

CHAPTER VII

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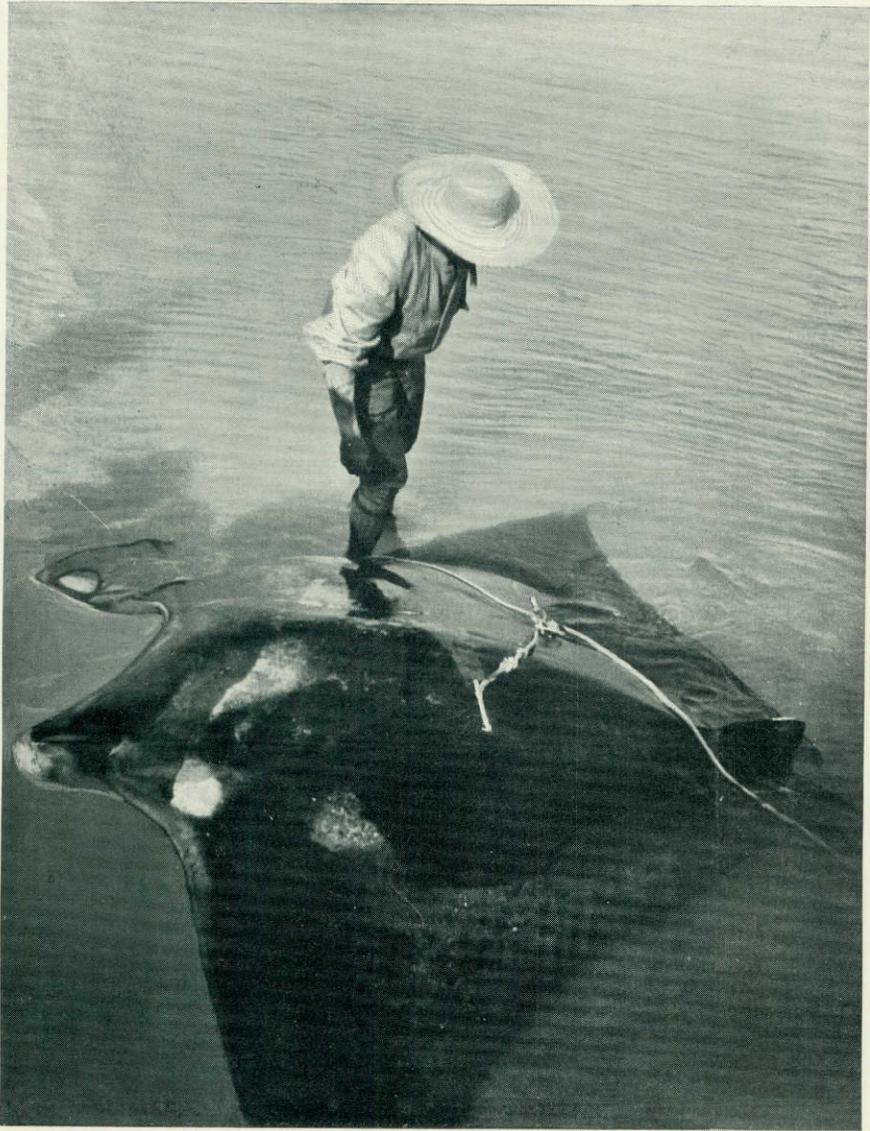
I REMEMBER another exciting adventure, which resulted in the capture of a giant ray, weighing many hundred pounds. The wind had just gone to the south after many days of cold northers, and, whereas it would require several days of such wind to bring the tarpon back to a feeding humour, this first breath from the south was sufficient to stir up a long line of foam and slush that means food to the devil-fish. Twenty feet and upwards across these monsters may measure, and they have been taken weighing over 4,000 lb. In the corners of the mouth, which gapes like a letter-box, are coiled fans that are used in waving the food into the throat. Three of these devil-fish we saw on the day in question, coming along and raising breakers as if they were steam-propelled rafts. With the tips of their great wings

Giant Fish of Florida

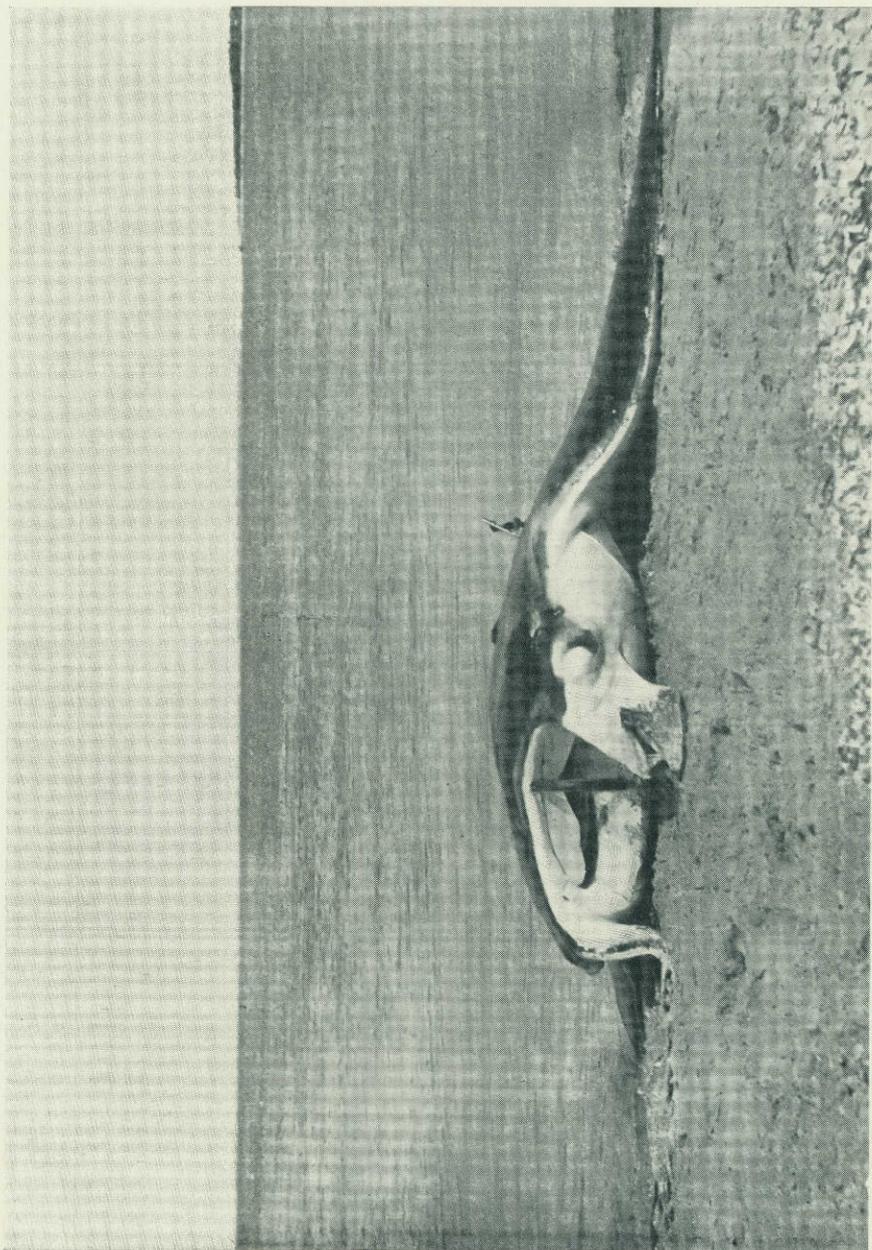
occasionally showing, and their huge shining black backs continually appearing above the surface, they looked very terrible.

In full pursuit was the man with the harpoon, who had been waiting such a chance for weeks. And now, as we can plainly see, he is close to this moving line of flesh. Whiz goes the harpoon, hurled by a strong and practised arm ; not only the metal head, but also the shaft is deeply buried in that three-foot slab of flesh, and the maddened monster bounds off with lightning speed. The next moment the man changes places with his guide, no easy proceeding in a slender 14ft. craft, but it is necessary that he should do so, for he killed a devil-fish alone not a month since, and the skin has not yet grown again on his raw hands. Ere the boat has got properly under way a loose bight of rope catches the guide round the leg, and flings him into the gunwale ; there is plenty of way on now, and a dangerous list into the bargain as the bow dips under water. The man rushes, knife in hand, to his guide's assistance, but the latter succeeds with great dexterity in freeing himself from the coils, and there is no need to cut loose.

And now the pace grows fast and furious. Eighty feet of line are out, waves are flying from the bow, and the boat speeds so that no launch in Florida could catch her. The great fish is close to the bottom, and suddenly shifts its course. This manœuvre is like to cost it dear, for it enables six



A HARPOONED DEVIL FISH IN SHALLOW WATER.



A HARPOONED DEVIL FISH, WEIGHING ABOUT 2000 POUNDS, WITH THE JAWS PROPPED OPEN.

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other boats, which had already stopped fishing, to join in the chase, to cut off a corner and hitch on to the circling harpoon boat. A seventh boat from the fishing grounds has failed to make connection, and, before the day is over, others will wish they had done likewise.

On, and ever on, speeds this extraordinary procession, the like of which was surely never seen under other circumstances, propelled by an unseen power to an unknown destination with a force so great that it makes no account so far of the additional strain on its resources. Some have tried to back water as a check on the runaway, and have for their pains been almost thrown out of the boats and had the oars torn from their hands. Onward they tear, the great fish keeping carefully in the deep channel-way, and avoiding treacherous shallows on its unrestrained course to the open sea. When the ray has thus run for five miles, it quite suddenly doubles on its course, with the surprising and discomforting result that the seven boats are tied in a knot. Quickly they will have to extricate themselves, else, as it is impossible to go full speed ahead in that formation, over they must go.

The pace gradually slackens during the next three miles, and at last all oars are shipped and the guides back water. This is not without its effect on the "devil," who promptly heads again for the open sea, and moves on until the shore is but a streak on the horizon. Anxious eyes are now

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seeking for the smoke of the steamer that they hope will have been sent to their assistance. It is two hours or more since the giant was first harpooned, and it is tiring sufficiently to allow of its being brought now and again to the surface to receive a Winchester bullet or two in its spine. Its mighty wings still flap, however, and it is like some great unwieldy water bird for ever struggling onwards. And now the welcome smoke can just be seen in the distance, though it will take the steamer a good hour to reach the ground, and goodness knows how many hours to tow such a flotilla home.

Only two hours of daylight remain, and one of these is well nigh gone ere the steamer comes along, and promptly crashes into the somewhat erratic harpoon boat, striking her fair amidships, almost the worst disaster of the day. Fortunately she was a nice limp boat with scarce a sound rib in her, and she gave so freely to the sudden blow that little fresh damage was done and she leaked but slightly more than usual. The rest of the day's sport, the slaying and towing ashore of the giant ray, was a matter of time only, yet, curiously enough, when that man went harpooning devil-fish again he went alone. The rest of the company had somehow lost all taste for such weird recreation.