong gaff and a fourteen-foot sprit from the boat. You then pick your way through tangled undergrowth, disturbing many a mocassin snake that glides away on your approach.

At every likely puddle the professional one holds his nose and emits a series of fearful grunts, with the object of attracting the wayward reptile. As this expert trick usually fails, the only plan is to make fast the gaff to the sprit, and carefully probe every hole and cave, exploring crevices in the dry earth that look no bigger than large rabbit earths. At length, if success is to be yours, the gaff will be seized in the jaws of the infuriated sleeper, which may then be gaffed anywhere near the head and hauled from his lair. On being brought forth into the daylight, he opens his jaws to their full extent and grunts loudly, but seems a harmless, torpid creature enough, though it is prudent to keep clear of his tail, which



THE ALLIGATOR MADE STRAIGHT FOR THE OPEN SEA.



## Giant Fish of Florida

can, with little apparent effort, whisk a man off his legs ; and of the jaws, which then snap round unpleasantly near the other end.

It would be folly to class this pastime as sport, for it is merely a novel experience ; but a somewhat more sporting method, where alligators are sufficiently plentiful, is to shoot them with a rifle at night. Professional hunters take only the underside of the skin, which is worth just twenty-five cents to them. There is one alligator story that every visitor to Boca Grand is sure to hear. A professional hunter was on one occasion engaged to find sport for a man who wanted an easy kill without adventuring his person among the parasites of the bush, and they returned with a dead alligator within half an hour. It afterwards transpired from an unknown source that the hunter had walked with his employer to a small pond a few hundred yards distant, and there made strange noises through his nose, and told the other to fire in a certain direction. The sportsman fired at quite another spot, being somewhat excited ; but that made no difference, for the hunter rushed in knee-deep and dragged forth a fine dead alligator. There was no mark of any wound on its hide, but the man told us that it had been killed by the concussion. No one else said anything. Such recreation, however, is appropriate only to days on which sea-fishing is impracticable, and I now come to the main business of my notes, the capture of tarpon by the modern method of trolling.

