

THE CHASE OF THE DOLPHIN



## CHAPTER IV

### THE CHASE OF THE DOLPHIN

A FAMILY of dolphins was piloting us through emerald waters in the Bay of Florida. One channel after another, in the labyrinth we were threading, had given out, and more than once all hands had gone overboard to drag the launch across banks where it would not float. The acquaintance with the channels shown by the dolphins, as they rolled and snorted a hundred yards ahead, led us to follow them, to the manifest betterment of our navigation. Twice the head of the family shot a dozen feet in the air in pure playfulness, making a thrilling picture that can be seen about once in a blue moon. Sometimes Mamma Dolphin raised her head above the surface of the water and fixed a big apprehensive eye upon us, while Baby Dolphin snuggled up beside her and lifted his little nose in comical imitation of his mother.

When the chug-chug of the motor sounded within fifty yards of the big dolphin he gave a blast of warning, and three long bodies shot gleaming through the clear water straight as a fish torpedo, which their propeller tails suggested, until a broad shoal was reached, over which, with fins and backs out of water, they scrambled with the fuss and fury of a

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flock of frightened ducks, only stopping when a mile of channels and shoals separated us. Ten minutes later, as we again approached, they were rollicking in a school of silver mullet, filling the air with splashing water and spray as they tossed the little fish by scores many feet above the surface of the water and leaping upward caught them in the air as they fell.

They were too busy to see the launch until its bow was within thirty feet of them, when in wild panic they scattered in three directions. I rolled the wheel toward the biggest one and thereafter his trail was not dropped. Other dolphins came near but were ignored. The big bayonet fin of a tarpon, the two fins of a wandering shark cutting the water in the wake of his prey, or the three which followed the swaying four-foot weapon of a fourteen-foot sawfish, tempted us in vain as they crossed our path. When the creature looked toward us, whether from a distance of ten yards or a thousand, it was always our pursuing bow that he saw. From the moment the chase began the dolphin knew that he was the quarry, as the wild deer is sure when his own trail is struck. He dashed through channels and over shoals for a long distance in a straight line, while we plodded after him, farther behind each minute.

As the danger receded he rested from time to time, often changing his course and forgetting his fright until the approach of his pursuer, near and more persistent than ever, struck him with a panic that sent him flurrying around us for an hour in circles of varying diameter, but usually in one direction,





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- (1) When the dolphin is struck, there is a mighty splash in the water. (2) The skiff is forthwith towed at high speed. (3) Gaffed and pulled to the side of the skiff.



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while we described lesser circles within his orbit, gaining with every yard, excepting as he reversed his direction when we presumed too much on his maintaining it. He swam between banks that were nearly dry, through channels so crooked that I strained the tiller ropes many times in each minute, while our boatmen, with oars at bow and stern, helped us around the sharp corners. The Camera-man at the motor, during the short turns, smothered the air to avoid stranding the boat, and when the course was clear changed the lead and varied the feed with microscopic care until the last possible foot was extracted from each minute. That our speed might be yet further increased, our excited boatmen invited trouble for themselves by dragging one of the skiffs we were towing up on the stern of the launch, while it was traveling at its highest speed. Three times it happened that we ran aground, only to get under way again within a minute. Once all hands went overboard to drag the boat a dozen yards through the mud, losing minutes during which the dolphin made his way to open water, with a depth of six or seven feet. Here the circling began again and for more than half an hour we chased him, until at times not more than the length of the boat separated us, and as he rose more frequently to blow, his explosive breaths sounded like great sobs.

Drawing up beside the launch the skiff we were towing, which contained a harpoon, pole and lines, I started out with my boatman to intercept the dolphin in one of his great circles. After anchoring the



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launch and putting overboard the other skiff, the Camera-man followed with his photographic paraphernalia. When the chug-chugging of the motor stopped, the dolphin seemed to think the chase ended, became less wild, and swam so quietly, as for an hour he evaded us, that I looked forward to a tame surrender when he should at last feel the harpoon. Later, while using my harpoon pole to help the hot pursuit of the creature which was just ahead of us, he turned so quickly that before I could slip the harpoon on the pole he had passed me, striking the skiff contemptuously with his tail as he went by.

After another half hour of exertion that would have been most exhausting if it had been useful labor, I got another chance with the harpoon. This weapon was less savage than its name would imply. It was about three inches long, with a single barb so arranged as merely to penetrate the skin of the creature struck, and was not intended to disable him. When it touched the dolphin, however, it seemed to turn on an electrical current of much dynamic importance, and his first dash filled the air with splashing water that drenched me, tore my hands with the savage jerk on the harpoon, and persuaded me to sit down on the bottom of the skiff, hastily and with violence, when the line chanced to foul. As the dolphin swam swiftly under and around the skiff, striking it violently with his tail as he leaped beside it, I thought of another dolphin which had playfully jumped through and everlastingly wrecked the dingey, and quite shattered the nerves of a friend of mine.



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The outgoing line burned my hands. Then, as I began to get way on the skiff, instead of towing it and wearing himself out, in harmony with all recognized theories, the dolphin turned and swam back around and under the skiff many times, keeping me busy clearing up the line in which he was trying, with some success, to entangle me. After he had played me for an hour, during which he seemed to be growing as much stronger as I felt weaker, I persuaded the Camera-man that his plates contained all the pyrotechnics he required and that he had earned the privilege of playing the creature. We exchanged places and I rested for half an hour.

There were moments during his struggle with the dolphin when some especial activity of the latter encouraged me to look for the capsizing of the skiff, which often seemed imminent. When I returned to the skiff I handed the harpoon line to the boatman and tried to gaff the animal. On the first attempt the breaking of the handle of the gaff saved me from going overboard with it. After the second stroke I hung on to the gaff, although the boat was whirled around many times with a violence that half filled it with water and threatened every moment to capsize it. It was yet another hour before the creature was quiet enough to justify an effort to take him aboard. We tried this in many ways, dragging at his head, pulling on his tail, and endeavoring to roll him sideways over the gunwale. Often we nearly swamped the skiff and had to bail it many times, before, aided by the animal himself, we succeeded in

rolling him aboard. For the first time he then opened wide his mouth, causing me to retire to the extreme bow of the boat while he slapped my boatman with his powerful tail. Victory was ours. He was the captive of our spear—for the moment, which we utilized to measure his length of eight and a half feet and his girth of about five.

Then he became uneasy and lifting his tail laid it upon the port gunwale until water poured over that side. The boatman and I promptly sat on the starboard edge of the boat to trim it. The dolphin shifted his head to port with an emphasis that left us sitting in water that poured into the skiff. Like a flash his tail was in the air, falling with a violence that broke the stem of the boat as his weight rolled it bottom side up. The first dash of the fleeing animal, which was yet fast to the skiff, brought him against the other boat, nearly upsetting it, quite capsizing the boatman, and spilling the Camera-man among his tools, where he sat gnashing his teeth as he contemplated the heads of two swimmers, floating oars, line, tubs, pole, and an upturned skiff being towed rapidly away, while his unready camera held only plates that had already been exposed.

As the harpoon line was still fast to the dolphin and he was much exhausted I again got hold of him and tried to drag him on the bottom of the submerged skiff, with the result of again capsizing the already capsized craft. But the struggle was over. He was quiet as I rested in the water beside him, except that he sent occasional offensive blasts from

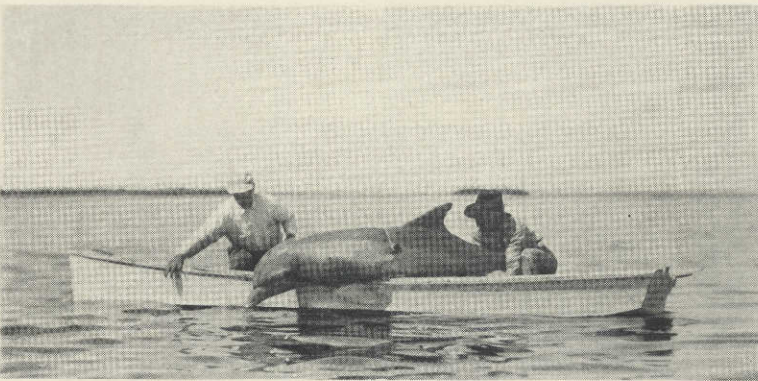




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- (1) Trying to get him aboard head first. He is too heavy for that method. (2) Tail first is a better way of getting him into the boat. (3) Just landed and all in.





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his lungs into my face. When we turned him loose he swam slowly away, seemingly not realizing that he was actually free.

If the sport of chasing dolphins requires justification, the best general defense is that of the small boy accused of the sin of fishing on Sunday:

“I didn’t ketch nothin’.”

Ninety-nine times in a hundred this plea is pertinent, since one may pursue dolphins for many moons before catching one. A hundred times I have seen sportsmen hunting them with harpoons, but never once with success. The flesh of the dolphin is of the color, consistency and nearly the taste of beef, but with enough of a fishy flavor to discredit it, although sometimes it is used for food.

Fishermen often shoot them because of their successful rivalry. Neither of these grounds may justify their serious pursuit, but the sportsman who has successfully chased a dolphin with a harpoon will tell you that the sport discounts any other form of excitement known to man; that, in the language of the bar, he doesn’t have to prove it, he admits it; and that anyhow it involves a smaller percentage of cruelty than any other recognized sport, from salmon fishing to football.

The dolphin of our story has suffered at the hand of the closest naturalist. He is really and truly a porpoise, whom some “scientific gent” who never saw him, has labeled *Delphinus delphis* and left without redress. His good name has been taken from him and given to a pig, the Snuffling Pig, or

Herring Hog, a little four-foot beast, ugly and oily, that cannot leap his length out of water. The dolphins of history and poetry have all been fish, since Arion addressed his preservers as "faithful, friendly fish," and poets praised and painted the p. p. c. color scheme of *Coryphæna hippuris*. Our porpoise is a splendid mammal, of as good red blood as the whale, seal or manatee.

He prefers the name of porpoise. He is accustomed to it, he uses it in his own family, and he is known by it to all who go down to the sea in ships, or, who, living on the coasts or rivers which he frequents, have seen him make picturesque the industry by which he gains his livelihood and provides thriftily for his little ones. He is the life of a coastwise cruise, in deep water popping up beside the boat continually, with a snort of surprise on each appearance, and often disappearing before the eye can be turned upon him. He becomes more prudent when the water is clear and his long body can be seen cleaving it beneath the surface, for sad experience has taught him that the Man-with-a-gun can then trace his course and time the instant of his rise to the surface, to his undoing. If all but the channel is shoal and water beside the boat too shallow for his protection, he precedes it as pilot and playfully signals the course by his gambols.

When he fishes in deep water, friendly flocks of gulls attend him and fatten upon the crumbs that fall from his table. Sociable pelicans, in their own ungainly fashion, tumble upon the water beside him,



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finding prey in the fish he has frightened. When the tide is high he takes his family picnicking on shallow banks where they keep the air filled with the mullet they toss back and forth. As the tide falls, he lies craftily in an adjoining channel and knocks endwise the small fish as they come off the banks.

Like the fisherman, he is shy of the weapons of the catfish which he deftly catches just back of the head and bites in two before swallowing it. When other fish are scarce the heads of hundreds of "cats" with their vicious daggers attached, may be seen drifting with the tide in the waters where a family of porpoises have breakfasted.

He becomes less timid by night and greets one in startling fashion with a sudden blast beside the cabin window, or the shake-down on deck. On dark nights, he swims beside grassy banks where small fish have hidden in water too shallow to float him. Here at short intervals, with his powerful tail, which lies horizontally as he swims and is a mass of muscle of such tensile strength that sailors use its fibers for fiddle strings, he strikes blows, like those of a pile driver, which can be heard for miles. The splashing water flashes out light and the small fish leave wakes of phosphorescent fire that guide their pursuer to his supper. He is possessed of a restless activity that finds expression in playful leaps of many feet as he catches in his mouth the little fish which he has tossed high in air.

The porpoise (or dolphin) contributes little to the food or raiment requirements of the people, but he

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adds to the gayety of nations, and is the only one of the great sea mammals available for study or entertainment. What are left of the whale family are protected by their environments from ordinary observation; the seal has been mostly manufactured into garments of fashion, and the shy manatee is too nearly extinct to be helpful.

Webster clears up the confusion of names by defining: "*Delphinus delphis*, true dolphin." "*Phocaena communis*, called dolphin by sailors," and "*Coryphæna hippuris*, commonly known as dolphin."

The last named is a fish of triangular construction, five feet in length, and a favorite of elegiac poets, who rank him with the swan, whose dying melody is not more impressive than the brilliancy of the changing hues of this fish as he makes his exit.

One well-known naturalist writes that porpoises are distinguished by their blunt noses and dolphins by long, pointed beaks, but that some dolphins have blunt noses and a few porpoises long snouts, so that it is impossible to lay down rules by which one may always be distinguished from the other. Every-day folks, who don't care for the dolphin of the ancient or the many varieties they never see, but would like to know the name of the creature they have watched from the deck of a ship or the pier of a hotel may conclude that if it is about seven feet in length, with small head, long and narrow beak, body built on the lines of a manatee or cucumber, with a jaunty tail set crossways, gray of back, dingy of belly, given to playful leaping and resembling its picture among

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the illustrations herewith, it is *Delphinus delphis*, the dolphin. If it is less than five feet long, black, ungraceful as the pig it resembles, and too lazy to lift its head out of water when it sniffs for breath, it is the *Phocæna communis* of the naturalist.



