

CHAPTER III

How to Catch Tarpon



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### HOW TO CATCH TARPON

HAVE I sufficiently introduced the tarpon itself? I hope so. The fish shown in the frontispiece was caught in March, and was therefore in poor condition. They improve rapidly towards the end of April, and are heavy with spawn late in May. Strips of mullet—four cut from the white belly of each—are the orthodox bait for tarpon, yet an autopsy will reveal only an occasional fish, small crabs being by far the more usual food. When a tarpon is seen rising slowly, head and tail like a salmon, it may be regarded as on its way to the bottom to feed, its movements when routing among the rocks and weeds being notified by the string of bubbles that rise to the surface, much like the otter's chain.

In Boca Grand the tarpon is fished for close to the bottom, but elsewhere it is sometimes caught near the



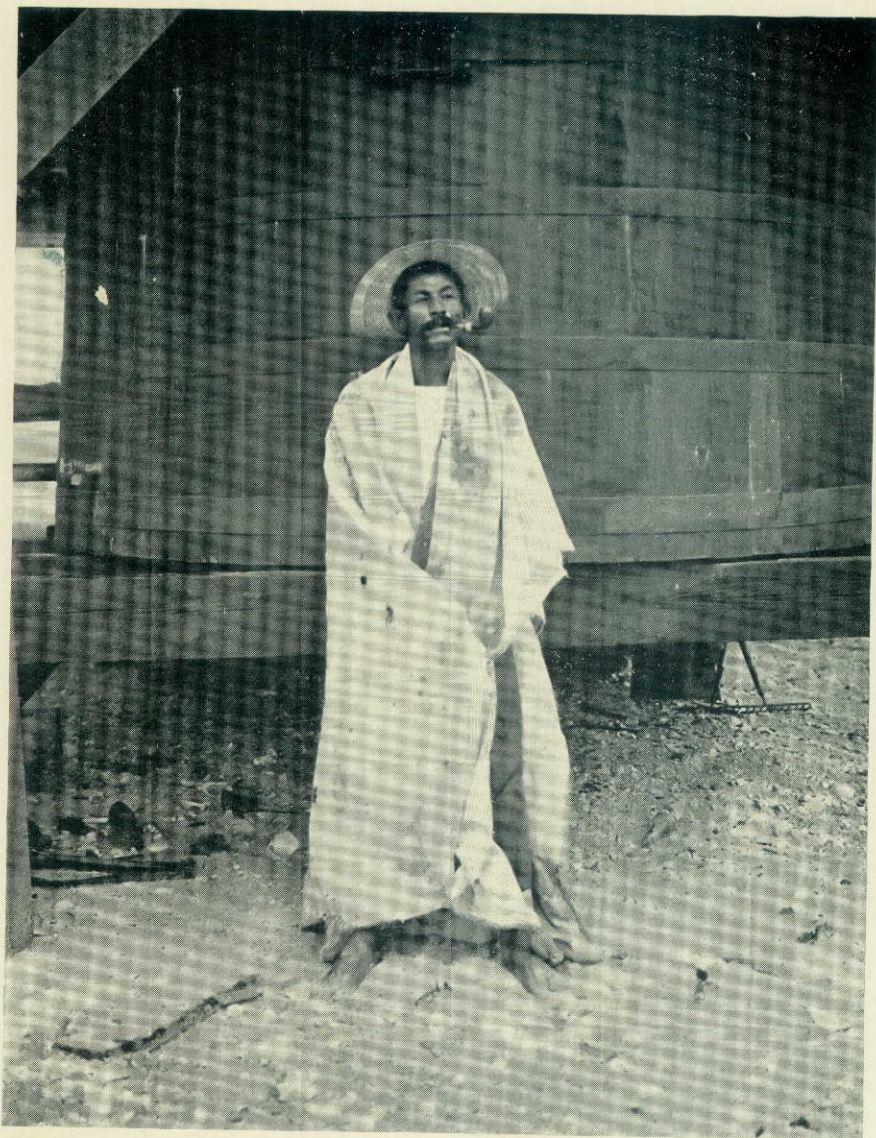
## Giant Fish of Florida

surface. When actually rolling and playing on the waters the fish are rarely caught, and where they congregate in a strong tide and in shallows they are most difficult to hook—not more than one fish being on the average caught out of four or more strikes. When a hooked tarpon does not break water, a comparatively rare occurrence, he may be regarded as a heavy fish. Once the life is out of the tarpon, he is of little use, unless it be to furnish a trophy for exhibition to admiring friends at home, who may like to see what America can raise in the herring line. Yet probably this universal neglect is due to the abundance of other more excellent food-fish in those waters rather than to inherent unfitness, for its flesh is dark, firm, and meaty.

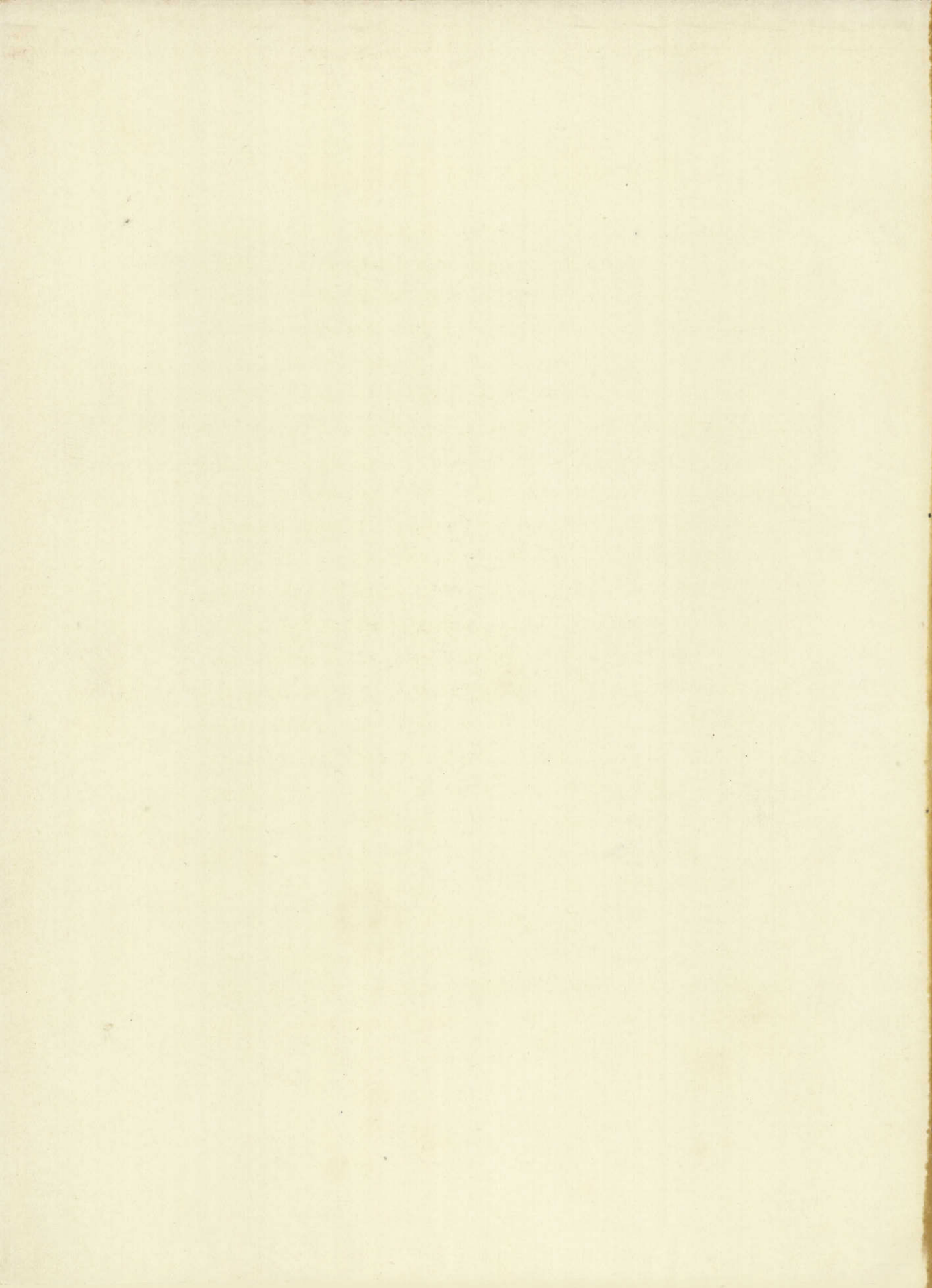
Not the least important factor in success is a good guide. These men are quite characters in their way, and never speak of their master as having caught or lost a fish: with them it is always "I did this or that," and in truth their experience and skill mean so very much that this egotism is not altogether unpardonable. They are for the most part civil and obliging fellows, particularly the niggers, but there are, of course, exceptions, and these the sportsman should, for the public good, never hesitate to get rid of.

At the same time a little consideration is due to the guides themselves, and if they are worked all day, they should be allowed to rest at night. Quite apart from their carefully acquired knowledge, their duties are by no means light.





A TARPON GUIDE.





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They have to be at their employers' beck and call at all hours of the day and night, and to help him get sport in a willing and efficient manner. During the fishing they have to exercise great care in manœuvring the boat, so as to keep a tight line when it is impossible to reel in fast enough. They must also be always on the lookout for moving tarpon, and they must, above all, have an unfailing supply of fresh and well-cut baits. All said and done, the daily wage of less than a sovereign for the guide and boat is well earned.

Tarpon fishing has one feature unique in angling annals ; it is a social gathering, and not by any means a solitary sport. Whether the undoubted charm of this distinction lies in the inherent gregariousness, often undiscovered, in the angler's bosom, or rather perhaps in the rare pleasure of seeing one's friends in all manner of difficulties, it is quite certain that tarpon fishing would be far less popular under other conditions. As it is, where the fish are seen on the move, there must every one go, and twenty or thirty boats will soon be clustered with no more than twenty yards between each.

An element of excitement is also imported by the continual apparition of great fish leaping high in the air, falling into boats and jeopardising life and limb, for it is a poor choice whether you will have 150 lb. of lively fish dropped on the top of your skull, or whether you will rather have it fair in the side, with the risk of being knocked overboard to the sharks.

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There will no doubt be disparaging anglers who despair of tarpon fishing as a sport when they read my frank admission that it calls for little special knowledge beyond a useful husbanding of one's strength that can be acquired only with practice. At the same time, attention to the business in hand will often save many little inconveniences, such as getting your finger broken by the reel handle, or cut through by quick-running slack line.

In thus discounting the skill at present necessary to the killing of tarpon, I do not overlook the fact that this state of things will not in all probability continue indefinitely, since there are already signs that the tarpon may become both scarcer and better educated as the sport gains more adherents; nor is it other than probable that we do not yet know the best methods of catching this splendid fish. In Boca Grand Pass, for instance, we fish for tarpon with a strip of mullet used close to the bottom. In other places where the sport is followed they use a whole mullet near the surface. The probability is that we know no more of the life history and habits of the tarpon than our fathers knew of the salmon forty years ago. It is when greater art is called for in the capture of the scarcer and more wary fish that the more intelligent guides and sportsmen will inevitably score in a measure that, it must be confessed, is not always the reward of superior intelligence to-day.

As to season, the most agreeable time for tarpon fishing



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is undoubtedly from the second week in April until the end of May, or as much longer, for the matter of that, as the mosquitoes are graciously pleased to let you bide in peace. Still-fishing, the old-fashioned method of angling, is practised under the lea of some islands only on days that do not permit of your getting out into the Pass. It bears considerable resemblance to some ways of sea-fishing at home, and consists in anchoring the boat, baiting and throwing out a gorge-hook, and then sitting down to wait for a bite. As often as not the bite never comes ; as often as not, when it does, the fish proves to be a shore-haunting shark.

