

CHAPTER VI

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RAYs, which are somewhat closely related to the sharks, though so different to the casual observer, are characteristic of all seas, but especially perhaps of the tropical waters of America, where some of them attain to enormous weight. The sting-rays, of which the one depicted in this volume is a variety, armed with formidable serrated spikes at the base of the tail, are in some cases fearsome creatures, while many of the family are provided with the means of numbing their victims with an electric discharge. The whip ray, however, though carrying spikes above the tail, is a harmless and indeed beautiful creature. At the same time, its frantic leaps when driven wild by the suckers that adhere to its disc are sufficiently alarming to those unaccustomed to its ways.

To see a kite-shaped creature with a long and whip-like

Giant Fish of Florida

tail leaping high in the air, then merely touching the water again like a ricocheting shell and again soaring aloft, a series of such leaps taking it quite a hundred yards over the surface, is, to say the least of it, a novel spectacle to those just out from Europe, the seas of which do not afford these apparitions. It is as if the monster fish were suddenly tenanted by the wandering spirit of a defunct kangaroo, and when it is added that its aerial leaps often bring it quite close to the boats—though I do not remember hearing of a single case in which it actually jumped into one—it will be seen that there is some excuse for the occasional signs of alarm evoked by its sudden appearance. The splash with which it regains the water can, on still days, be heard quite a mile away.

The swimming action of these great rays is very beautiful, displaying all the graceful undulating movements so characteristic of the shark tribe, which go so far towards mitigating the repulsive appearance of some of them. There is always this striking contrast between the live and dead shark ; the one, though endowed with instincts that can never commend it to our goodwill, is yet a very lithe and graceful robber ; the other, deprived of all life and movement, shows only the vices with none of the redeeming beauty.

A more characteristic pose of the rays, however, is that of lying motionless, or, at most, with its disc slightly undulating with respiration, on the sand just under water. Sometimes, indeed, they are found lying a yard or so above low-water mark in pits

Giant Fish of Florida

of their own making, and it is in such positions that they may be particularly dangerous, through no fault of their own, to the too eager surf-fisherman who wades bare-footed in the muddy water, careless of such risks. The whip rays seem of wide distribution under a variety of names, and a striped species has been taken on the Irish coasts. It would be difficult to know what use the delicate tail—usually stripped bare of its skin an inch from the tip—can be to this fish. The armament of spikes at the base can be erected at will, and the fish is able to bend up its back, much after the fashion of the scorpion, so as to bring them to bear on enemies attacking it in front. Each spike is serrated, its innumerable small points setting inwards, and the whole is enveloped in a skin so thin as to be ruptured by the mere act of withdrawing it from some body into which the fearful weapon has been thrust. My own impression is that portions of this skin remain in the wound, and set up that local poisoning that gives to such an act of aggression the popular name of "stinging."

There are even larger rays on that coast than the whip ray. The giant ray, for instance, is one of the largest of existing fishes, and specimens have been captured measuring as much as twenty feet across the "wings." Indeed, the Spanish and half-caste pearl divers call this ghoulish monster the "blanket," from a fixed belief (though no one can have survived to tell the tale) that it envelops its victims as in a blanket, and then devours them at leisure. This sobriquet

Giant Fish of Florida

survives in the adopted scientific name of Manta. It appears to me that such a diet is against all probability, if we may judge by the food of most of the order, but these men are firmly convinced that the giant ray, or, as it is also not inappropriately called, devil-fish, is an inveterate enemy to man, and they at least earn the right to an opinion on dangers to which they alone are constantly exposed.

The proper way to capture these creatures, if any one cares about an occasional hour's excitement, is with the harpoon. As for catching them on the rod, it is only done by foul hooking, and it merely strains the arms and tackle in what cannot be described as a very good cause. Harpooning, however, may be really exciting, and I will try to describe such an adventure to the best of my recollection.

You take the harpoon and get your guide to row you along the shore northwards. Standing in the bows, behind the neatly coiled harpoon line, you keep a sharp lookout for game, and very soon you see a mighty disc lying on the sand at no great depth. Poising the harpoon in the air, you let drive at the object of your desires ; it vanishes in a trailing cloud of sand, and you have an opportunity of seeing how poor a shot you made by insufficient allowance for refraction, which, of course, distorts the size, shape, and position of objects under water ; and, as you assure yourself that in this case the harpoon went a good five feet ahead of the fish, you resolve to study the position of the next more accurately.

Giant Fish of Florida

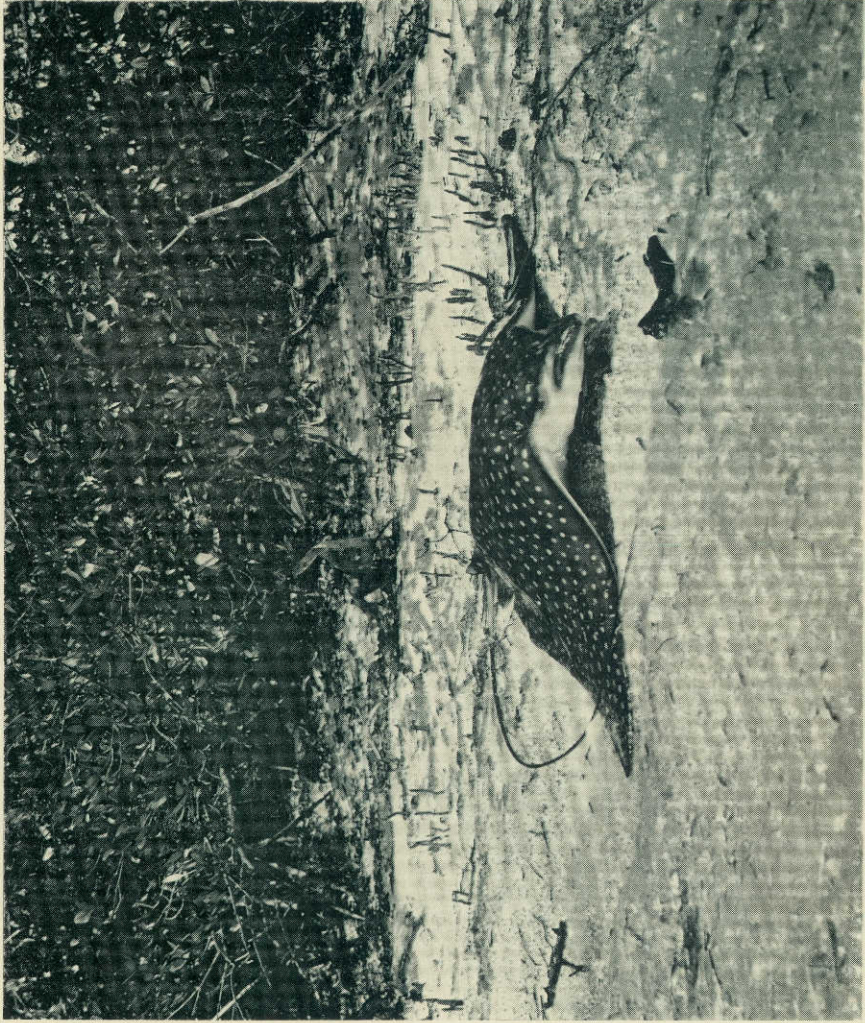
Look out ! Here is a long, dark object coming straight at you. It is a shark. Let him have it right in the neck. That is better. The harpoon has struck this time. Habet ! Only the weapon has entered near the tail, not within four feet of the spot you thought to reach. You have to keep the rope close to the bow, or the brute may capsize you. But the harpoon has come away, and you coil the rope for the next comer. There is a sting ray right under your boat. No calculation necessary this time. You strike it fair in the centre. Be careful how you handle it, for should it get its spike into you, you will remember the wrenching out of the barbs.

All ready again ! See that dark patch a hundred yards ahead ! It is a whip ray, weighing perhaps 400 lb. How gracefully it flies beneath the water ! You take careful note of its bearings, and reckon that it lies about seven feet deep and perhaps seventeen feet ahead. This means that the centre of the fish is some nine feet nearer to you than appears to be the case. Good ! You threw too far again, but the ray is struck near the head, and you will get some sport anyhow.

The infuriated fish tows the boat in all directions. It is too heavy to haul in, and must be got ashore. This is not very difficult, for you let it run free when heading in that direction, and check it when making a move for deeper water. At last it is beached. There is no occasion to cut out the harpoon, for all you need do is to thrust in your finger and press up the barb on either side, and it comes away at once.

Giant Fish of Florida

As a trophy, the back of this ray, with its black ground and small white rings within larger ones, characteristic of old fish, makes a handsome table cover. The tail is about six feet in length, and less in thickness than a cedar pencil, and at its base are three or four barbed spears. It feeds entirely on crustacea, never taking a fish bait, and is caught only by foul hooking. In the roof of the whip ray's mouth will be seen a series of processes like corrugated grinding stones; and there is a corresponding series on the lower jaw. It is between these that the shell fish are thoroughly triturated. I have somewhere read that the male rays have sharper teeth and no grinding arrangement, but I am not sufficiently acquainted with the sex distinctions to bear this out.



A STRANDED WHIP RAY.

