

A SQUARE DEAL



## CHAPTER XIV

### A SQUARE DEAL

**E**UREKA!" I shouted, but the cry was smothered in salt water, as the big tarpon pulled me over the capsized canoe and sent me upside down to the bottom of the bay. When I got back to the surface, with my head where it belonged, I wondered if the philosopher of the tub came as near drowning while making his discovery, so akin to mine. I had found how to rid the crowning sport of fishing of its alloy. That was my remedy: *Give the fish a square deal.*

The idea was not quite original, but its application was unusual. From the days of Izaak Walton, fishermen of gentle instincts have worked in this direction. Linus Yale, as perfect an angler as he was mechanician, loved to stop by the roadside and, with a few hairs from the tail of his horse, a tiny hook of his own delicate forging, a microscopic fly designed and made by himself, and a reed or tiny sapling for a rod, coax from his home in the mountain brook some patriarch of the stream, twenty times the weight of the improvised gear. I have seen Mr. Jefferson capture (I hate the word "kill") a twelve-pound salmon with an eight-ounce trout-rod, and to-day if you tell your tackle-man that you are going to

catch an eighteen-ounce trout and want him fitted with a rod, he will pass over the counter one that weighs three and three-fourths ounces.

But with little fish the cold fact remained that the contest was between one pound and a hundred. Writers often treated it as a Homeric combat, and even Warner's gentle satire failed to cure some of them. When bigger fish, like the tuna and the tarpon, were dealt with, there were assistants and machinery, and although the quarry might escape, it never had the chance to hit back. One author has written in sweeping denunciation of this unfairness, and though I sympathized with his humanitarianism, and might have welcomed with him a system which would have killed fewer fish and more fishermen, I yet thought his imagination perfervid when he pictured the fisherman as the "cold-blooded, cruel creature at the wrong end of the unfair line," and was reminded by the fisher with a camera of "a Roman painter who tortured a slave on the rack that he might paint a man's dying agony."

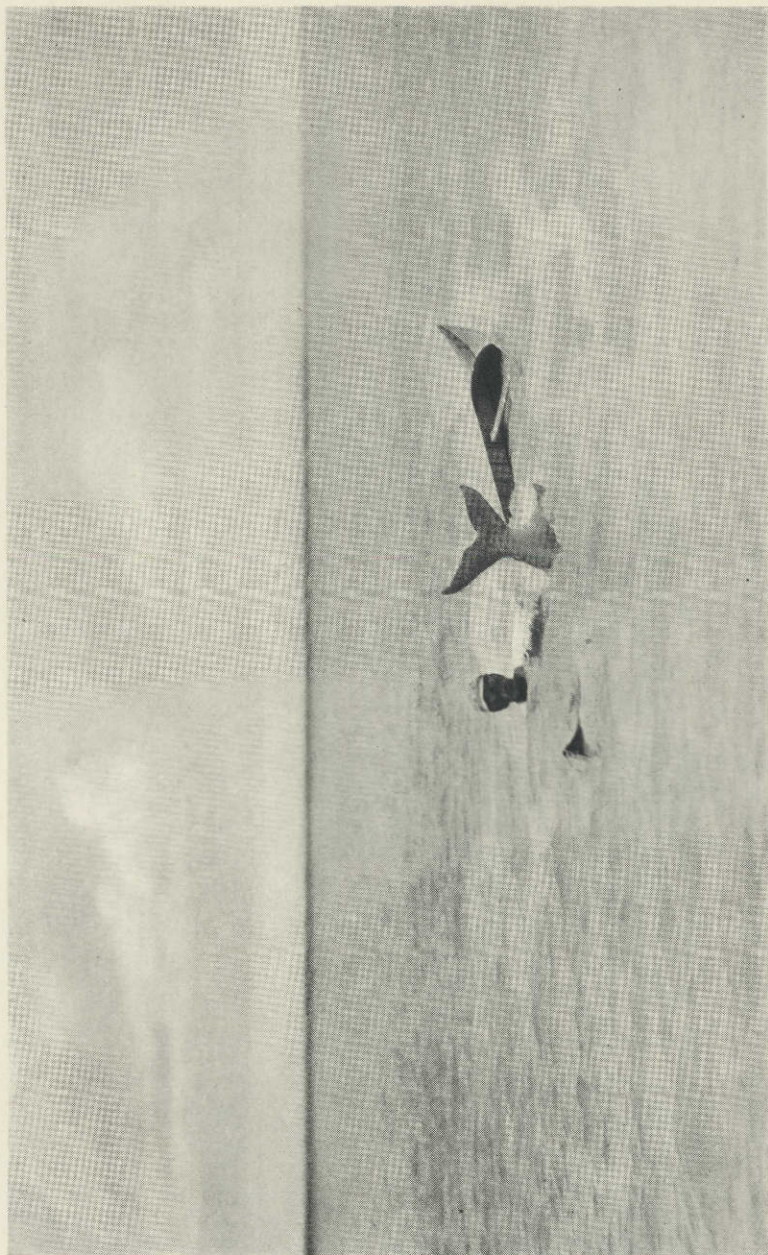
Then one day the Camera-man came to me with a solemn face and letters in his hand, from which he read:

"We can use it, but we had hoped for something more adventurous."

"Good stuff, but lacks human interest."

"Deficient in local color . . ."

We planned to compound a manuscript of equal parts of adventure, local color, human interest, and a square deal, and then hunt up facts and pictures to



The fish struck with all his weight upon the side of the canoe.



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fit the story. I agreed to be the human interest, if my constitution held out, and began by getting into the little Canadian canoe, fifteen feet long, twenty-six inches wide, and eleven inches deep, and trying to stand up in it. I stopped down a tiny harpoon until it could penetrate only one and a half inches and took it aboard with a light line and tub. The hunter-boy asked:

“Am I to go with you in the canoe, sir?”

“Yes.”

Then he went to his bunk, emptied his pockets, took off his shoes, and got into the canoe. The Camera-man was in his short little power boat, which would back, fill, and almost turn on its center at the motion of a hand.

I continued to practice standing upright, balancing myself with the harpoon-pole, while the boy sat as low down in the canoe as he could and paddled me out in the bay. The Camera-man zigzagged behind us, cheering me with offers to bet two to one on a capsize before a capture. He called my attention to the three tandem fins of a fifteen-foot sawfish gliding through the water near me, but preferring to be my own biographer I passed by on the other side. Chaffing stopped when we saw the bayonet fin of a tarpon cleaving the water a hundred yards ahead of us. As we approached each other there was nothing to fix the relation of hunter and hunted. The mien of the tarpon was at least as fierce as mine. His advance was swifter, straighter, his weight greater, and he would have overtopped me by a foot.

He bore slightly to the left, and I murmured to my boatman, in tones almost of anguish, "To the right, to the right!" for, being right-handed, to twist my body half around to the right and throw from that position spells "capsize" in big letters. But the boy sheered just enough to the right, and as the fish came on and distance diminished, slowed down and steadied the canoe, while the thrill of the coming crisis ran tingling through my veins, muscles hardened, and ceasing to take thought of my balance, I found it no longer needful, as foot by foot my eye measured the lessening distance between the canoe and that gleaming, oncoming, form. As the pole left my hand I felt the shot was a sure one, and the sudden dash of the fish toward me brought forth the exultant cry, "I knew it!"

The tarpon's first leap was high in the air beside the canoe and he whirled about as he plunged beneath the surface, dashing water over us and nearly capsizing the craft, in the bottom of which I was then kneeling. While getting under way and headed for him I lost many yards of line which I slowly recovered until the bow of the light canoe was close to his tail. When the Camera-man finally overtook us, the frightened fish swerved from his course, and as the power boat followed, the tarpon made circles around us, so near that I could not follow him without capsizing the canoe. Once more he made a straight-away dash for a long distance, leaping often in the air, then, turning, swam straight for the canoe, so suddenly that I could not gather in the line as he



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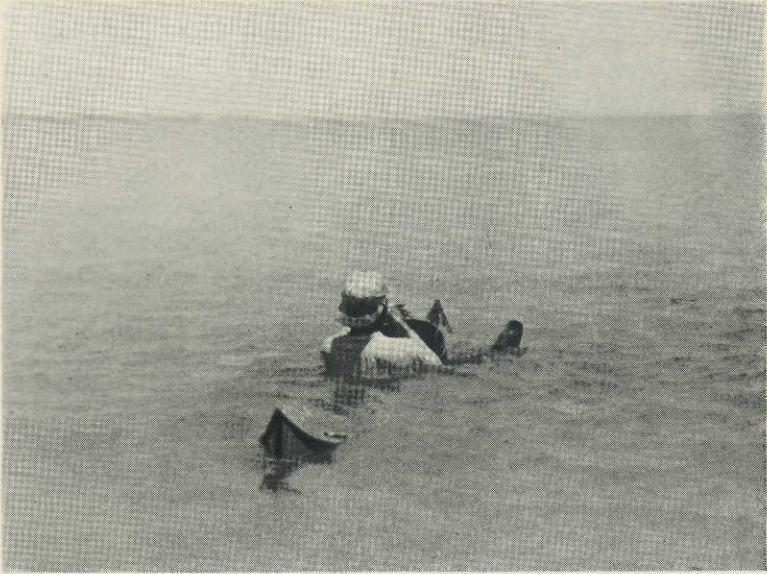
came. He leaped from the water so near me that I could have touched him with my hand, rose above my head and then came a quick turn in the air, and the descent of the creature, head downward, brushing my side and striking fairly, with all his weight multiplied by a velocity which I have not yet figured out, upon the side of the canoe. The canoe melted away and left me kneeling in the water and my boatman sitting in the same element. He promptly swam to the power boat and climbed aboard, but I was committed to the human interest and the square deal.

The tarpon was swimming away, and the line, which I had not dropped, was running through my hands as a few strokes took me to the capsized canoe. I rested against its side, with my arms extended across the bottom, as I took in line which came up from the bottom of the bay in hanks, and tried to get it into the tub, to which one end was fastened, and which I kept floating before me as best I could. This work progressed intermittently, as the tarpon kept me occupied in other ways much of the time. It was during a special effort to control one of his rushes that I was hauled across the canoe and plunged head downward to the bottom by the rolling over of that craft. Things got tangled this time; I was mixed up with the line and had to swim around a good deal to straighten up. Finally I got into the submerged canoe, right side up, all comfortable, head and toes above water, tub between my knees and the game in my own hands. That was all right while the tar-

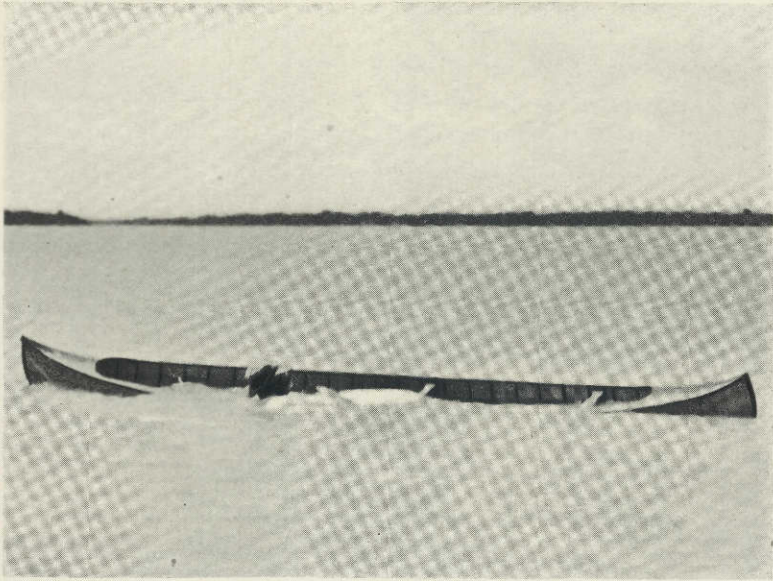
pon kept a straight course, but when he began to tack I was in trouble. The way that canoe rolled from side to side, pitched back and forth, and took headers wouldn't be believed.

Of course the tarpon jumped. He always jumps, and is the only big fish that really knows how. Other fish jump sometimes, but the tarpon makes it a matter of principle. He leaps out of water at the first prick of hook or harpoon, he leaps to catch the fish on which he feeds, and one unhooked tarpon jumped into the skiff, knocked my guide overboard, laid him up for a month, and very nearly sent him into the next world. His jumps are vertically upward, at any angle, in any direction, or he may skim the surface of the water. He can hold himself straight as an arrow, bent into a circle or the letter S, or tie himself into a bow-knot, and I never saw the leap of a salmon that the commonest kind of a tarpon couldn't double discount in his sleep. The performance of a tarpon is so picturesque, so thrilling, that to see it sportsmen travel thousands of miles, sit for days in little skiffs, and then grind fifty-dollar coffee-mills on springless rods for hours at a time.

I wanted the tarpon to jump over the canoe, and to that end hung on and tugged till we were so near together that he struck the canoe on its side and rolled it over; and as I came up on one side of it, his tail, lifted well in air, banged against the other side. It was a joyous moment; nothing could have added to my happiness but the presence of the author who wrote of the cruel control of "the wrong end of the



I got into the submerged canoe, right side up, with the game in my hands.



The tarpon slid into it of his own accord, which I accepted as a formal surrender.



unfair line." I would have given him his choice of ends; he could have run with the hare or hunted with the hound, if he could have made up his mind which was which. "The combat deepened"; sometimes I was in the canoe, and at others I was not. The Camera-man's plates were "'most gone," and the fight was now at short range. Whenever I hauled the fish into the canoe, it rolled over with both of us, until after one such capsize, as I was righting it, the tarpon slid into it of his own motion, which I accepted as a formal surrender, and, with a sudden jerk of the lightly fastened harpoon, set him free, just as the last plate was exposed.

I had discovered a new sport which thrills from its alpha to its omega. Whether one stands balancing on his feet, or kneels paddling in his canoe, the whole hunt is filled with charm. Overhead, wonderful pictures are painted, most often when the fishing season is best, of quick-gathering cloud masses, sometimes sending back fingers earthward to invite great whirling waterspouts, sometimes bursting into tropical rainstorms, which suddenly melt away, leaving the sky filled with mountains of snowy clouds bordered by the richest colors of the spectrum, and backgrounded by the pure blue of the heavens. There, too, are the waters and the life in them, more varied than the tourist dreams, picturesque streams; wooded shores and the life thereon; birds of many kinds on the ground, in the trees, wading, and eternally on the wing; the startled deer with big eyes following your every move, otters playing as they slide down

the banks, big turtles and alligators, and, crowning it all, the gleaming sides of the royal fish, carved in silver, but charged with dynamite. Then, throwing the harpoon! No other act of fishing compares with it in the skill involved or the thrill evolved. With the average sportsman, after a fair amount of practice, the odds are half a dozen to one against his hitting the fish, and the chances are even that he will go into the water oftener than a tarpon will come out.

Playing the fish is another delight, not a struggle to destroy him, but to stimulate him to make those gorgeous acrobatic displays which are without a parallel in the animal world. Then turn him loose. The injury to the fish is usually less than that which an average football-player would ignore in the glory of the game and count as trifling afterward.

I would like to suggest to the critic, who still thinks the contest too unequal, that he substitute the stable skiff for the cranky canoe, take the button from his foil and with his sharpest harpoon, backed by six feet of chain and a hundred of half-inch manila, follow that black fin that is lifted a foot or more above the surface of the water, as its owner glides stealthily in search of a victim. When he finds himself beside a murderous machine with a big mouth furnished with rows of serrated, introverted teeth, with head and tail overlapping respectively the bow and stern of his skiff, he can strike freely with the full assurance that the next minute will dispel all his fears of inadequate resistance to his attack. Or if

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he will throw his iron into that other member of the family of sharks, so smoothly gliding beneath his skiff, and hang on to the line till a four-foot weapon, four inches broad, wielded by half a ton of angry adversary, is broken across his craft, he will admit yet other possibilities of fairness in fishing with a harpoon.

Sometimes it does happen that by accident you kill a fish, but the sharks will destroy a hundred before that accident will happen twice to you. I cannot agree with the author who believes the art of the angler "the refinement of cruelty," nor would I wholly subscribe to the views of that other fanatic who thinks that fish dying in air perish from an excess of oxygen and pass away in a glorious delirium of intoxication. My own belief, based on observation of facts too numerous to be cited here, is on all fours with that of a learned doctor of metropolitan distinction who assures me that fish do not suffer pain as we understand it, that their apparent manifestations of suffering are about as significant as the shrinking of a sensitive plant. I may add that I never saw any action in any fish that indicated half the agony suggested by a hustling hen as she hiked over the fence when chased out of the family flower-garden. There is plenty of real trouble in the world, and it is not well to magnify the sorrows of these cold-blooded victims, to the extent of getting your moral lens out of focus. Hunting the tarpon with a harpoon, under the conditions I have endeavored to set forth, is the very acme of sport. No man with

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*Florida Enchantments*

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red blood in his veins can resist its attractions if he once gets within its field of influence. Of all sports it is first in legitimate pleasurable excitement, fullest of thrills, unequaled in healthfulness, and the only sport that gives the dumb object of pursuit a square deal.





Rarest and most beautiful were the long whites.

