

THE ANGLER'S BATTLE ROYAL:

THE TAKING OF THE TARPON.

BY CHARLES F. W. MIELATZ.*

THE man who has caught trout, black bass, or salmon, and has added to this the delight of shore fishing for tautog, bluefish, or striped bass, has many pleasant and exciting contests to remember; but if he should once get fast to a tarpon, all his other fishing experiences—desperate as some of them may have seemed—will be eclipsed in a moment. The keen pleasure he took in recounting them will be gone. He will only remember that it was the tarpon which gave him the "battle royal."

To the trout fisherman wading down the brook, or drifting down the river with dainty tackle and beautiful flies; to the man who skirts the lily pads on quiet lake or broadening river with hellgrammite or phantom minnow; to him who haunts the rapid, and lures the royal salmon to attack some gaudy combination of colour; to him who hies him to the shore to tempt the succulent tautog with crab, or chums for the voracious bluefish, or casts his bait into the swirl of dashing breakers to entice the striped bass—to each of these his first encounter with the Silver King will seem as though he had hooked one of those saucy little tow-boats which busy themselves towing leviathans about a great harbour.

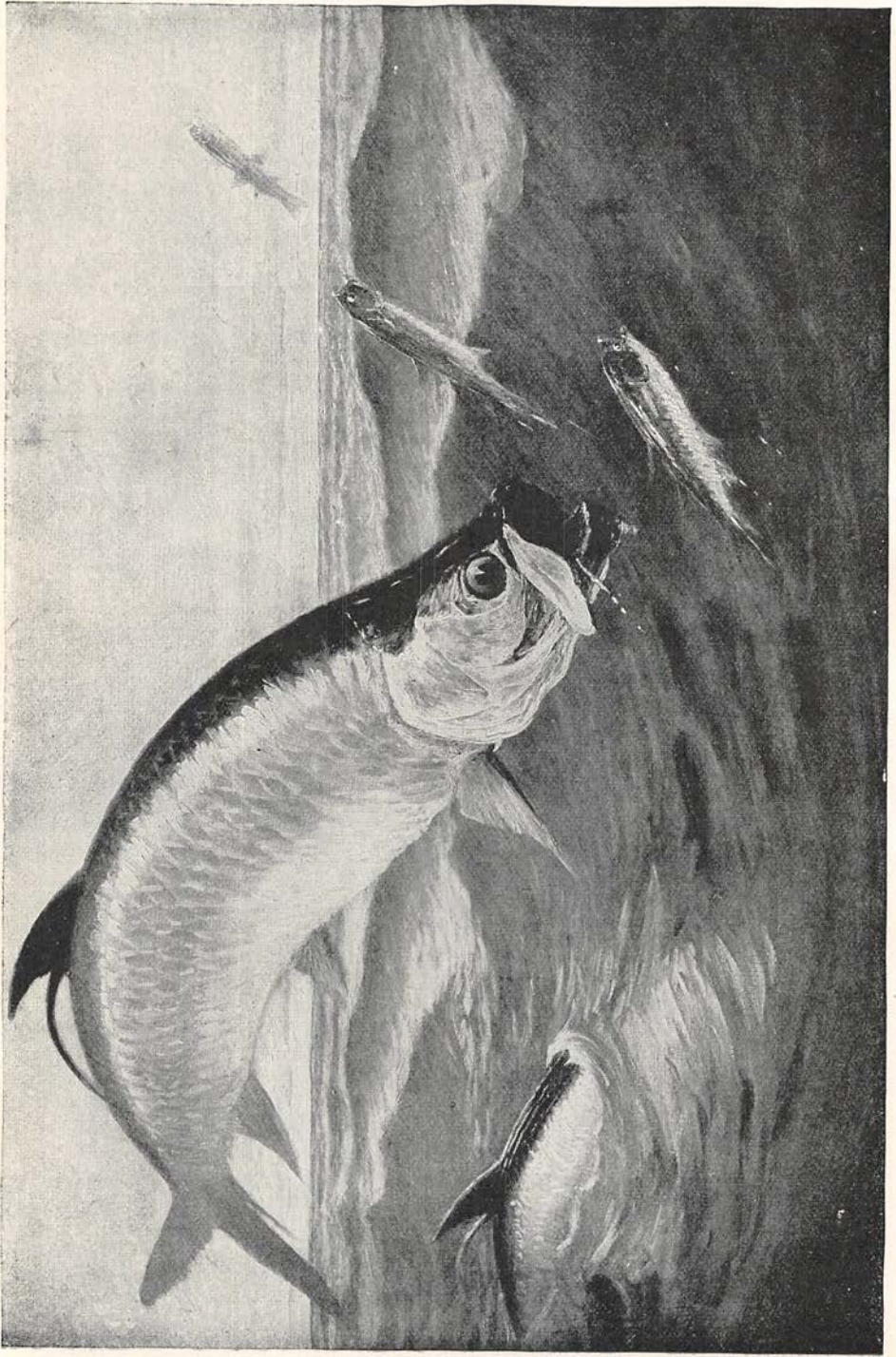
Those true fishermen who have killed only small fish, especially those who have confined their labours to fresh water, will regard tarpon tackle as altogether too heavy for any kind of fishing. They will look at it, handle it, and then tell you that they believe in giving the fish a fair chance for his life—that they do not care for just the killing.

It would be interesting to have the opinion of that gentle angler, Izaak Walton, on the subject of tarpon fishing. But it would be more interesting to sit by and enjoy the tussle, to see the look of astonishment that would spread over his benign countenance when he beheld a piscatorial beauty two yards long break water at the end of his tackle. It would surely interrupt his train

of contemplation. For he who hies him after tarpon has no use for shady nooks wherein to sit him down with favourite author and enjoy himself till Fortune smiles on him in an attack upon his lure. The tarpon fisherman must be up and doing.

Time and tide wait for no man, but the tarpon fisherman waits anxiously for the tide. The beginning of the flood is the best time, although the change to the ebb has also afforded good fishing. But the fact is that mullet, the staple article of food for the tarpon, are frequently possessed with a desire to come to inner waters in face of the ebb. This puts an end to fishing for the time being. For when the mullet do appear, the tarpon are at once seized with a desire to kill all in sight. It is an interesting and even exciting spectacle to see a tarpon make preparations for a meal. It is not the kind of sport the fisherman is after, to be sure; but when the tarpon get started on a course of slaughter, it is not a bit of use to fish—better sit by and watch the performance. Tarpon do not make a first attack upon their food with their mouths. They have no teeth, except a roughening on the edges of the lips sharp enough to cut the best line instantly, if it comes in contact with them. They secure their food by striking with their tails, and then turning about to pick up the fish stunned by the blow. When a school of tarpon comes up with a school of mullet, the big fish are so eager to get at their prey that the second rank will often leap clear over the advance line into the thick of the company of mullet, laying about them right and left with their tails, and lashing the water into foam flecked with the blood of the small fry. The mullet, on his side, has been equipped with means of escape, for he is able to make jumps that are remarkable for fish weighing, as he does, from two to three pounds. They spit through the air for fully twenty feet. A curious thing about this great jump is that the mullet make a series of three leaps before stopping. The moment the mullet perceive the second line of tarpon coming

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“The second rank will often leap clear over the advance line.”

over the first, they jump, with an indescribable result.

The most remarkable exhibition of this that it ever was my fortune to witness took place in Biscayne Bay, near Miami. The school of mullet was fully an acre in extent. They went into the air in a mass, followed closely by the tarpon. It was a wonderful sight, and meant a frightful mortality to the mullet, for the tarpon must have killed thousands of them.

Some tarpon enthusiasts fish three tides a day. I have known them to go out as late as ten o'clock at night, if it happened to be moonlight and the tide came right. And, curiously enough, the fish did strike, though very few were killed. The exhibition given by the fish in the phosphorescent water made the experience well worth while.

There is one feature in tarpon fishing that the fisherman has reason to be grateful for. He does not have to sit about and wonder if there are any fish in the water. If weather and tidal conditions are right for fishing, there are always plenty of signs in evidence. The tarpon, like the porpoise, comes to the surface to blow. As the time for the change in the tide approaches, they may be seen in schools and pairs, showing their silvery sides on the crest of a wave for a moment, and then gracefully disappearing.

Some fishermen—the veterans, sometimes, but the new men always—are possessed with a wild desire to try to hook one when they see this preliminary performance. They may be seen frantically urging their boatman, first this way and then that, in the hope of cutting off a school in time to drag their bait before them, or to cast it among them. It is usually a vain effort, however, as the fish seldom begin to feed until the tide actually does turn. As a result of this unseemly haste, it is not unusual to see an impatient fisherman hooked to a jewfish (Warsaw), a follower of the tarpon, just at the time when the fish begin to feed and the propitious moment has arrived. I have seen the agony on his face while he tugged away at his jewfish, when the water all about was alive with tarpon, and a bait could not touch its surface before a fish would be there to take it. In fact, I have had experience myself and know the feeling. Now, it would seem that a jewfish, weighing from one hundred to three hundred pounds, might furnish fairly good sport in itself. But it is not tarpon, and there is nothing more to say.

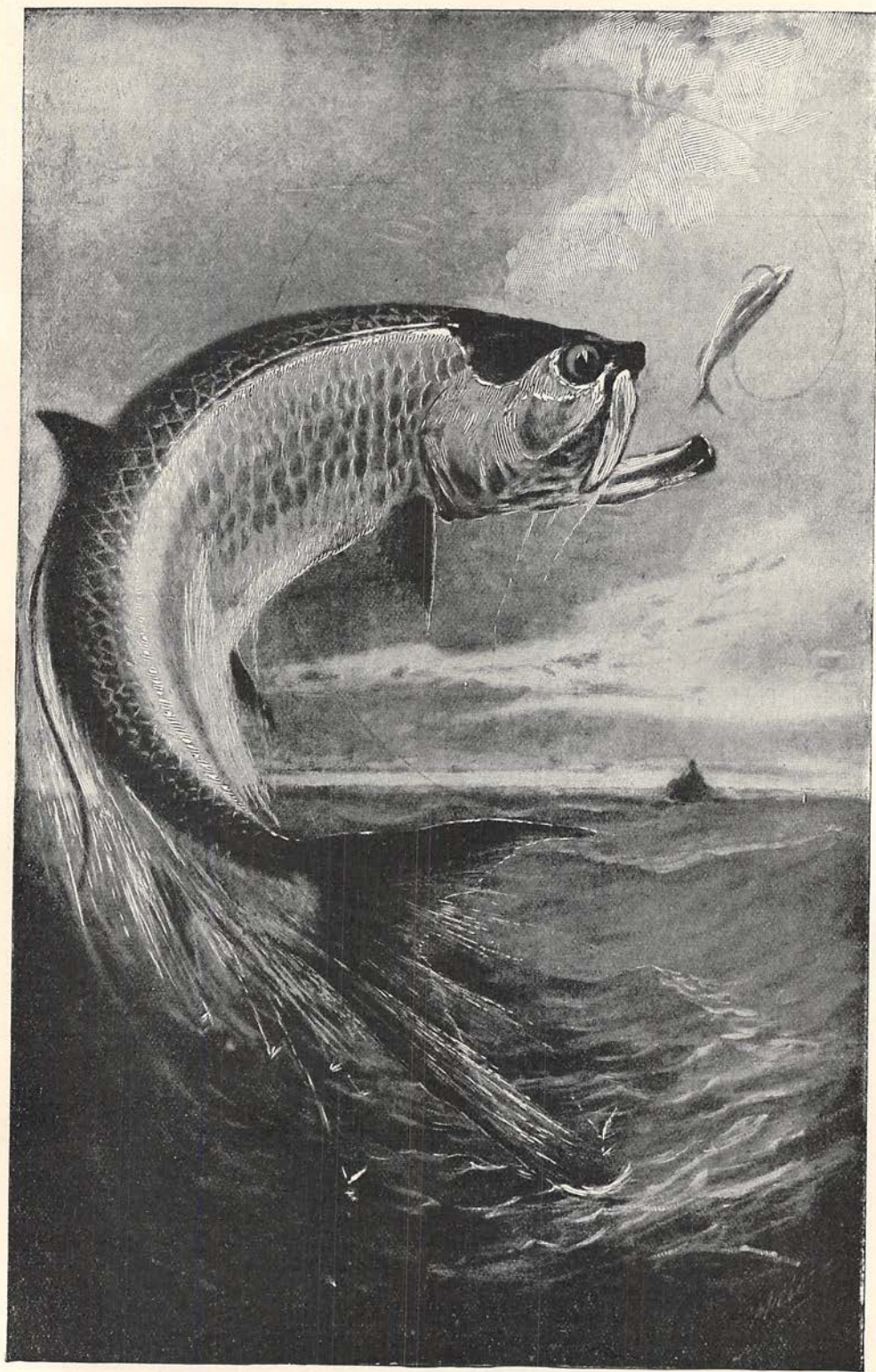
Another thing you will observe about the true fisherman is that there are conditions

under which his tackle counts for nothing. There are others under which he would rather do anything than give it up.

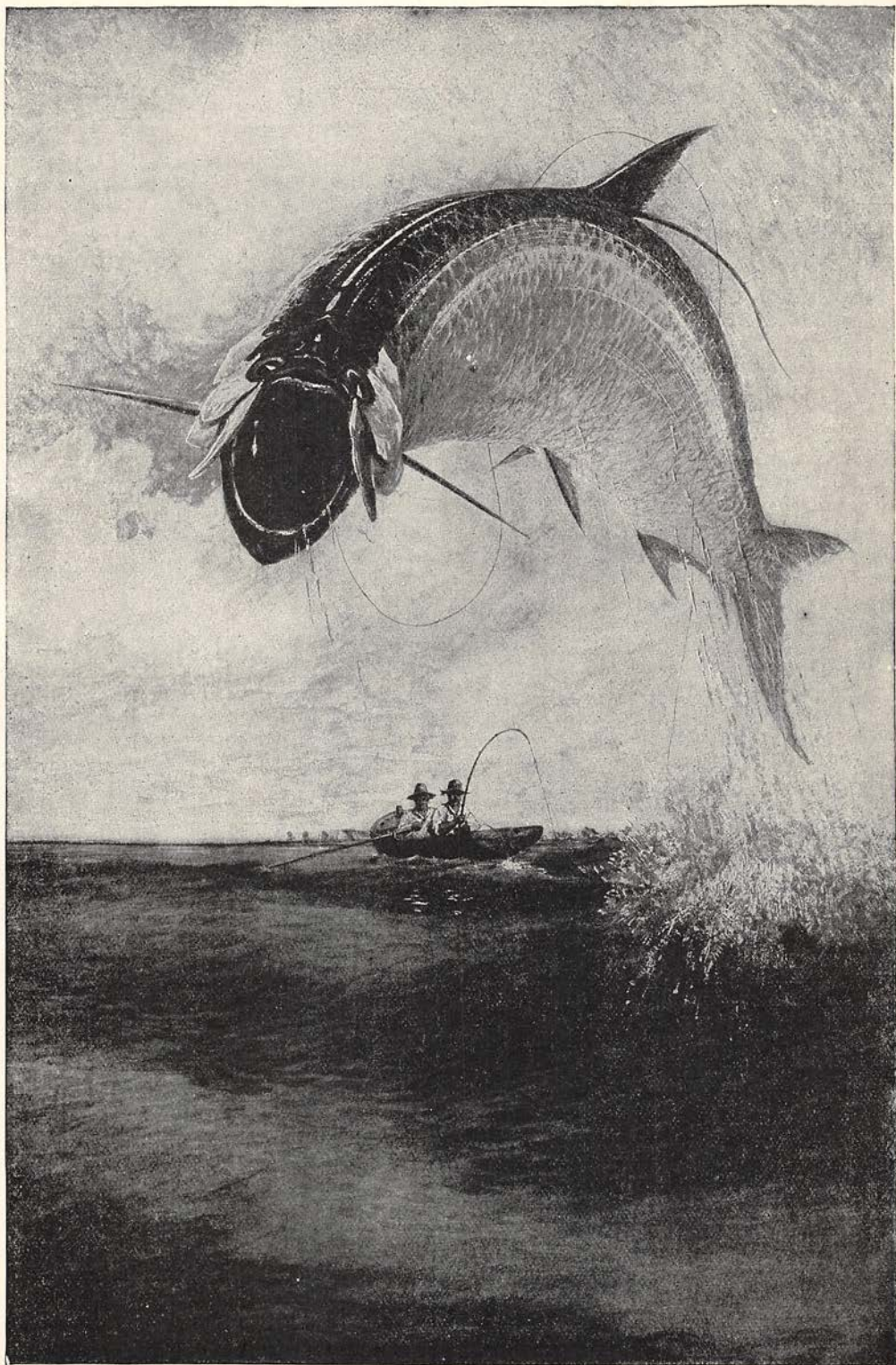
The tarpon fisherman, hooked to a jewfish at a critical time, no matter what his feelings may be in regard to the desire for tarpon, is bound to land that jewfish, and he does. It never once enters his mind that he could cut loose, re-rig, and go after the tarpon. On the other hand, a great deal of tarpon tackle, especially that for still-fishing, is so arranged that if a shark takes the bait, he will cut loose the moment he closes his jaws. This will not worry the fisherman in the least. He simply puts on another snell, thanks his stars that he does not have to fight the shark, and goes on with his fishing.

But let me get back to the turn of the tide, and consider that the fisherman is not impatient—that he has made up his mind to do as his guide tells him, which is, to reserve his ammunition until the proper time. The guide will row him out to the fishing-grounds, where he will see the tarpon rolling about on the undulating surface as though they had not a care in the world. They will come up and blow within arm's length. This was to me perfectly exasperating before I learned the habits of the fish.

But see! there goes one swiftly, giving the surface of the water a sharp slap as he disappears. The tide has turned. Now, if you observe, you will see the fish are moving more quickly in all directions. Here and there one comes clear out of the water. They are feeding, and now is the time to try your luck. You look at your bait, a silvery leather-fish, to see that it is properly fixed to the hook, and cast it, say, forty feet or so astern of the boat, and in a moment you have an embarrassment of riches. Two or three—aye, even half-a-dozen—tarpon rush at your bait. You are so fascinated by their action that you forget to strike until too late. None will be hooked, but your bait does not come back to you; you try again. This time a fish gets the bait. You feel his tremendous blow and set every muscle to hook him. Probably you do. But your leather-fish, hooked through the eyes, has left these useful members on the hook and shunted his body up the line. In a moment there is another strike, but as your unprotected line comes in contact with the tarpon's sharp, rough lips, it parts, and away go hook and snell and fish. The programme of the tarpon fisherman is many strikes, a few hooked, and fewer killed. This is his sport, and he keeps straight on with it. No sooner



"The fish is out of the water, and you see your bait go sailing through the air."



"When the fish, breaking water, is headed away from you."

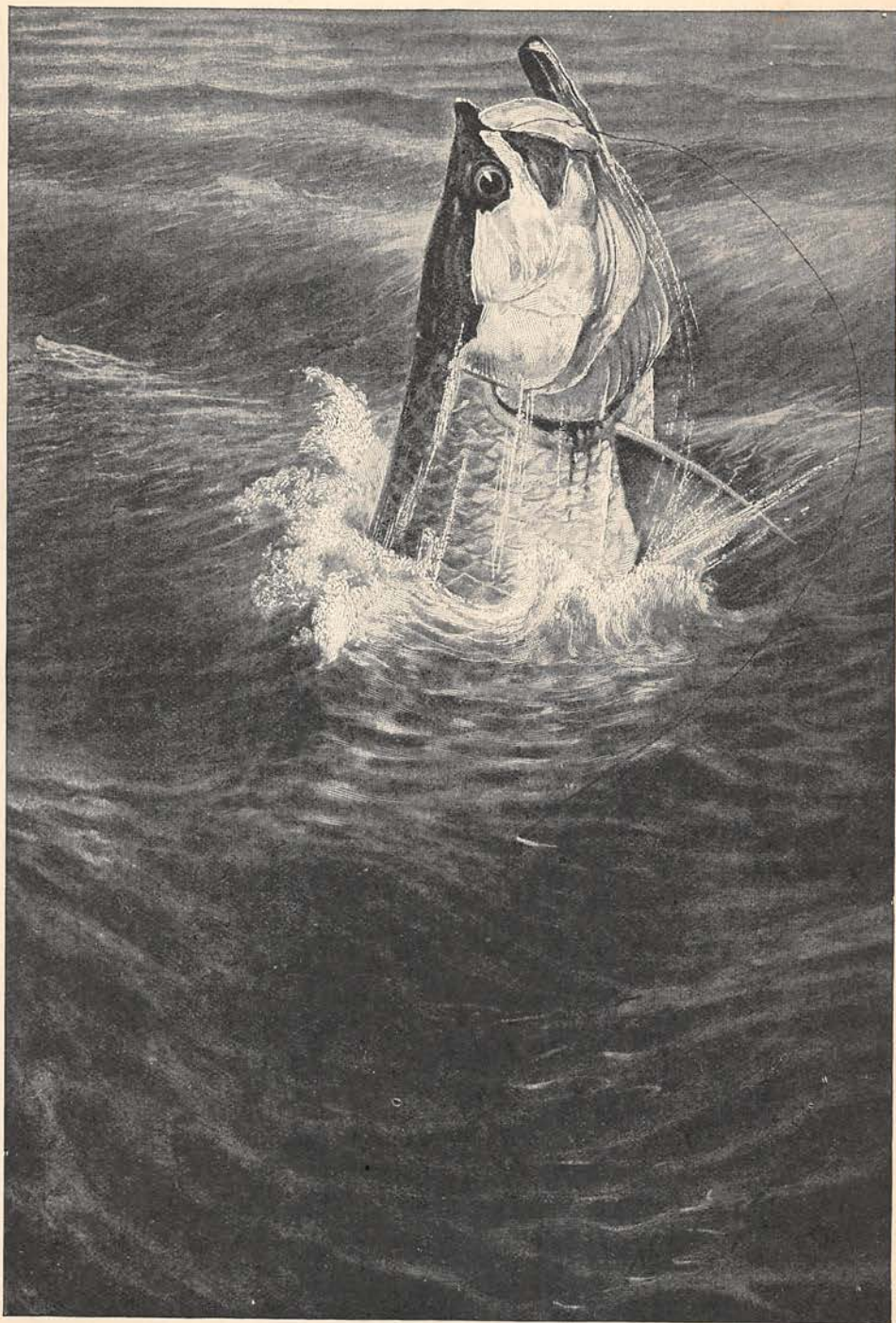
does your bait strike the water again than you feel a sharp rap. On the instant you cannot quite make up your mind whether to strike or not. But the next moment a fish breaks water and goes down immediately over your bait. He has seen it, and it looked so much alive to him that he hit it with his tail, and then simply turned around to pick it up. You are prepared for what is coming, so you brace yourself for the shock.

You feel you have hooked the fish. He goes straight to the bottom, and though you are putting all the pressure you have on your thumb-brake, you cannot stop him. He goes fully seventy-five yards before he shows himself; and when you do get sight of him, you see his back as he shoots out of the water in a tremendous leap, which takes nearly ten yards more of your line. He is going straight away from you, as you sit there pressing every ounce you have in you on the brake, in the hope of stopping him. He is a hundred and fifty yards away before you see him again. You try your best to hold him. The spool on your reel is much reduced by the outgo of line. Every bone and muscle in your arms and hands is aching from the pressure. Your guide in the meantime is backing water towards the fish with all his might. It is no use, however; you cannot do it. He comes out of the water again, as the last of your line goes off the reel with a shriek. At the same time, you feel a violent pull on the rod. As the new strain comes in an entirely different way, the rod is almost out of your hands before you adjust yourself to it. But you do hold it. There is a sharp report like a rifle-shot a short distance away. You look in a gazed way after the fish. You see him jump wildly into the air a couple of times, turning over and over as he falls back into the water, and all is ended.

You feel as though you had had hours of struggle; the muscles in your arms and hands fairly ache; but it has really taken little more than a minute to accomplish all this. It does not profit you to wonder how it came about. It is the kind of thing that happens to the most skilful veterans, and they can explain it no better than can the novice. They will tell you that when the fish, breaking water, is headed away from you, especially when headed towards the open sea, you might as well make up your mind that he will get your line. The fish may be counted as a dead fish, for the friction on the line will cause him to keep up the struggle until his last spark of life goes out.

You simply put on another line or take another rod, and try it again. You trail your bait for some time without any sign of fish, and you are about making up your mind to the fact that fishing is over for that tide, when you suddenly feel the now familiar shock again. In an instant the fish is out of the water, and you see your bait go sailing through the air for a distance of twenty feet. You were caught napping, and you have missed your tarpon. This encourages you to try again. You still see fish breaking water here and there, but it is invariably at the other side of the pass. You chase first one school, then another, all in vain; till, finally, in compassion for your guide, who has been rowing for hours, you decide to stop. But he objects, for he is a keen sportsman and does not want to go in without a fish. So you stick to it a while longer; but at last, after missing another fish, and having a long interval of no signs, you conclude that fishing really is over for that tide, and the guide reluctantly heads the boat for shore.

Thinking of the number of times you have been taken off your guard, you determine to be vigilant as long as your bait is overboard, and you trail it across the pass for the last time. You keep a close watch as you are nearing the shore; and just as you are about to reel in finally, you feel a gentle pull on your line. Being ready, you strike. In fact, you would strike at anything just now. In another moment a mass of iridescent silver shoots into the air and falls back with a crash. Away goes the tarpon. He is hooked, and the battle is on. He does not run the line out fast, but moves around the boat with wonderful speed, and comes out of the water only a short distance away, shaking his head fiercely, and with a defiant expression in his almost human eyes. He dashes first in one direction, then in another, so rapidly that the guide is utterly unable to keep the stern of the boat pointed towards him. At one time he is off at right angles, and again he is right ahead of the boat, so that the line is running out over the bow. He keeps you turning and twisting in a way that is most tiring. The fish has been out of the water three or four times, giving a gymnastic performance of the first order, when down he goes to hunt for deep water. He gets there, too, in spite of all you can do to hold him. Now that he is down, he sulks. You pull and haul and lift with might and main, straining your tackle almost to the breaking-point, but to no purpose. He will not budge. You have gradually



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worked the boat so that it is just over the spot where the tarpon lies—a very bad place for it to be in. As you cannot move him, you begin to think that the fish is off and that your line has caught on something on the bottom. You finally conclude this is a fact. So you slack up to move the boat in another direction with a view to unhooking. This slacking of the line causes the fish to move. You put the strain on again at once, and he seems to give a little. Your tired muscles and aching fingers take on a new lease of life, and you go at him. You give him another lift. He comes up a little more. You are surely bringing him to the surface. You are putting in all the power you have. To encourage you and to be prepared for the unexpected—though he does not believe the battle to be half over—the guide makes ready with the gaff. After many pulls and much lifting, till your muscles are numb from the strain, you bring the big fish to the surface. The guide cautiously reaches out with the gaff. You are feeling highly elated, as you swing him slowly within reach, and are all ready to relax with a sigh of relief, when, in a flash, the fish, which has no intention of giving up, is away. In an unguarded moment you are the recipient of a crack on the fingers from the reel-handle that makes you dizzy, and before you recover sufficiently even to think of putting pressure on the brake, the fish has not only gained a hundred yards of line, but has had a breathing spell. Well, you pull yourself together, grit your teeth, and go at him again.

Your guide is now backing towards the fish as rapidly as possible, to get in what line may be had that way before the fish moves again. Working the reel under this reduced pressure limbers you up a bit, and you begin to take notice again. But a hard fight is still before you. The tarpon recovers rapidly and is now as fresh as ever. You reel in until you get a fairly good strain on him, doing it as gently as you possibly can, so as not to alarm him; and then you think

it about time to stir him up a bit. So you give him a “yank.”

He comes out of the water headed straight for the boat—and at the second jump it looks very much as though he were coming aboard. He strikes the water almost under the rod, however, and goes under the boat, out at the other end, and away. In the meantime, you have fully fifty yards of line to take in before you can get a strain on him again. This is no easy task, as your fingers tire more quickly now, and for the next half hour you will accomplish nothing beyond exasperating yourself. But then you begin to feel better. You are getting your second wind. Your fingers may be bleeding and your muscles tired, but you don't mind them. You stir up the fish as often as possible. You get in your line whenever you can, although he runs out lots of it at times. But you do not work as hard in getting it back. In fact, you are acquiring a great deal of knowledge about the sport of tarpon fishing.

At last he begins to weaken. His runs are shorter, his leaps do not lift him from the water—a final effort only brings his head above the surface. With the look of defiance still in his eye, he gives up the battle, and there is nothing more to do but to reel him within reach of the gaff. The guide puts a line through his gills, and you tow him to shore, where he is hauled out before you. What a thing of beauty he is, with his living silver sides, the deep green and gold of his back, and the wonderful iridescence of the underbody!

He measures six feet and ten inches in length, and the scales register one hundred and fifty pounds—just your own weight. As you look at the splendid fellow, a vague feeling of regret comes over you at the thought that such a thing of beauty should be dead. You would gladly give him back his life, for he has given your eye a feast of beauty in magnificent action, and he has called upon all your skill and endurance in The Battle Royal.

