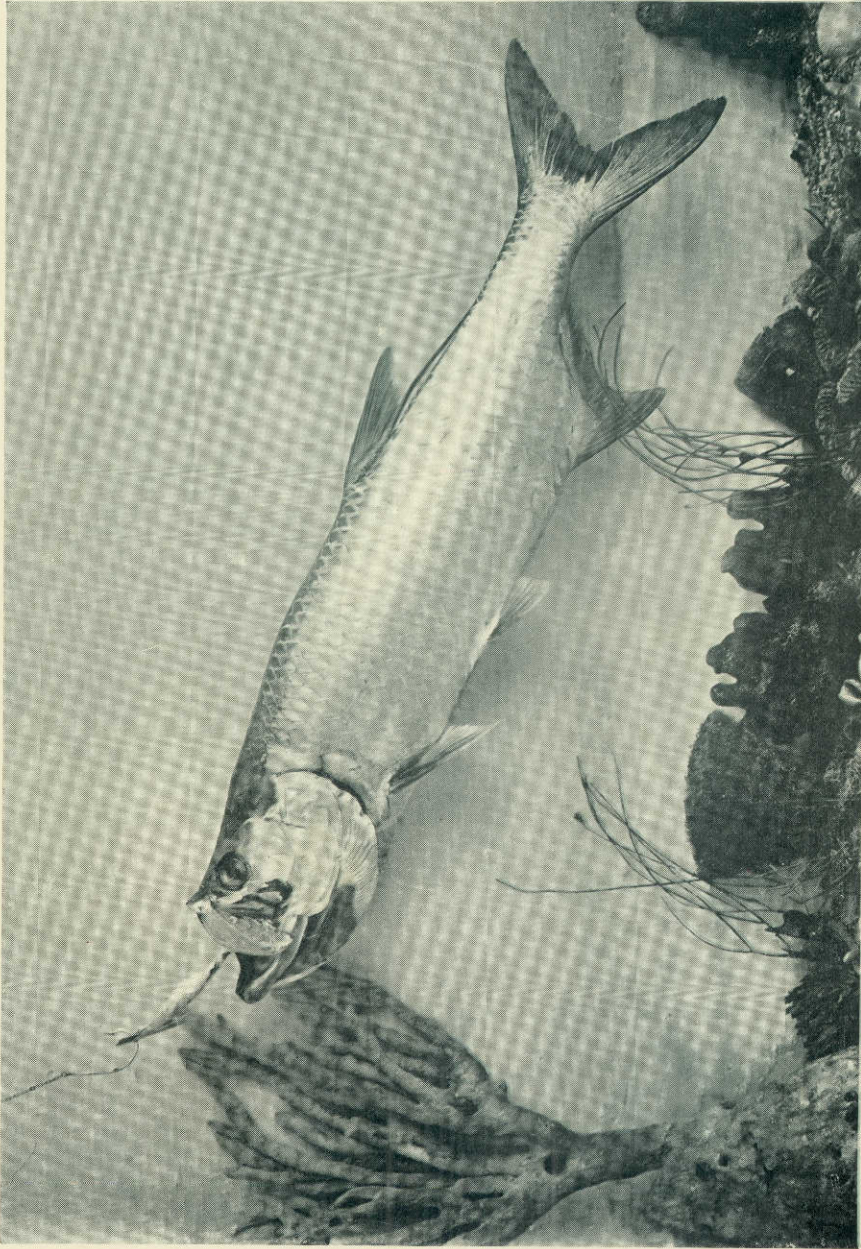


CHAPTER I

The Giant Tarpon





A TARPON SEIZING A BAIT OF MULLET.

CHAPTER I

THE GIANT TARPON

IN the old country the sport of sea-fishing, though yearly more popular with its own votaries, can never oust the sport on inland waters, until at any rate these are fished out. Always excepting sharks as vermin, there is no British sea fish so mighty as the salmon, or so game as the trout. American waters, however, provide more than one salt-water giant calculated to test, if not, perhaps, the finest skill, yet certainly the greatest endurance that man is likely to bring to its capture. Of these, the big game of the Atlantic, the tarpon stands easily first.

Better than any detailed description of the fish and dentition, with measurements, is its picture to be found in this volume. Suffice it to say that the tarpon is to all outward appearance, bar the long dorsal fin ray, a gigantic

Giant Fish of Florida

herring, with scales four inches in diameter. It may weigh over two hundred pounds, and the length of such a monster would be about seven feet. The qualities that recommend the tarpon to the sportsman are—first, its power of leaping clear of the water, which lends excitement to its pursuit, since it may, and not infrequently does, land in your boat ; and further, its mighty strength, endurance, and cunning, which combine to render it a worthy antagonist. It will, very often, indeed, completely tire out an angler, who then hands the rod to his guide, leaving him to finish off the half-exhausted fish, an alliance that, however unsporting it may seem to the hypercritical, may be absolutely necessary if the fish, or, indeed, the tackle, is to be saved. Not that the fish, except as a trophy, is of much use when gaffed. As food it is of little worth, and it is quite a pity that the pioneers in tarpon fishing should have thought it necessary to gaff through the gills and kill every fish, and leave it dead on the foreshore. Nowadays a more economic and sporting spirit prevails, and fish are often landed without being gaffed at all, and then allowed to go free.

Attempts have from time to time been made to compare tarpon and salmon fishing, to the advantage of one or the other, but the fact is that no such comparison is possible. As well compare shooting trap pigeons and rocketing pheasants. The salmon calls for skill, experience, and light tackle ; the

Giant Fish of Florida

tarpon requires no skill and no experience, but the very strongest of tackle. It also taxes the angler's strength and staying power to an extent that would, save in very exceptional circumstances, be out of the question in salmon fishing. And why, after all, any call for these eternal comparisons? To every country and season and income their fish; and those who have the opportunities may without difficulty kill their Florida tarpon and their Highland salmon in the same summer. Nor is the tarpon, though first, the only fish worth catching in those waters, and I have purposely devoted a page here and there to the sport obtainable with smaller species, and even with the harpoon.

The best time of tide for sea-fishing at Boca Grand is slack water, and the interval immediately before and after it. A good deal depends on the quarter of the moon and direction of the wind, for it is these that regulate the duration of a fishing-tide. The tides are erratic in those seas; at times it is possible to fish for three hours on end, while on other days no sooner are you fairly under way than the tide becomes too strong, and there is nothing for it but to reel up and go ashore. Much the same difference is, of course, discernible in sea-fishing at home during a week of spring or neap tides, but there is much greater irregularity on the Florida coast.

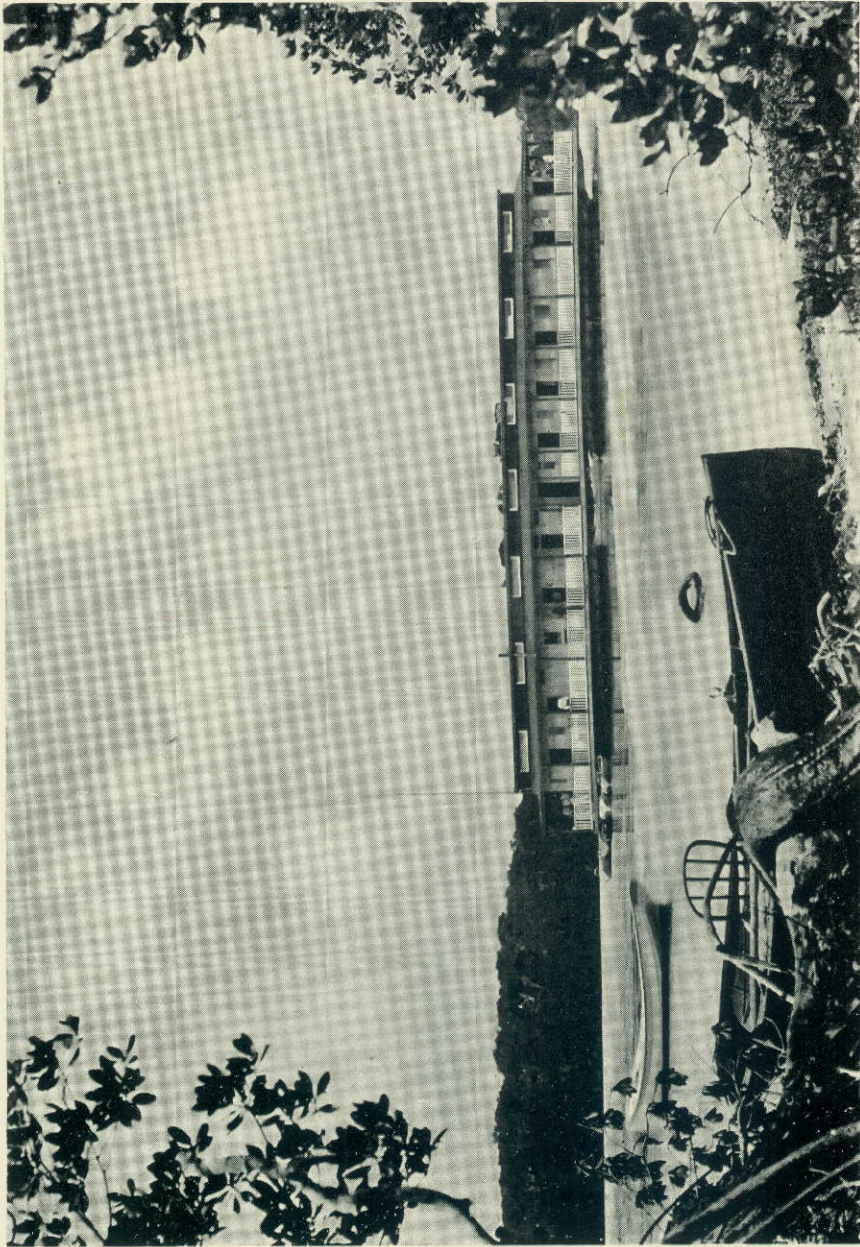
Tarpon fishing by night is exciting work, somewhat too exciting for many people. The fish, however, bite with

Giant Fish of Florida

far more certainty than by day, particularly when the moon is shining. There is an element of danger about this night fishing, and more than one nervous system has been shattered by a porpoise jumping into a boat ; indeed, Mr. Otis Mygatt, one of the most celebrated of tarpon-fishermen, suffered severely from this startling intrusion.

It is impossible to know how far one is drifting towards the open sea, and on all sides are heard the plunges of mighty fish, which are far more likely to land in the boat than during the day. A great tarpon may seize the bait and get round behind the angler, to his utter confusion. Even if the shore is reached in time, there is considerable difficulty and excitement in landing a tarpon on a dark night. Towards the end of May those who are not strong enough to land their tarpon without delay lose them to the sharks. As many as five of these monsters will attack a hooked tarpon at once, and on one occasion I remember four of them while thus engaged attacking a fifth, and in a few moments not a shred of that fifth shark remained. The angler recovered only the head of the tarpon. It is remarkable, seeing the position of the shark's mouth, what rapid bites he can take at a struggling tarpon, just as we should take the first bite of a sandwich. It is no bad plan to carry a rifle in the boat so late in the season. It will often keep off sharks and save a good fish.

A few words must now be said as to the means of reaching Boca Grand Pass, the most fashionable tarpon



THE FLOATING HOTEL.

Giant Fish of Florida

ground of to-day, and as to the accommodation to be had there. There seems to be a mistaken idea that tarpon fishing is an inordinately costly recreation ; but this cannot be upheld when it is remembered that the total expenses on the spot amount to little more than thirty shillings a day, including hotel, board and lodging, guide, boat, bait, and guide's keep, while the return fare, with forty hours train and four hours boat after reaching New York, is not more than £32 out and home.

The Boca Grand Pass was not always the headquarters of tarpon trolling, for this modern method of fishing was first successfully practised some few years ago in the Captiva Pass. There is also good tarpon fishing in Aransas Pass, Mexico, where living and other expenses are much less than at Boca Grand, but the fish run smaller. In 1901 Hughes' Floating Hotel was the only accommodation available, with the exception of hired yachts, and, though most comfortable in every way, had certain disadvantages arising out of the spot in which it was moored. There was also, however, to be shortly completed on Museppa Island, about three miles from Boca Grand Pass, a well-appointed hotel, with every modern comfort, including a steamer and launches to convey fishers to and from the Pass. Guides, bait, a photographing room, and shark-proof bathing establishment were among the attractions to be anticipated at this hotel for the next fishing season.

Giant Fish of Florida

Tackle for tarpon fishing should, for the present at any rate, be bought of Vom Hofe, of New York. English tackle makers have the matter in view, but it is to be questioned whether the lower prices at which they will one of these days be able to turn out equally good stuff will not be more than neutralised by the excessive duties. The rods cost about £3 each, and the reels about £7. Money for use during the trip should be sent to the bank at Punta Gorda, a little town with few resources beyond its fashionable hotel.



INTERIOR OF AN ALLIGATOR ISLAND. THE HAUNT OF THE RATTLESNAKE, GOPHER,
TORTOISE, AND RACCOON.

