

**TARPON FISHING**



## CHAPTER XII

### TARPON FISHING

**T**ARPON fishing is more kinds of sport than any other known game. Tarpon of any age will rise to a fly and young members of the family, from fifteen inches to two feet long, may usually be found in the creeks that feed the rivers of the west coast of Florida and captured with a light trout rod, after a fight more brilliant than was ever put up by the most gallant trout that was ever spawned. The swift waters of the syndicated salmon streams and the rugged country through which they flow, possess peculiar charms with which the placid rivers of the Florida peninsula make no pretense of competing, but the gamiest of salmon compares with the gorgeous Silver King as a Satyr to Hyperion. As a game fish, the tarpon is in a class by himself and it is a waste of time to talk of comparison. He presents an acrobatic performance and chromatic spectacle not paralleled in the animal kingdom. Imagine a gracefully contorted body, as big as yourself, quivering ten feet in the air, panoplied with a thousand glittering silver scales, reflecting, like facets of a great diamond, the rays of a tropical sun, surrounded by a halo of prismatic drops of flying

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water and all backgrounded by the massed black clouds and solid wall of falling water of a near-approaching storm. The tarpon fights with all the spirit of the purest strain of race horse, product of a thousand years of selection and training. From the time he feels the steel, until he rolls exhausted on his back, his activity is incessant. He leaps out of the water, several times his own length, from two to a score of times, and the action of his gills and head is so rapid that the eye cannot follow it and we know of it only through the camera which divides time into thousandths of a second. Of a hundred leaps no two are alike and there is individuality in every fish. When struck, your tarpon may leap straight up, or at any angle, or he may skim along the surface of the water, rising clear of it half a dozen times in as many seconds. He may speed like a race horse away from you until your six hundred feet of line runs out, or he may dash straight for your skiff, rubbing against it, diving under it, or even leaping over it and tangling you in your own line. The tarpon lends himself alike to the needs of the dilettante of the private yacht and the barefoot boy of the fishing boat. The cost varies: there is the fashionable yacht which disregards expense, the chartered outfit of house-boat, launch and dingies, with a per diem of from one hundred dollars to half that sum, down to the five dollars and upward of daily disbursement by the personally conducted tourist, and the one dollar or less by cruisers in fishing boats who conduct themselves. Though methods differ so widely,

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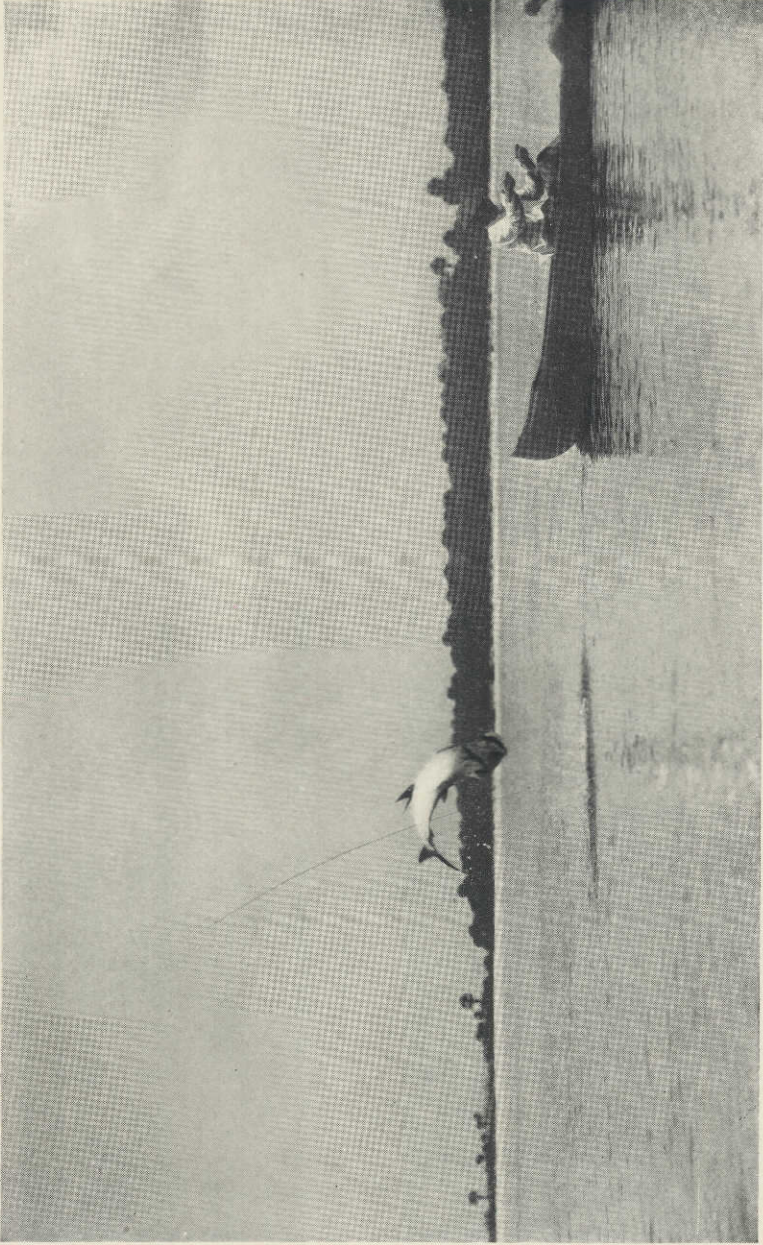
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the result is much the same and the game always worth the candle, whether played with a hundred-dollar tackle outfit, one of four dollars, or a cotton hand line and a pair of canvas gloves. The strenuousness of the sport can be graduated to the weakness of the invalid or the capacity of the athlete.

On the Gulf Coast of Florida the tarpon season is from March to November. They are especially numerous in June and July, and between Capes Romano and Sable a few can be found all the year round. The last hour of the ebb and the first two of the flood can be recommended for trolling, and the slack water of the flood tide for still-fishing, but the only sure time to troll for tarpon is when they are in the humor. The most successful tarpon fisherman of my acquaintance assures me that the more he studies the tastes and habits of the fish the less he knows about them. Sometimes they will take the bait as it touches the water, at others I have vainly dragged it over a deep hole, from which the fish were rising to blow at the rate of five a minute, only to see it knocked three feet in the air by the contemptuous toss of a tarpon's tail. You cannot make an appointment with your tarpon as you do with your dentist. If you are patient, he will come to you in his own good time and bite at any old rag you choose to offer him.

Still-fishing for tarpon is the old and lazy method, but is yet practiced occasionally. Your boatman anchors your skiff beside a channel which runs through the shallow waters where the tarpon finds

his prey. The tarpon hook is attached to the line by a three-foot snood of braided flax or other soft and strong material and is baited with half a mullet. Now cast your baited hook fifty or one hundred feet out in the channel, place your rod across the skiff with its point toward the bait and its reel free to run. Reel off a dozen yards of line, coil it loosely on the seat before you, light your pipe and muse on the infinite, or cut the leaves of the latest magazine, while your boatman "chums" from time to time by casting bread upon the waters in the form of fragments of fish. In a few minutes, or it may be hours, or even days, the line begins to run out, you lay aside your magazine and pick up the rod while your boatman takes in the anchor and sits down to the oars. You must feed out the line as called for, resisting all temptation to strike, until perhaps fifty yards of line have gone and the fish been allowed ample time to swallow the bait. Then pressing your thumb firmly on the brake, "Strike for your altars and your fires." Two hundred feet away a gleaming form of burnished silver leaps, gyrating in the air. The whirling handle of the reel raps your incautious knuckles and the friction of the line burns your thumb through the thick brake of sole leather. You cry out to your boatman as you watch the diminishing line on your reel and he struggles mightily with the oars. Soon the line slackens, as the fish turns, and the multiplying reel spins beneath your nervous fingers as you labor to wind it in. Another leap, the strain on the line shows that the fish is well hooked, and with skill and care



A sudden pull at the line—you awake from your day dreams.





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on your part, the chances are now even that you will conquer him. He will play tricks on you, will leap out of the water beside your skiff and then dart under it and away, and as you reel in your line you will find the tip of your rod on the wrong side of the skiff. Only the quickest action, mixed with good luck, can then save you. He will twist the line around a snag or a mangrove root, cut it on an oyster reef, or if the struggle is too prolonged, grind apart the snood between his bony jaws. He may tow you for miles and hours before his leaping is over and he floats vanquished beside the skiff. You should now give him his freedom, but if he is your first tarpon and you wish his scales or skin as souvenirs, you will strike him with the great steel gaff and probably go overboard to him in his final struggle.

The strike, after the first anxious paying out of the line, is not always followed by the leap of a silver king. Sometimes there is a steady tug at the line, which comes back minus the hook, the snood having been bitten in two by a shark. That's what the snood was for, so that the shark could bite it. If steel wire had been used you would have had to choose between cutting the line and being towed for miles until you could get the brute to the surface where you could shoot him or kill him with an axe. Other creatures trouble the tarpon still-fisherman. The sting-ray, unpleasantly armed and hard to handle, the sawfish which will tow you back and forth all day without seeming to know that anything has happened to him, and big three hundred pound jewfish,

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great inert masses, catching which is nearly as exhilarating as hoisting an anchor, but which on the Pacific coast are caught, weighed and labeled Black Sea-Bass.

Better than still-fishing is the more modern trolling, or deep-sea fishing, in the big passes, where the rod must be held ready for instant action and conditions of wind and tide become of active and often of controlling interest.

It is in the passes of Charlotte Harbor, notably that of Boca Grande, the big pass, that tarpon fishing *de luxe* has reached its fullest development. Day by day, during April and May, fishermen and fisherwomen gather here from near-by yachts, American and foreign; from house-boats anchored in the harbor north of the pass or in one of the coves south of it; and from hotels, near as Useppi and far as Punta Gorda or Punta Rassa. The typical outfit is a dingey with a little motor and a revolving chair in the stern in which the fisherman sits, facing backwards, also a boatman to do the work. Tackle consists of a twenty-five dollar, one piece, six and a half foot rod, with agate guides and tip; a big forty dollar reel, built like a watch, with jeweled bearings, noiseless machinery and a perfection of action which is a perennial delight to the mechanical eye; a four dollar, twenty-four thread line, two hundred yards long and tested to forty-eight pounds; a dollar hook with a bronze cable and swivels; a socket in the belt to hold the butt of the rod; and a vacuum-surrounded-bottle warranted to keep coffee hot or other

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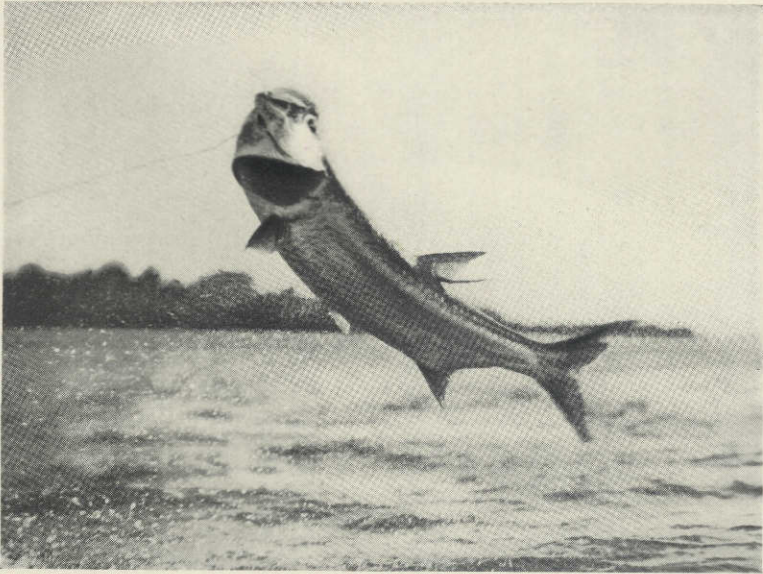
liquids cold—if the cork is not removed too frequently. A good brake on the rod is essential. Some fishermen wear a thumb stall and press the protected thumb against the line on the reel, others hinge a piece of sole leather on one of the pillars of the reel for the same purpose. The trouble with these methods is that when a fisherman gets real earnest in using them he burns his thumb. The ideal brake is a friction disk device interposed between the reel handle and the reel axle, capable of adjustment by set screws and acting automatically when the handle is held.

The best bait for trolling is a strip of flesh six inches long by one wide, cut from a mullet or some other white-bellied fish, and roughly trimmed to suggest a small fish. When trailed behind a skiff, canoe, or little, slow-moving launch, this lure is very effective. While trolling, the fisherman is seldom bothered by other fish, although an occasional Spanish mackerel, cavalli or grouper may strike at his bait. In his first wild leap the tarpon, as he feels the hook, usually throws it with the bait high in the air. If, instead, it catches in his bony mouth, the sportsman must keep a constant strain upon the line, through all the leaping, twisting, turning and sulking of the quarry. How difficult this is with a rod, so nearly springless and so short, is best known to the fisherman of most experience. Even when success seems assured, in the big passes and among the outer keys, a fourteen-foot shark is likely to take in half of your six-foot tarpon at a single bite.

In fighting the tarpon, the fisherman holds his left hand as high as convenient on the rod and throws his weight backward against it. Then throwing the tip of the rod forward he reels in the slackened line. The process is called pumping, and the fisherman's heart soon pumps with it. The tarpon which I have captured have required of me from ten minutes to three hours each, or an average of something over half an hour, of incessant toil, before they have yielded. For those who fish to kill, the boatman's skill with the gaff shortens the time. Much of the pleasure to me of tarpon fishing lies in giving freedom to the fish after his surrender. Even after he has given up and been drawn beside the boat he keeps up a powerful motion of his tail, and there is excitement in removing the hook from his mouth. Usually a quick motion of the hand will back out the hook, sometimes a small penknife blade must be used to free the barb, and once in ten times it will be necessary to use a stick or the handle of a paddle as a disgorging. It is a delicate operation which the tarpon is always likely to complicate. He is the slimiest thing in creation and can only be steadied for the work in his mouth by holding his jaw or inserting a few fingers in the outer edge of his gills. To put the hand in his gills would invite something worse than laceration. Yet I have removed the hooks from scores of tarpon, even in rough water, while holding them beside a tiny, cranky canoe, the sides of which rose only five inches above the water line. Of course in still-fishing the snood usually has to be



The joy of the first jump makes up for unrequited days of fishing.



He follows the tide in his wild rushes for freedom.



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cut to free the tarpon which must then get rid of the hook as best he can.

Excitement is doubled when the hand line is substituted for the rod and reel windlass. The line should be one-sixteenth of an inch in thickness, of cotton loosely twisted, and the hands must be guarded by leather or canvas gloves. The mouth of the tarpon can be felt by the fisherman as, through the reins, the horseman feels that of the animal he drives. Each stroke of the tail or turn of the swaying body of the fish is telegraphed to the hand that holds the line. Even the emotions of the tarpon can be inferred from the angry shaking of his head, or its gentle yielding to the persuasion of the line. The hand line lends itself to work with the canoe and the camera. A light canoe, which a twenty-four thread tarpon line could sustain, suspended in the air, can be held by a light trolling line as near the big fish as the fisherman chooses. He may enjoy his drive at a safe distance from his fiery steed or he can invite the mix-up which it is easy to get. He ought never to try this in the sweeping tide of the big pass, no matter how much of a water dog he may be, without a friendly boat at hand. There is probably no danger from sharks, as these brutes apparently never attack living human beings in this country, yet after seeing the eagerness with which they gobble up tarpon from beside the boat, I have become conservative in acting upon my faith in their harmlessness. In less turbulent water than Boca Grande I have often seen the shark temper tested. In Marco,

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women and children swim about the dock from which men are fishing for sharks, and more than once, while swimming there with my daughter, fifty feet from shore, I have seen a shark glide between us and the bank.

In hunting the tarpon the true sportsman's weapon is a light harpoon. The fisher with a hook is the trapper of the craft, who neither sets nor baits his own trap. But the harpooner of a tarpon has earned his laurels. There is no royal road in that business and no mercenary can carry you to success. Nothing that is done with rifle or fowling piece is more sportsman-like or calls for greater skill. The game is a lottery without blanks, for if you miss the tarpon with your harpoon, the joy of the pursuit, the excitement of the near approach and the delirium of the throw, though it fail, is greater than even the capture of the creature by trapping methods.

Leave your hired guide at home and go forth with your friend and companion, in the lightest canoe or skiff that will carry you, paddling or sculling one another by turns. Find and follow the bayonet fin of the tarpon as it cleaves the surface of the shallow waters of the feeding grounds; explore the deep rivers and look under the dark shadows of their banks for the sleeping silver king; or paddle out to the tide-rips in the big pass, to where a school of tarpon are rising to blow, at the rate of twenty a minute within the area of an acre. If you are gifted with your weapon and your companion skilled and cautious with the paddle, you may get half the fish you follow



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on the flats, one in five of those you see under the banks, and succeed in hitting one in a hundred that rise in the pass to blow, within twenty feet of you. The Camera-man says that the latter would be a good average for the camera as well. Even if you fail to find tarpon your time will not be wasted. On the flats, beautifully spotted whip-rays will attract you, big, vicious sharks tempt your steel and huge saw-fish tender you their four-foot weapons as trophies. The rivers will be found alive with fish of many kinds, the flora and fauna of the banks will lend interest to every minute, while in the big pass, if you fail to get the tarpon you seek, there is always the chance that he will capsize you and give you a story to tell at home—when you get there.

Would you reach the *Ultima Thule* of tarpon fishing and touch the very heart of the game? Then forget all that has been written here. Take your best girl out in a little canoe and don't bother with rod or reel but provide a trolling outfit, which is less tiresome to a fisherwoman and leaves one hand free. The lady should troll the lure—for the tarpon—about fifty feet behind the canoe, while you paddle silently, that not a whisper may be lost, through channels, up bayous, around and between islands and along shores lined with mangrove trees, from whose pendant branches hang great bunches of oysters begging to be eaten. Your course should lead through beautiful winding rivers, with banks covered with pine, cypress, live-oak, palmetto and red cedar; adorned with myrtle, mistletoe and thousands of air-

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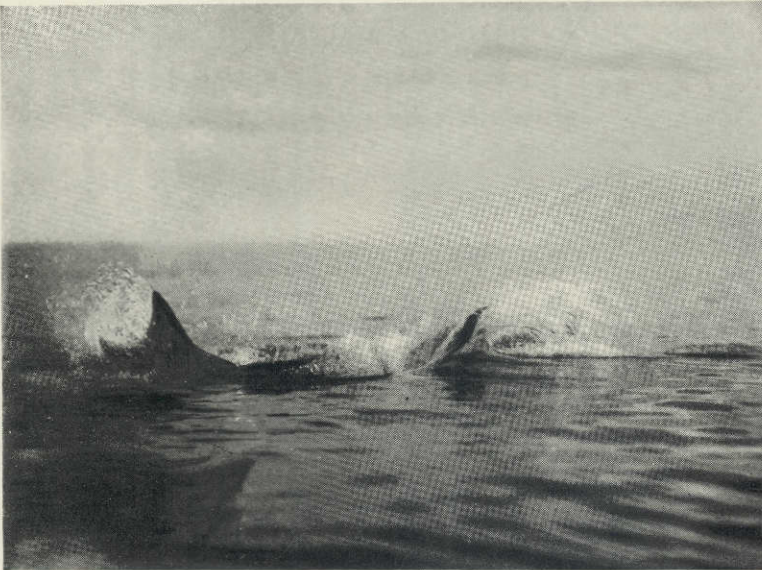
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plants, and fragrant with magnolia and jessamine. From the trees hang festoons of gray Spanish moss and great cables of swinging vines. Less frequently you find wild orange, lime, mastic and tamarind trees, while an occasional royal palm lifts its magnificent head far above the forest which surrounds it. Rarest of all, a palmetto may be seen thrusting its slim, straight body upward through the hollow trunk of a wild fig tree, with its crested head twenty feet above the wide-spreading branches of the latter. As each bend in the river is passed, ducks rise from the water and snipe from the banks. Herons, great and small, flap their lazy wings. Night herons fly, squawking; pink Curlews flutter from the trees, snake-birds drop from the boughs into the water and clumsy pelicans wing their way, with intermittent stroke, to other waters. The sullen plunge of the alligator, disturbed in his siesta and his bed, is followed by the cautious lifting above the surface of the water of a pair of unwinking eyes which gravely gaze at you. Occasionally a quick step is heard, a startled deer stands in bold relief upon the bank for the instant preceding the toss of his white tail, which is the last you see of him. Just as you have forgotten that you are fishing, there will come a tug at the trailing line, a cry from the girl who holds it and, if it is your first tarpon, the most glorious sight you ever beheld, the wild leap of the radiant silver king. Thereafter, don't bother about rules, but just sit tight and enjoy yourself. Probably the girl will attend to playing the fish. Intuition or inheritance



The humane angler unhooks his adversary and lets him go his way.



A shark cuts the tarpon in two.



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will tell her when to give him his head and when to bring him up with a round turn. She may know nothing of Izaak Walton, but it's a hundred to one that she's up in the methods of Simon Peter. If the first run of the tarpon threatens to carry away the whole line, you may have to brace up and paddle mightily toward the flying fish. When the early rushes are over and the tarpon settles down to business, the drag on the line is about equal to the pull against the bit of the average trotter. You can now ride quietly for miles behind the gorgeous creature that at irregular intervals leaps high in the air, or if you are greedy for excitement and the girl can swim, the canoe may be pulled close up to the tarpon and the excitement will come. When the leaping is finished and the tired fish rolls over on his back the canoe may be pulled beside him and after his length has been measured the hook should be taken from his jaw. If you desire a souvenir scale from your adversary, now is the time to take it. If you wish to record his weight, cube his length, in feet, divide by two and you have his weight in pounds. After a few minutes' rest the tarpon will swim slowly away, sometimes jumping once in the air by way of a farewell.

