

## CHAPTER V

### THE SILVER KING

"I'd give fifty dollars down for a hundred and seventy-five pounder, in good condition!" declared the host of the Anglers' Anchorage.

"Poof! I'd give five hundred!" laughed the New Yorker, who owned several electric roads and was a director in one or two banks.

"On your own hook and line, sir," amended the host, suavely.

"Of course. On my own hook."

The Bostonian dropped a bead of oil on the axle of a dismembered reel, and delicately smeared it over the steel with his finger-tip.

"I had a good one on yesterday, but —"

The New Yorker and the man who favored an eight-ounce rod exchanged the glance of cynical brotherhood.

"We know that one," they said, wearily.  
"The one that might have been!"

"But my reel was gummy and the line parted," continued the Bostonian, with characteristic calm. "I think he weighed at least one hundred and thirty. One of the Salem Kents caught a hundred and ninety pounder last season. But that happened at Tampico."

"There's no doubt that Mexican fish run heavier," said the man who always felt a desire to apologize for the Bostonian. "But these are big and gamy enough for me — when I get one. Three days without a bite!"

"It's a little early," reassured the host. "The main body hasn't struck in yet. When they do there'll be fishing."

The Bostonian, tenderly assembling the oiled bits of steel, smiled coldly.

"Yet you offered fifty dollars for a hundred and seventy-five pounder a minute ago."

"Sure. And I expect to pay the money," said the host. "If I had time, I'd go out and win the reward myself. I want a nice fish for the hall mantelpiece, that's all."

As he bustled indoors, the New Yorker and the man with the eight-ounce rod exchanged another glance of understanding.

"His fifty is safe," said the New Yorker.

"Wish I could feel as sure about my little pile," said the other. "This place is too far up. Only the light scouts will ever get here. Wish I hadn't exchanged old camps for new."

Here were grown men from the North, men of reputation in the business world, who took fishing with solemnity, and rose with the sun in order to spend a full, active day at it. Bob and Jim, anglers too, basked in this company, which threw an unwonted dignity upon the craft. They had both made up their minds that wealth could be spent in no better way than was exemplified at the Anchorage. That it required exceeding great wealth to live in this creation of red tiles, Moorish columns and latticed balconies, was beyond a doubt.

The hotel had sprung up before their wondering eyes like an Aladdin's palace. The cellar was scooped out in a day by an army of imported laborers. Another army ran up the framework in an incredibly short time. And every train brought more workmen, who swarmed over the structure like bees upon honeycomb. It was a modern tower of Babel; a confusion of rappings

and tappings and shouting. But when the clouds of workers suddenly rose and trooped away they left smooth, luxurious order behind them; a complete, modern hostelry painted, plastered, furnished, electric-lighted, in the midst of newly made gardens flashing with fountains. Perhaps there was more show to it than durability, but Bob and Jim accepted it on its face value. It was a marvel and a delight to them and made the rest of Ordville look drab and dreary by comparison.

Whenever they had a chance they hung about the verandah of the Anchorage, absorbing the extremely interesting conversations that passed between its guests. They were actually sitting on the steps when Mr. Simpson, the host, made his extraordinary offer. Fifty dollars for a mere herring! They exchanged looks that recorded a common vow.

“But where are we going to get the tackle!” mourned Bob. “I haven’t got anything that will hold one as big as that.”

Neither had Jim. As he was considering the problem, the host reappeared and called to him, “Here you, Jim! Take Mr. Worthington out,

will you? It's no use waiting for that lazy ducky," he added, to the Bostonian. "Like as not he won't come round, and the boy knows where the fish are all right."

The man from Boston studied Jim through his glasses. The eyes behind them were sharp but kindly. "Perhaps you'd like to try for that fish of Simpson's," he suggested. "I've several extra rods, and you may use one."

Poor Bob! He could not help feeling envious as he watched the joyous Jim tuck the rod under his arm and sally forth. One by one the other gentlemen, accompanied by their negro boatmen, went down to the landing. No one noticed him sitting there on the step. The clear blue of the sky and the flashing water mocked at him.

"I s'pose it's because Jim's more of a kid," he thought. "They think I'm big enough to go out by myself, that's why!"

It was not much of a consolation. It was none, in fact. He sat there trying hard to be manly, but seeing the little scattered flotilla of boats through a mist.

Again the host came to the door, and his eye rested on the rather forlorn figure. "Hello,

young man!" he said. "How are you — pretty quick on your pins?"

"What, sir?" asked Bob.

"Good with your legs? Can you use 'em? Make 'em move faster than a darky's? I want an errand done at the village, and I want it done quick."

"I reckon I'm quick, sir," said Bob as a plan darted into his mind.

Tough as an Indian from much outdoor work, he made the trip to the village and back in less than half an hour, surprising Mr. Simpson exceedingly.

"What, back so quick!" he exclaimed. "You're all right. I'll have to use you again."

He held out a bright quarter, but Bob, flushing, put his hands behind his back.

"I'd be mighty glad to run errands for you, sir," he said, breathlessly, "any time, sir. But I don't want money. If you'd let me have — if you'd —"

"If I'd what?"

"If you'd lend me an old rod, I'd try to catch that tarpon for you."

Mr. Simpson slowly pocketed the quarter.

“You think fifty dollars in the lagoon are better than a quarter in the hand, eh! Well, I don’t know.” He eyed the boy meditatively. “Ever used a rod?”

“Lots of times. I’ve caught sea-trout and cavally and king-fish and tarpon too. But they were small ones,” Bob added truthfully.

“I don’t know,” mused Simpson. “Well, all right. I’ll let you have a rod and fixings if you’ll promise to do more errands. A rod costs good money.”

“I’ll promise,” said Bob.

After a man is tired of trout, and has come to be a match for the skilful salmon, he is likely, if he is a consistent angler, to turn to Southern waters for new conquests. There he will find among the hordes of strange fish eager to take his bait a giant herring, that for weight, agility and cunning is the king of all game-fishes, with the possible exception of the huge leaping tuna. Men who have found salmon-fishing an easy sport have had their pride lowered when they came to cast a tarpon line in some placid lagoon. Here there are no running waters or eddy-encircled rocks to complicate the battle; nothing but

the big fish himself to fight, but the chances are that he will beat you.

Bob had his own logy bateau, a recent purchase, and his particular friend and admirer, Rufus, who stood ready to do menial labor for him at any moment.

Rufus jumped at the chance to go fishing for such game, and fifteen minutes after meeting Bob he appeared at the landing with a brand-new rag round his perennially sore toe, and the left hind foot of a rabbit in his trousers pocket.

"She'll shore bring us luck," he confided as they rowed out upon the pellucid bosom of the lagoon. "She's de same what Yaller Jack bruck de las' dry spell with."

Bob sniffed. He had not much faith in such charms, at least, when it came to fishing. He put a pop-eyed, slippery, one-pound mullet on the hook, and swung it overboard. The velvet cluck of the big reel was inspiriting music. He had never held such a perfect rod in his hands before, and his pulse stirred bravely.

There was not a ripple on the dead blue surface. The scattered boats from the hotel lay off to the north, as motionless as if glued there. Bob



had chosen new ground near a narrow inlet, where the tide ran in from the sea in long, pulsating jets, like blood in an artery.

He had dropped anchor there at slack water, but the iridescent film that gathers on the surface at such times was now beginning to break up into lines and darkening feathers that glided slowly toward the head of the lagoon. Soon it was all gone. Then the first clean gush of sea-water came, lifting the boat a little and letting it sink gently as it rolled on.

With this green water came predatory fish. Few of them were visible, but now and then a porpoise showed a slice of fat, muddy back, or a piratically slanted fin ripped the surface. In the lagoon there was plenty of gentle prey.

When the tarpon came, it was a descent of Norsemen. Boring their way up the inlet, their bright backs rising and falling, they came in rushing fleets — eager to be the first on the feeding-grounds. They stretched from shore to shore of the narrow cut like the metal plates of a steel corselet, racing so close to the boat that they cast spray into it, but not one noticed the hooked mullet. He was too insignificant all by himself. They

wanted a school to charge and devour, worry and scatter. In a few minutes they were gone with the inflow that had brought them.

"We's too far down!" wailed Rufus, in despair. "Dey's gone up to de boats, and Jim'll catch our fish, sure. Pull up de anchor, Mister Bob. Pull him up!"

"Pull up nothing," said Bob sturdily, although he was somewhat pale. He had never seen so many of the great fish before. "I've watched this place, and if you can't catch one here, you can't anywhere."

He drew in his line and put on a vigorous mullet from the bucket. The "bait" scooted here and there, feeling the danger. In every way it did its best to draw that danger down upon its defenceless head; but the sun passed the zenith and sank slowly toward the west, and the reel hung silent on the rod.

The fish "were not biting," as the anglers say. They were there and at work. Patches of shadow and patches of foam mottling the blue of the lagoon showed that the mullet and small fry were being harried, but no silk line tautened. Anglers are patient folk, but they have their superstitions,

and one of them is that when fish show a disinclination to bite they cannot be made to. One after another, as the sun sank, they quietly took their rods apart and stole back to the landing; all but Bob and the Bostonian, who had made it a principle to combat all conventional conclusions.

It was high flood. Six hours had passed. The drowsy Rufus came out of his cat-nap suddenly, and with an inarticulate exclamation. Something had surged in the water close by. The drooping line took life and straightened mysteriously.

But before Bob could strike, the water boiled and broke noisily; and a wide dorsal fin cut it like a knife. On the hook were the staring head and bleeding shoulders of a tarpon, the rest of whose body lay in the maw of a thievish shark.

"I reckon we-all better go on home," said Rufus shudderingly. "I doan' like fishing fo' sharks."

Bob put on another mullet and cast it clear of the cloudy spot on the water.

"This is where we get action," he said. "Some of 'em are going out hungry."

The bait had hardly sunk below the surface before the same uncanny upheaval occurred. Again

the line crept out and out, stealing away from the boat. Then Bob struck, and with a shower of drops the line straightened like a steel wire, and the rod creaked under the dead weight. It was a dead weight only for an instant. After that it was so much alive that the rod shrieked high to the fierceness of its rush. One hundred feet from the boat the tarpon shot out of the water. Up he went, his cheeks flaring from the red gills till he seemed all enormous head. Still he rose, foot on foot of blinding silver, and at the great length of him Rufus gasped and pulled the rabbit's foot from his pocket.

"Conjure him! Conjure him!" he yelled, and shook the little hairy pad at the fish as it curved in a high arc and fell back, driving foam to the boat.

Now he rushed steadily and straight for the head of the lagoon. The raised tip of the rod put its strain upon him, but a tarpon six feet long is not to be turned or tired by such tricks. Foot after foot of the line spun from the reel. Bob had no finger-stalls, and the thin silk ate hot into the flesh of the thumb with which he tried to brake the line.

Two hundred and fifty feet ran out, and the fatness of the reel was gone before the tarpon swung. He came straight for the boat. Bob reeled frantically. It would not do to give the fish too much slack. There was a dreadful droop to the line when the second leap came and the tarpon rose, higher than before, and slatted his great head vigorously. When he turned in mid-air he bent like a steel bow, and snapped out straight again with a jerk that tossed the line high. But in the heart of the suds and broken water the line stiffened, and Bob knew he had the fish well-hooked. Well-hooked is far from being safely landed. A tarpon can perform more acrobatic feats than almost any other game-fish in the sea; and a straight rush, if not stopped in time, will inevitably end in a broken line.

Not once did the tarpon sulk. It was straight fighting every minute. With rod and reel and bloody fingers Bob fought back, and the hour that passed seemed a dozen. He was bathed in sweat, and every muscle ached. Even his teeth ached under the dogged pressure of his jaws. Rufus chewed on his precious rabbit's foot with savage disregard of its value. He might

have ground it up if the tarpon had not intervened.

During the first half of the second hour the fish seemed as fresh as ever, but a series of huge leaps and their smacking falls tired him. For the first time Bob was able to gather in a hundred feet of line, the tarpon yielding sullenly to the strain. He lay now within a few yards of the boat; dorsal fin out, his six feet of silver gleaming through the water.

“Coax him, Mister Bob!” pleaded Rufus, gaff in hand. “Lemme get jus’ one jab at him with dis yere pike.”

Bob touched the reel with numbed fingers, but gentle as the pull was, it roused the tarpon to a last fury. Out of the suddenly swirling water he rose, open-mouthed, and before the boys could move he was upon them with an impact that sent Rufus and the oars flying, and thrust the gunwale of the boat beneath the surface. It was not an attack. The great fish was merely trying to free itself and in his blind terror he landed squarely in the boat.

Bob and the tarpon and the broken halves of the centre seat thrashed about on the flooded bot-

tom. The boy's length was less than that of the fish, but he thrust his hands into the wide gills and wound his legs round the slippery body, and fought with shut eyes. He was fighting in his own element and the tarpon was not. The muscular body ceased to heave under him; and when the streaming Rufus cautiously appeared at the gunwale, the rabbit's foot protruding from his lips, the real struggle was over.

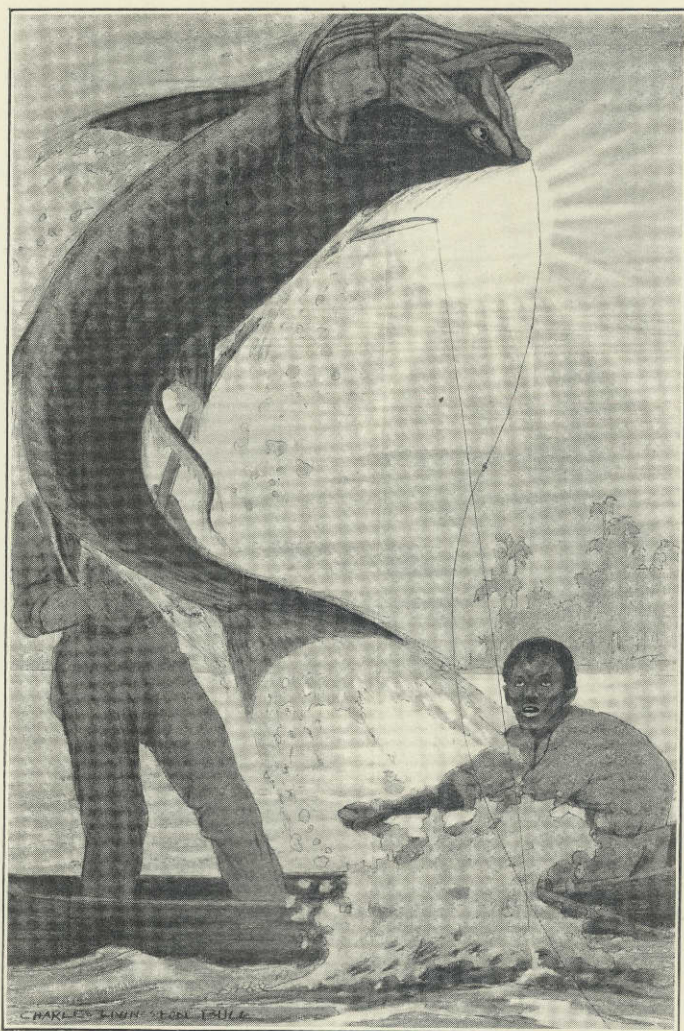
"Mm-mm!" said Rufus, removing his talisman from his mouth. "Ain't he jus' de nickel-plated son-of-a-whale! Lemme get at him."

Very valorous now, he climbed into the boat and pike in hand, assaulted the dying tarpon.

"Hold on Rufus!" expostulated Bob. "Mr. Simpson won't give a red cent for it if you go knocking the scales all off."

Mr. Simpson did, however, pay the fifty dollars he had offered, and though the handful of crisp bills was something never to be forgotten, Bob's keenest pleasure came from the congratulations and compliments showered upon him by excited anglers.

The tarpon, stuffed and varnished, was in due time hung over the hall fire-place of the fashion-



“ BEFORE THE BOYS COULD MOVE HE WAS UPON THEM.”





able Anchorage, and under it was placed this inscription: "The Silver King. Caught by Robert Leach, June 3, 1908. Weight 204 pounds."