

CHAPTER XVIII: BETWEEN TWO PERILS

“What—what are we going to do?” gasped Grace. She, as Betty said afterward, seemed always to be the first to ask questions that were hard to answer in an emergency. “They—they may attack us!”

“Why can’t you say something less—less scary?” demanded Mollie who, after the first gasp of fright, had come forward to stand beside Betty. Amy had already shrunk to a place in the rear near Grace. It seemed to be always thus, with Betty and Mollie facing the immediate danger, and Grace and Amy needing protection.

Not that they were not brave when occasion demanded it. They would not have been outdoor girls else, but somehow the first fear of something menacing sent Amy and Grace scurrying to the rear, whence it needed considerable persuasion to bring them to the van again.

“They—they don’t seem to see us,” ventured Amy, after a few tense seconds, during which the four had stared at the alligators.

“They won’t see you and Grace at all, if you stay behind us,” said Mollie a bit sharply. “There’s no present danger, as far as I can see. Why don’t you come out and help Betty and me throw stones at them?”

“Oh, you’re never going to do that!” gasped Grace. “Why that would—make them mad!”

“Well,” answered Betty, with a shrug of her shoulders, “I don’t know that a mad alligator is any worse than any other kind. They’re all mad, as far as I’m concerned, and throwing stones at them can’t make them any worse. I rather side with Mollie. We may drive them away.”

“Yes, and it may drive them toward us,” cried Amy. “Please don’t!”

“We won’t coax them this way if we can help it,” said Betty. “You may be sure of that. But we must do something. We can’t stay out on this almost-island much longer. We’ll have to eat, and—”

“Where’s Tom?” suddenly asked Grace. “He ought to be able to rescue us. He knows all about alligators—and—and such things.”



“Yes, maybe he can charm them away,” suggested Mollie half-sarcastically. “But I don’t see him.”

The girls looked toward where they had left their escort setting the “table” on the grass. They had a glimpse of the white cloth, and the various things upon it, but Tom was not in sight.

“Maybe—maybe an alligator ate him!” said Grace. She was half-crying now.

“Don’t be silly!” directed Betty in a stern tone. It was sometimes necessary to be severe with Grace when she was likely to give way to her feelings. But in this case Betty did not want to be too much so, for she realized all that her chum had suffered in the disappearance of her brother.

The two big alligators, and they were exceptionally large, so the girls said afterward, seemed to have taken permanent possession of the narrow neck of land that connected the peninsula with the main shore. The girls were practically prisoners on what, with a rise of the river, would be an island.

“They don’t seem to be coming after us,” remarked Mollie looking about for some stones, or anything else, to use as a weapon of offense.

“No, they’re just waiting their time,” said Amy, who was still clinging to Grace. “When they get ready they’ll crawl out here and—and—what is it alligators do to you, anyhow—charm you?”

“You’re thinking of snakes,” said Betty, narrowly watching the saurians. “Alligators knock you down with their tails, I understand, sort of stun you, and—”

“Spare us the horrible details,” interrupted Mollie, and she drawled it out in such a funny way that the others laughed.

The alligators evinced no intention of coming forward. They were moving about, seeming to scoop out resting places in the hot sand, on which the sun poured fierce rays. Then, having made themselves comfortable, stretched out at full length, the creatures sunned themselves.

The girls were getting uncomfortable now, for they were in an exposed position, and the day was warm. There was very little shade on that small peninsula.

“We’ve got to get help!” decided Mollie at length. “For some reason our escort has deserted us, and—”

“Oh, don’t say that!” cried Betty. “I’m sure he can’t have done that.”

“Well, he isn’t there; is he?” demanded Mollie, waving her hand toward the distant spread on the grass. “And I’d like to know where he is!”

“Maybe some of those men who were hanging about the orange grove, or who were after that poor, ragged young man, have taken Tom away,” suggested Amy.



“Comforting— isn’t she?” asked Mollie, appealing to the others.

“Well, I mean—”

“Oh, never mind—don’t make it any worse,” interrupted Mollie. “The question is what can we do?”

“Let’s call for him,” suggested Grace. “He can’t have gone very far, and it’s a still day. He’ll hear us.”

“It is rather strange where he could have gone,” mused Betty. Anxiously she looked toward the main shore. There was no sight of Tom Osborne.

Together the girls raised their voices in a shout that must have carried far. They wailed, but there was no response. Then they called again, with like result. The outdoor girls looked anxiously at one another. The alligators seemed disposed to maintain their position indefinitely, and the neck of land was so narrow that the saurians occupied the entire width of it.

“Well, here goes!” cried Betty when it was evident that their calls were not going to be heeded. With that she threw a stone at the nearest alligator. Her aim was exceptionally good. Betty admitted that herself, afterward, the missile falling on the broad and scaly back of the reptile.

“Oh—oh!” cried Grace. “Now you have done it, Bet!”

They all looked and waited. Nothing happened. The alligator merely moved his tail slightly and did not open his eyes.

“Well, I don’t see that I did very much,” said Betty calmly. “I’m going to try again.”

“Don’t!” begged Grace. “They may come for us!”

At that moment Amy, who had gone back a little way toward the far end of the spit of land, uttered a cry.

“What is it?” cried Mollie. “Is there another alligator there?”

“No, but I have found a way to get off, and back to the shore without going near those creatures. See! here is a sand bar curving from the side here, right around to that other point of land. You can see bottom all the way to shore. It isn’t more than a few inches deep, and we can wade.”

They all ran to where Amy stood, forgetting for the time being the alligators that held them prisoners.

“That’s so! It can be done!” cried Betty, taking in at a glance Amy’s plan. “We can wade right along that raised bar. The water is deep on either side of it, but as she says, it is only a few inches deep on top of the bar. Come on, girls,” and she sat down and began unbuttoning her shoes.



“Don’t—don’t!” cried Mollie. “Keep them on. What if we do get wet? Our shoes will soon dry, it’s so hot. And there might be crabs or little fishes or—little alligators on the bar. We’ll wade in our shoes.”

“All right, I’d just as soon,” agreed Betty.

[Illustration: IN THE SHALLOW WATER OVER THE BAR WERE A NUMBER OF REPTILES.— Page 153, *The Outdoor Girls in Florida*.]

Little Captain that she was, she prepared to take the lead. She was about to step out into the shallow water when she drew back with a gasp.

“What’s the matter—cold?” asked Mollie.

“No—but look—snakes!”

Betty pointed to where, pursuing their sinuous way in the shallow water over the bar, were a number of reptiles.

“Moccasins,” whispered Mollie. “We—we can’t go that way either,” and she glanced back toward the sleeping alligators. Both ways of escape were blocked.

