

CHAPTER V

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THERE are generally some ladies in the company, indeed the gentler sex seems to have taken to tarpon fishing to an extent quite unforeseen when first men introduced the sport. It is wonderful, too, how ladies manage to hold on to these mighty fish, and to husband their strength, the department in which, in their excitement, they might reasonably be expected to fail. I have already mentioned the feat of the lady who killed her four tarpon in one morning. Considering that these fish weighed close on 100 lb. apiece, this was no mean achievement. This same woman, while beaching one of her first heavy fish early in the season, fell backwards over a few straws. She was too exhausted to stand upright again for some moments, but so excited was her imagination that she was firmly persuaded, until

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convinced by the evidence of her own eyes, that she had fallen over a log

There were many other successful lady anglers. One of these caught and landed a jewfish scaling 137 lb., and this must have called for all her strength, for these jewfish have enormous power of resistance so long as they sulk at the bottom, which they do as if they were rocks. I have watched a man fighting with a 350-lb. jewfish, which he eventually succeeded in killing, though not without a severe tussle, which taxed his patience and his tackle in no small degree.

For a long time we thought he was playing a rock, after the manner dear to "Dibbler," so little did the object in which the hook was fast seem to yield to his persuasions, and it was only the fact of his being too old a hand to be taken in by any such makebelieve that convinced us that big game was really in question. For a good twenty minutes hard pulling he cannot have moved that jewfish through more than fourteen feet of water, and all his labour would seem to be undone next moment, for the monster simply sinks to the bottom again and is doubtless trying to cut his line against some sharp coral edge. Yet his skill and patience have not in fact been thrown away, for the great fish is tiring. The next steady strain brings it appreciably nearer to the surface, and at last, after a giant's contest lasting fully two hours, the three hundred and odd pounds of fish float blown and helpless on the top of the water, the vanquished monster looking more like a barrel than a fish.



A BIG JEWFISH FOR A WOMAN TO LAND.



THE JEW FISH, WITH SUCKER CLINGING TO IT.

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Like most ground-hugging species, the jewfish, once brought to the top, is inflated and helpless. His one hope is in the razor-edges of the coral, and well he knows how to turn these, where available, to account. If he is caught, it is because he has inadvertently wandered far from his natural defences, and cannot risk a sudden haul from above by an attempt to regain them. A ponderous perch-like fish, he is known in many southern and sub-tropical seas, and is a favourite object of sport, like his ally, the grouper, all round the Australian coasts.

It is just possible, of course, to reckon too securely on this helplessness of jewfish when hauled to the surface, for an occasional captive may put forth exceptional efforts to regain its liberty. Thus, I recollect a case in which one of 300 lb. was lost by a lady through too great reliance on this usual collapse, for the fish was made fast by the line close alongside the boat, and was being towed ashore, when it made a sudden dash for freedom and went down like a stone.

Like most of the other great fish of those waters, the jewfish is troubled with suckers, and in the photograph facing this page may be seen a sucker of about 1 lb. adhering to the side of a 400-lb. jewfish. So close do these uninvited guests cling by means of their sucking apparatus on the head, that only a quick leap (which the jewfish, by the way, cannot manage) and a sudden twist in the air dislodges them. I have seen sharks leap out of water and throw them off in showers. The only

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thing that will tempt a sucker from its comfortable position is a small and suitable bait dangled near it. Thus lured, it will frequently swim away from its host, and allow itself to be caught.

The scales of the jewfish are somewhat curiously formed, and those of sufficiently active imagination profess to see in the centre of each an accurate and unmistakable full length portrait of the Virgin Mary. Many, however, will, I venture to predict, look for this in vain.

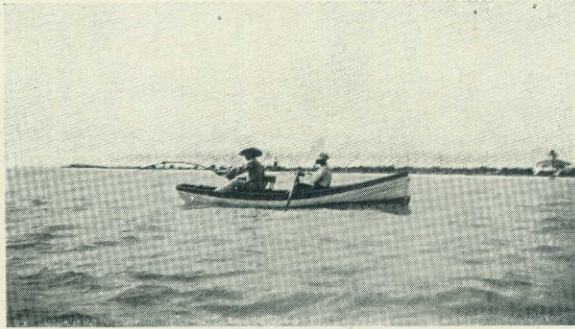
Before quitting the subject of the many successes achieved by women on those hunting grounds, I may mention one in which an enormous whip ray was foul-hooked, and the lady obligingly stood on her victim that the camera might do its share. On the whole, fishing in Florida seas may be said to offer thrilling sport to such ladies as are venturesome enough to give it a trial. There is just that spice of danger which sports-women never resent, without the need of prolonged roughing it, that tries them far more than sudden calls on their endurance. As long experience and angling skill are not required, at any rate at present, a lady has on her first outing as good a chance as any one of hooking the record fish of the season, tarpon, jewfish, or shark, as the case may be ; nor is the ordinary work of tarpon fishing, though beyond doubt arduous, such as to alarm any woman of average aptitude for outdoor sport. When you have fairly hooked your tarpon, you sit comfortably back in the armchair, your rod resting in a socket screwed on the thwart or suspended round the waist, and thus you pit your



THE VANQUISHED WHIP RAY.



THE WHIP RAY FIRMLY HARPOONED TURNED HELPLESSLY
ON ITS BACK.



STEADILY THE HOOKED TARPON FOLLOWED THE BOAT
TOWARDS SHORE.



THE CREWS OF SIX BOATS TOWING A HARPOONED WHIP
RAY.

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strength against that of the fish. Your reel carries 200 yards of line, but it is rarely that half of that length is required. Most tarpon fishers bring their fish to the gaff from the boat, but it is far more sportsmanlike to beach them, as they need not then be destroyed.

When this lady foul-hooked the whip ray, it towed her boat about for quite half an hour. She then got rather tired and handed her rod to her husband, who, in the course of another hour's hard fight, could do no more than raise the brute to the top of the water fully thirty yards away from his boat. He then sent along to the man with the harpoon to help him, and next time the ray came to the surface the harpooner had it fast, and it was triumphantly towed ashore by a remarkable procession of boats. Its estimated weight was 500 lb., and this I should regard as not far wide of the mark.

