

**In
Search
of
the Silver
King**

In the shallows off Islamorada swims the Tarpon, a fish of strange prehistoric beauty. The Tarpon can weigh more than 150 pounds and its gills are like sharp, flattened plates of dulled steel. When James Fox received a call from his friend, the art critic Robert Hughes, inviting him to fish for the Silver King, he had no idea of the struggle which lay ahead...



ONE MORNING, AT AROUND SIX, the telephone rings in my room in a motel in Islamorada. It's late May and a gale is getting up outside, the warm wind streaming through the palms, the white lines of the tennis courts below still obscured in darkness. "It's unspeakable," says the voice of Robert Hughes

from a few doors down the balcony. "It's a bloody wind tunnel," he says. "We'll fish live bait." And he slams down the phone.

The monotone voice of the TV weather channel has been crackling in my half sleep, recycled every fifteen minutes over still ads of the local marine sup-

pliers. What I'm hearing is heartbreaking. We have three days to fish for the tarpon, and the report – a low pressure front south of Cuba, an opposing system down from Maine – predicts wind and rain. This will be put into perspective by my guide, Captain Bud Grace, as the worst weather for this season for 35

years, which is exactly as long as he's been fishing the flats, the "backcountry" as they call it in this revered little fishopolis, 100 miles down from Miami.

Live bait is nothing like casting with a fly. It's like taking four shots for the green, instead of shooting a hole in one. Tarpon are the mightiest and most exciting and, for their jumping, the most spectacular fish you can catch on light tackle (perhaps on any tackle). You fish them inshore in shallow water, just you and a guide in a small boat. Casting at them with a fly, at 60 or 70 feet, as they ghost across the sandy flats in the green and white water, is the skilful, exhilarating way to fish them; a mixture of fishing and stalking, requiring delicate skills with the line and rod, requiring, theoretically, perfect casting.

You rarely see the salmon or trout that you cast for, but with the tarpon you cast a few feet ahead of its dark form as it suddenly appears out of the shadows and channels. Then if you're lucky, you feel its tremendous power. BOOM is the word always used, the tarpon-speak of the marina bars, the fist smacking upward into the palm to describe the fierce take. Then, whatever your skill, the question is: will your heart stand up to it, to the next few minutes as it flies and plunges, before the muscles settle in for anything from 40 minutes to five hours of struggle with a fish that weighs around 100 or 150lb (the record on a fly is 187lb). You have the same fight with live bait, of course, but it's not much to do with skill

of-the-line purchases on the motel floor: a twelve-weight, nine-foot Sage rod; Marine Phosphorbronze reels in little suede bags; Scientific Anglers Tarpon Taper line, forward weighted and floating; a box of outrageously vulgar flies, of feather and mirror strips of mylar, with little simulated fish eyes made of links from a lamp chain. "Deranged drag queens" is what they look like to him, and since nobody knows why the tarpon takes the fly, they are clearly designed only with other tarpon fly-tiers in mind. All this gear is useless for live bait.

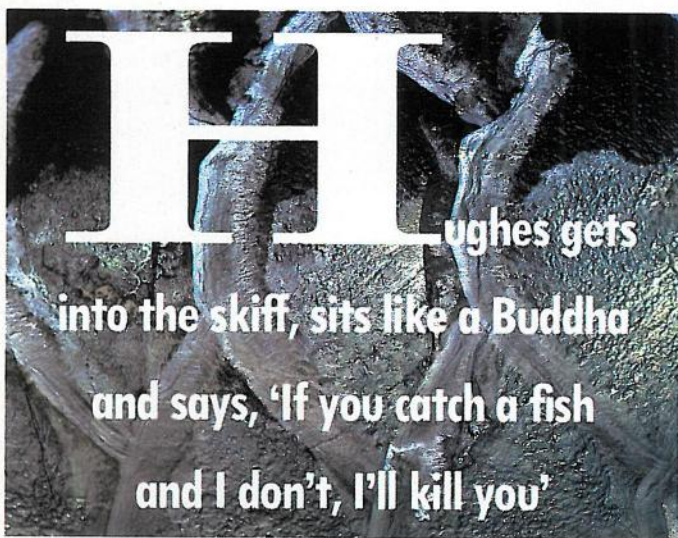
Hughes has also had time — before calling me — to read a chunk of *Double Whammy*, the latest novel by Carl Hiaasen, the reporter from the *Miami Herald* who often writes about corruption in fishing tournaments in Florida. Double Whammy is the name of a lure, used locally. There is also "Beulah's Bush" (black and purple), "Stendhal" (red and black — the literary fly), "Hothead" and "Black Death".

"How's yer casting?" he had asked on the phone from New York, as a form of invitation to this trip. "Can yer double haul? *Double haul*." Evidently not. "You'll have 30 feet of line lying in the boat and you'll have to get it out pretty quick," he said. "When it takes, you'll have something on with the power of an MG, and the eccentric flying habits of a Tiger Moth. It's got jaws like cinder blocks. It's like a giant herring, with enormous scales, this intense silver..." He tells me in detail about double hauling, but I'm not concentrating. I'm on my way to Florida. "See you there, mate."

I knew about this fish because it had helped to break up my grandmother's first marriage in 1912. Her millionaire husband, fresh from Harvard and the Porcellian club, followed only the sporting calendar, usually in a haze of alcohol: Aiken for hunting, Georgia for quails and down to Florida for "Mr Tarpon", as he called it in his affectionate, but doomed letters. In those days it was a trip into the wilderness.

Finally, she could take no more. And wasn't Lord Cowdray, fishing for tarpon in 1910 in Tampico, stranded there for two years when the Mexican revolution broke out?

The obsession and reverence, the *love* that surrounds the tarpon, which is greater than any I have come across, has much to do with its strange prehistoric beauty, its Leviathan looks — the ancient toothless jaw that closes upwards like the ramp of a landing craft, and opens in a Jonah-swallowing square scoop; its large, leopard-like eyes (perhaps the origin of its name



whether the tarpon takes your wriggling mullet, suspended from a cork float and flung out from the skiff.

HUGHES IS A CHRONICALLY early riser, whose prodigious writing output is usually over by 11am, and the combat-ready hours of the Islamorada regime suit him perfectly happily. He has already been shopping for breakfast at 5am, striding to the general store across a darkened Highway One in a T-shirt that says "Andrea Mantegna", laying out his recent top-

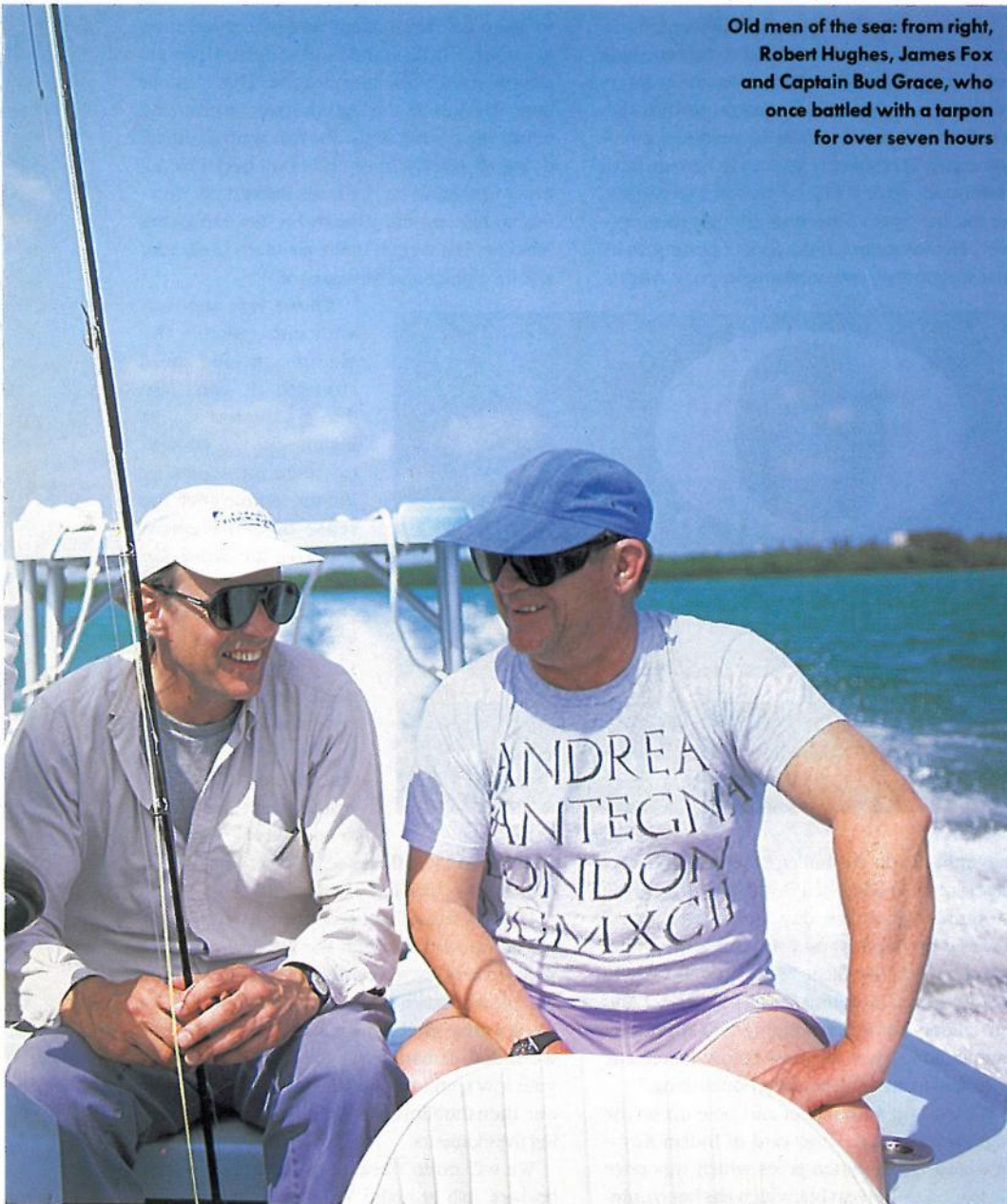
Megalops Atlanticus), whose iris is the colour of old oxidized gold. And the black, black pupil. The thick pearly scales on its back are the size and shape of artichoke leaves and its sides and belly are that intense silver, dazzling in the sun as it leaps, and particularly startling when you fish at night with lights.

Instead of teeth it has a sandpapered mouth. Its gills, which rattle when it leaps, are like flattened plates of dulled steel, so sharp they will slice a 125lb test leader effortlessly if it gets snagged. The sound of a tarpon taking a fly on the surface is a loud pneumatic crack, plus a suction and snap that reminds you of what life is like down there where there are no manners.

The tarpon has *character*, smartness. It's a little spooked, perhaps, by the memory of its bird predators when it was a fry, or by its own predator, the hammerhead shark. And it's no good to eat. You fish them to the boat, cut tackle and release them, by law. The hooks will rust away.

Islamorada is the best place for tarpon up

Old men of the sea: from right, Robert Hughes, James Fox and Captain Bud Grace, who once battled with a tarpon for over seven hours



of term. Who will be the captains, the bullies, the comedians? How soon will I be found out?

A serious cook, although sometimes compulsive with the ingredients, Hughes prepares our breakfast in his self-catering suite along the balcony. It looks as if it might be *oeufs sur le plat* (fried eggs) *au bacon*. The motel room is rattling with adrenalin. As I search his bathroom for shaving cream, which I have left behind, Hughes says, sharply: "You won't find any shaving cream, mate, because I haven't got any." I detect that this is typical of what whingeing pommies bring as extra baggage. The Australian has applied water and steel to the fearlessly articulate jaw just like Crocodile Dundee with his hunting knife.

We have fished together before, racing across the glassy water from Shelter Island to Plum Gut and Block Island Sound on early summer mornings for bluefish, to join the other punters in a haze of gasoline and a bleeping of Hummingbird fish finders. There one morning, my young son discovered what a simile was, when we struck into a plentiful shoal of fish and Hughes exclaimed, reeling up maniacally, "Christ, it's like rats in a bloody basement." But hauling up fighting bluefish requires almost no skill at all.

At the exact hour, with nervous precision, we draw into Bud 'n Mary's, a movie-set marina with Hollywood-size billboard lettering and a fiberglass great white shark creaking in the wind. A tame egret of blinding whiteness and ceramic delicacy is pacing the top of the bait tank picking bits of shrimp. A beautiful young woman, dressed in dirty overalls, is lading out live mullet from her truck into plastic buckets for the guides — a Jessica Lange among a couple of dozen would-be Sam Shepards.

The skiffs, eighteen of them, are suspended on electric winches in their covered stalls along the dock, like a stable of polo ponies — stripped-down craft with 150 horsepower engines and little else except radio. The names of their jockeys are posted up, including my three guides: Captain "Joe" Johannsen, Captain Jack Backus and Captain Bud Grace. In the office I purchase Polaroids without which you cannot see the tarpon underwater. Everyone down here knows Robert Hughes, of course — he's one of the most popular skiff designers in Miami. Hughes has said he's from *Time* magazine, but he's left out that he's its art critic. A guide says, "Hey how's it going?" A woman replies: "Better than the average bimbo, I guess."

In the centre of the yard is a wooden sign that reads "This is Why". It is a dated homily from the days of muscular Christianity and Teddy Roosevelt: "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered with failure than to take ranks with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much because they live in the grey twilight that knows not victory or defeat." Hughes gets into his skiff, sits like a Buddha as they push off and

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH BY DARRELL GARNETT

and down this coast — and one of the best in the world — because of the number and variety of its sandflats. And this is the best time. In the colder months the fish lie off in deeper water south of Key West or in the Gulf of Mexico, feeding on crab and squid. Then in early March they start their northward migration, spawning in the shallow water of the Keys. Islamorada is only four miles from the Gulf Stream, its edge marked by the Alligator light — so that offshore boats put out from here too. The tarpon don't like all this activity — particularly the jetskiers — and are making themselves scarcer as the years go by. "How would you like a Ferrari driving through your living room four times a day?" said one of my guides, indignantly.

ON THE MORNING OF DAY ONE, this day of wind, we are due for check-in at 7 am at Bud 'n Mary's Marina, "The Sportfishing Capital of the World", a mile down the road, where our guides are waiting with their skiffs. The first day



says with equal muscularity in front of the guides: "If you catch a fish and I don't, I'll fucking kill you."

The thrill of these early mornings is the racing at high speed in the damp salty wind towards the fishing grounds. You see the beauty of the soft changing light on the sandbars, the stands of palms on the distant keys, the lines of marking posts curving into the ocean as in the Venetian lagoon. The highway, always visible, becomes tiny, the miniature trucks slipping silently back and forth across the elegant arch of the causeway.

Captain "Joe" Johannsen, a thick-set man in his fifties with Bogart mannerisms, is not interested in bait, and insists on fly, despite the high wind. Nor is he much interested in my shaky credentials as a salmon fisherman. He says, simply, "I prefer salt-water fish. They hit harder. You can get more out of them." When I say I may need practice, he says: "Well, how good is your casting?" He soon finds out.

We haul up on the Gulf side of the highway, the flexible fibreglass pole dug in and bending as it holds the boat against the wind. At first it's a disaster. Unused to the fierce power of this rod and the heavy line, I cast all over the place, tensing up, slapping the water, whipping the monofilament, casting short. In the high wind a back cast swerves and the hook hammers into my back, and sticks in my shirt. I can feel the point on my skin. "You better watch that," says Captain Joe. "These flies are exceedingly sharp."

By 9am my arm is aching. I think I've forgotten how to cast. Then the truth, put politely: "There's something you're doing wrong, Jim." (There is no such name as James in America.) He reminds me: cast economically. Take the line from two inches above the water. Cast back to the stars; forward to the horizon. Let the rod do the work. And *calm down*. In a few minutes I'm casting simply and effectively, 50 feet, 60 feet, the line curling obediently onto the water.

We wait for six hours and see two fish. We talk about thriller writers. He's fished with a few of them – local boys. He is amused that they are famous. "Ross Thomas. Writes fishing articles, right? You say he's famous?" The Bogart smile. He says, "How do you start writing an article like this one you're doing?" I say the conventional way might be a moody lead about the weather, the pressure. Mention Cuba, if you like, but leave out Hemingway. No thee's and thou's. A few minutes later he turns around from staring for tarpon and says, "Page one. It was blowing 25 to 30." I say it's good, truthful. In the afternoon he says, "Frankly, Jim, there's not a lot moving out here," and we head home.

DAY TWO DAWNS, with the wind still howling. Hughes and I both slept badly. He cooked a special dish for breakfast, *oeufs au beurre noir*, the eggs edged with carbonized black lace, the yolks *baveuse*, the English muffins most heavily buttered.

All the guides have strangely different backgrounds. There are rumoured to be renegade coke smugglers in their band from the old days of the cigarette boats. Jack Backus, on the other hand, was a police officer in Seattle, a handsome guy, TJ Hooker type, 41, a fisherman from childhood. After six of his buddies were shot, he felt he "wasn't meeting enough nice people". He was getting tired, too, of putting on all that weaponry every morning to go to work –

reflexes, the fierce attentiveness that you have to acquire for this – and lose the tension and the tarpon shakes free and is gone. Five minutes later, Backus strikes at another tarpon and hands me his rod while the fish is up in the air doing its silvery dance and I pull back instinctively to try and fix the hook instead of "bowing" to him, pointing the rod at him and giving him line. His weight in the air snaps the leader and the tippet and he makes off.

Those few seconds with either fish – the electric power and strength I can feel through the rod against my muscles – is enough to secure my addiction. But the terrible grief, the sense of bereavement and loss, the *depression* I'm nursing would be comic if it weren't impossible to shake off. The worst for these guides is that fishermen talk about it endlessly in a jibberish of self-recrimination which would seem ridiculous to anyone else. It's only

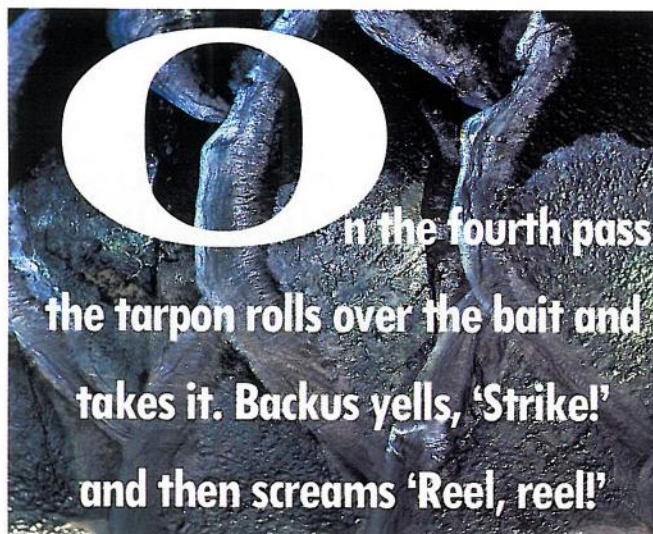
midday, and it's all we see. "This is what I'll call our bad luck day, Jim," says Backus.

Hughes has still not seen a single tarpon and we are moving through the familiar stages of most fishing expeditions. He recalls them for me: the optimism and excitement, followed by the lengthy anecdotal of failure, then the wounded camaraderie, the fear of showing your low spirits in case the other is still holding out, then the slim consolation of merely surviving the elements.

We will go to the canals, we will go to the bridges, fish at night. We could always go to Robbie's Marina down the road, where they swim around beside the dock, semi-tame, eating pinfish out of your hand. Robbie has been feeding them for 20 years and there are around 200 fish down there, many of them around 150lb. They would go for your lure without hesitation, but it's rumoured that Robbie has a night sight on his rifle. Shake your head slowly and say it: Robbie loves those fish.

For wisdom I visit Jimmy Allbright, senior angler and revered guide, now retired, who has fished here longer than anybody. He fished before the war with Hemingway, and more recently with Ted Williams, baseball's greatest ever and now, it is agreed, and also the greatest fly fisherman in the land.

Allbright is tying flies, his forearms the deep colour of tobacco plugs and the texture of leather. His sitting room is adorned with tarponalia, the air filled with the screeching of macaws and parrots. He says he wouldn't even go out in this weather, because of the wind. He also says there are fewer and fewer tarpon



the 9mm pistol, the bulletproof vest, the steel shock-plate, the handcuffs, the knives, and the shotguns. Then one day an armed suspect lowered his window and shot Backus's fellow patrolman in the face. "So I was crouching beside the car shooting it out," he said. "And I'm talking about exchanging 200 rounds of ammunition. I was 20 years before retirement. And I said to myself, I'm going bonefishing."

We load up with mullet and pole up on the edge of a channel, windward of Indian Key – an island of barely ten acres which was once the Dade County seat but which has been uninhabited since the nineteenth century. The light changes rapidly on the water – powdery green, pale yellow, bleached white. At moments the sea is as defined as cultivated land: muddy plough, bright grass, dark fields of kale. It is a brisk morning by Florida standards. Leopard rays are leaping out of the spray, pelicans diving for fish. It is here that I get my first strike at a tarpon, around 8.15.

You quickly know the proximity of a tarpon with live bait – although barracuda can be mistaken for it – by the nervous wriggling of the mullet on the line, which you can feel in the rod, as the fish makes two or three passes at it. On the fourth pass the tarpon rolls over the bait and takes it and Backus yells, "Strike!" and then screams, "Reel, reel!" There are sudden jitters in the boat as if we're under attack. The tarpon, which Backus judges to be around 100lb, leaps and twists, just like a Tiger Moth, and then swims towards me, slacking the line.

I am so mesmerized by its appearance that I don't react fast enough – with the frenzied

about in the daytime now, that they are so "run over" that they have abandoned the shallows, feeding at night and travelling in the Gulf Stream in deep water.

"I never used to hear of tarpon in the Gulf Stream and now you get shoals of 500 sighted by the offshore boats," he said. Soon, he predicted, they'll be very scarce for fishermen — although the population is healthy — whereas in Hemingway's time, he seemed to suggest, the fish would leap into the boat and embrace the writer in its fins whenever he appeared.

FOSSIL REMAINS OF THE TARPON date back 300 million years and suggest that they looked much the same then as they do now. The Seminole Indians of Florida incorporated their great age into one of their oldest myths. Before the arrival of man, as they have it, the Rocky Mountains formed the edge of the continent and were rich in silver mines. The Great Spirit commissioned the tarpon to guard them by swimming up and down in front of their underwater entrances, and rewarded them with silver-plated scales which he permitted them to renew every century by dipping themselves in a spring of liquid silver. As the land expanded, the fish were forced southwards to the Gulf of Mexico and beyond and lost their commission and white men eventually pillaged the unguarded mines. In gratitude, and out of pity, the Great Spirit decided to make the tarpon an eternal gift of their silver armour.

Will the Silver King — as they call it here — rise again on the third day? Or as God said to Job: "Canst thou draw out Leviathan with an hook, or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down?" Hughes is doing something artistic with the eggs, which I judge to be *oeufs miroir* (fried eggs), accompanied by twists of bacon.

The wind has died a little and Captain Bud Grace, 35 years on the flats, ties a blue handkerchief under his eyes to ward off the skin cancer that has already scarred him and guns his skiff alongside the highway, just overtaking the yellow school bus, speeding expertly through narrow avenues of mangroves — slowing for the hidden mud banks. He knows every bay, cut, island and flat in these parts and his expertise is quickly obvious: he has chosen a place off Long Key, half an hour south off Islamorada, on the edge of a bright sandflat, 100 yards from a deep channel, surrounded by dark water so that the sandy area looks like a large stage on which the tarpon must appear.

There are three other boats within sight, all

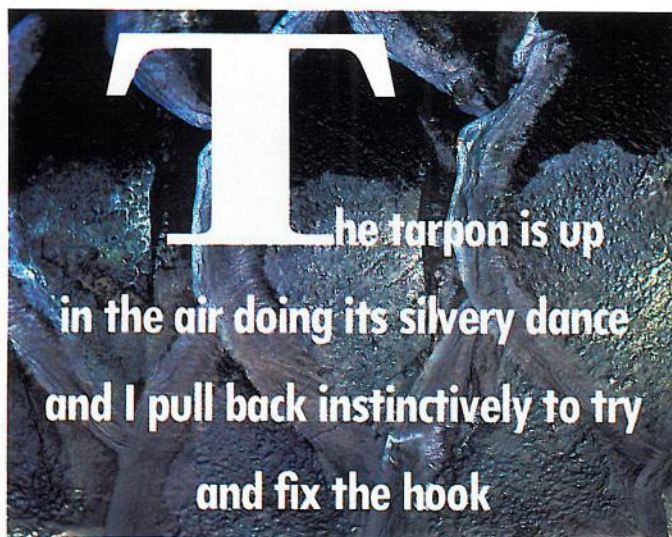
pitching in the wind, but somehow Captain Bud has chosen a spot on this open sea which is calm and sheltered by the surrounding shallowness. He's put on a new line, a bright yellow thirteen weight, forward biased and floating, and has blackened its end with magic marker to reduce the glare. He tries it out, with economical casts, his forearm hardly moving and says: "Yeah, that shoots good. It might feel a little heavy, but it's good in the wind."

Today, finally, I learn the mysteries of the double haul from Bud Grace. "A guy up at Islamorada went to this casting school for five days, cost him \$500," says Bud. "Get a diploma and all that. He came out with this guide and started casting and the guide said, 'You better go and get your money back.'" He is in fits of laughter. "Go and get your money back," he repeats. "Now that was a low blow, wasn't it?"

On the back cast Bud pulls sharply on the line with his left hand, and again just before the forward cast. The line shoots forward at great speed, rattling through the guides. By putting a little extra speed on the line as you cast, it strains the rod and stores and releases a little more kinetic energy. The effect is remarkable, putting another ten feet on the cast, but it needs perfect timing.

There's a good reason to double haul. When the tarpon appears you have 30 feet of line on the floor of the casting deck, and you have to cast quickly. The double haul relieves you of making two or three false casts to get the line out. It saves time.

It was near here once that Bud Grace, with a client, had his longest haul with a tarpon, last-



ing seven hours and 20 minutes, until they lost it under the bridge. For much of that time a hammerhead shark was pursuing the tarpon, driven off by Bud gunning his motor, so that the hammerhead couldn't sense the vibrations of the fish on the line, and even running it off with the pole. "We went for miles across the bay," he said. "When he (the client) went to the Green Turtle that night they had to lift the Martini to his lips."

I'm getting used to spotting tarpon, but my eyes are not nearly as sharp as Bud's, who never takes his eyes off the water. A couple of hours pass. For breakfast he has a Granola bar, and soon after that a plug of Redman chewing tobacco. We talk about hurricanes. A monument in the centre of town commemorates "The 35", as they call that hurricane here. Like all monuments to wars and disasters, it is necessarily misleading. A sandstone *bas-relief* shows the palm trees with their branches blown horizontally — but waving in art nouveau ripples like Ophelia's hair in the lilies. In fact, the wind stripped everything bare, leaving not a mangrove leaf the length of the keys.

It is inscribed to its victims, the residents "and the war veterans" of Islamorada, the suggestion being that the *anciens combattants* had finally been killed in a glorious, separate struggle with the salt water, having failed to achieve glory on their first attempt in Flanders in 1915. Bud remembers Donna in 1960 which, he said, only claimed one life at Islamorada, given the satellite warning. Bud and his friends went 40 miles north, sat in a motel room and played poker all night. "Next day all the bridges were out," he said. "Buck Grundy's wife was the only one lost. It always hits at night. The first thing that goes is the electricity, then the water comes in the door and windows. Well, Buck was alright but they found her body on Club Key, about ten miles back. Only reason they found her was the buzzards were circling."

In the middle of a conversation he suddenly says, "Fish". Then you see the shadows coming out into the sandy arena. They appear in ones or twos, or little schools of five fish, 200 feet away. The sudden excitement has a bad effect on the casting, and this is the first opportunity I have had with the fly: tangling the line, whipping it, treading on it. It took two or three schools coming by to calm down and then even Bud couldn't understand why the fish weren't taking the lure. Often I was casting exactly to the right place. "Come on, you snivelling coward," he growled, then "you dirty rat," as the tarpon slipped away down the channel.

Leopard rays glided through the water — a nurse shark. Bud changed the fly, which looked almost identical to the last one. On the first cast, a tarpon swimming along the edge of the flat in a school of five, took it with a fierce snatch. My rod was high in the air, trying to strike, line floating around in the wind, but I didn't strip fast enough and he shook free. There was one other take, ten minutes later, but this time a moronic, hyperactive barracuda who had been lurking there all day chased the tarpon off the fly. And then suddenly they stopped swimming.

Hughes had craftily booked his guide for a further hour at nightfall, to fish the tarpon with lights on his last night. To be fair he asked me to come. He caught a 40lb tarpon on a jammed reel. I was, of course, pleased for him. He looked so *happy*. **E**