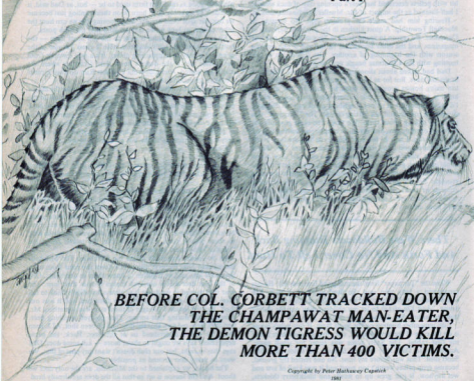


# THE KILLER CATS OF KUMAON

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

Part I



**BEFORE COL. CORBETT TRACKED DOWN  
THE CHAMPAWAT MAN-EATER,  
THE DEMON TIGRESS WOULD KILL  
MORE THAN 400 VICTIMS.**

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The girl's leg, still warm to the touch, lay on the sun-dappled trail, blood gently oozing from just below the knee, where it had been severed as though by the stroke of a sword. At the edge of a small pool a few yards away, red splintered bone and great gouts of gore stained the jungled floor of the mountainous Indian watercourse, seeping into the splayed pug-marks of a tigress.

The man-eating tigress then heard a small sound in the ravine from which she had carried the girl's body. Swiftly, the striped cat gripped the fresh corpse firmly with long fangs, effortlessly bounded up and over a 15-foot-high bank, and carried the body for several more yards. Tucking the half-eaten body under an overhanging rock past a thick stand of hill shrubbery, the tigress turned back, flattened herself low in the brush, and inched up to the edge of the bank overlooking the pool. Silent as a shadow, her only motion the uncontrolled twitch of her hidden tail, she watched through the cover as a man stepped slowly into view. The steel muscles of her hind legs bunched in anticipation as her curved talons gripped the earth for a spring onto the hunter below.

Jim Corbett had been following for nearly a mile, carefully tracking from the coagulating pool of blood and broken

blue beads that marked the place of the kill. He was alone; the hill man who had started with him on the blood trail now perched in terror back up the mountain on the highest rock he could find. Corbett stopped at the blood stains and carefully glanced all about him, unmindful of the hard eyes that watched him. Cautiously, he stepped forward, fascinated by the youthful severed leg at the water's edge. He was now almost in reach of the tigress' coming charge. But something raised the hackles on his sweat-wet neck. It was the old feeling. He was being watched.

The tigress sensed his tension, seeing the hated stick that smelled of iron in his hands swing in her direction. He knew she was there. The ambush was ruined. As she turned back from the bank to her kill, a small clod of earth trickled down the incline and splashed softly into the water. By the time the man could reach the top of the embankment, the Champawat Man-eater, the most successful feline human-killer of all time, had recovered her 436th victim and carried it off into a bewildering maze of rocks and ferns choked with thorn-hooked blackberry plants.

All afternoon, the lone man followed the pug-marks and the heavy blood spoor marking the dozen places the tigress had stopped to feed, only to be forced on, growling in anger, by the hunter's ap-

proach. At last, the deadly game was forced to an end.

Long shadows spiked the slanting rays of the sun, beginning to settle into a fiery nest somewhere past the snagged teeth of the western horizon. Alone and in the dark, Corbett knew he was a dead man, an easy kill for the tigress the hill people of Kumaon call *Shaitan*, the dark spirit.

Returning to the pool of water, Corbett took time to bury the leg of the Hindu girl so that some part of her might be recovered and burned on the *Ghats* and flow from the Ganga Mai — the Mother Ganges — to the sea. Reaching the tall rock with the frightened Indian clinging to it, he found the hill man quite relieved. He had heard the tiger growl many times, but no shot had reached his ears. His main

*Continued on pg. 61*

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## Killer Cats

Continued from pg. 17



worry had been how he would return to his village if the *sahib* had gotten himself eaten.

As the shadows settled deeper into the dead girl's village, Corbett sat smoking, planning for tomorrow. He knew the tigress would finish eating the girl during the night and lie up in the rocky ravine the next day. Perhaps a beat down the valley would give him a shot, forcing the man-eater into his ambush.

There could be very little debate that the great subcontinent of India has suffered through the ages more than any other place on earth under the unrelenting horror of man-eating tigers and leopards. This is hardly to say that the African man-eaters were pussycats; quite to the contrary.

Yet, the psychological impact of man-eating upon a dense population may be quickly realized by reading Peter Benchley's novel, *Jaws*. At least when a man-eating shark is at large in an area one can get out of the water. When, however, a region is under the threat of a man-eating cat, the mere presence of such a creature disrupts the entire culture. Human life cannot continue in a normal manner where a man-eater is operating; crops cannot be planted or harvested in a land already bleakly famous for starvation; wood and water may be gathered only at mortal risk. But, to survive, these risks are taken, and whatever the man-eater may be, tiger or leopard, it thrives on the flesh of those made bold by desperation.

The great predator of Asia, particularly with concern to man, which populates this continent more densely than any other, is the tiger. To the westerner, the impact of this animal over the past 400 years of closely recorded history is almost unimaginable. To quote Richard P. Derr, a recognized expert who wrote a definitive work on this animal, *The World Of The Tiger* (Atheneum, New York, 1966), the tiger is "the monster that for four centuries certainly, and no doubt for very much longer than that, has darkened with terror the lives of millions of Indian villagers. . . . In terms of human misery it was the constant suspense of being defenseless against a sudden and horrible death by day and night, over a period of months or

even years, that broke the spirit of the villagers, rather than the actual number of deaths among them, although the latter were terrible enough."

How many people have tigers eaten throughout their wide range of the last century? The best thinking on the matter, distilled from expert sources, indicates that tigers alone have eaten at least 500,000 Indians and certainly a minimum of one million people over the entire Asian continent in the last four centuries. In the 1800's when man-eating was at its statistical peak, there may have been as many as 800 killer tigers in business at the same time. These conditions existed, particularly in India, until after World War II when tiger populations began to drop quickly, yet the list of victims up until nearly 1950 still numbered some 800 deaths by tiger per year. Even though the tiger is endangered, incidents of man-eating are not especially rare even today.

Considering the vast amount of material that has been written on the natural history of the tiger, I see little point in adding to it here beyond the basic consideration of the world's largest cat as a man-eater, a profession at which he is highly talented. As an organism of carnivorous persuasion, the physical qualities of the tiger are purely awesome. A big male may weigh 550 pounds and several have been recorded at nearly 600 pounds. The biggest was presumably a Siberian snow tiger presented to Nikita Khrushchev in the 1960's. Are you sitting down? Good. It weighed 700 pounds. A tiger's claws may reach four inches long — the better to grab you with — and whereas canine teeth probably average around three inches long, there is one tiger tooth in existence that is five and one-half inches long and three and one-half inches around. Maybe the sabre-tooth isn't extinct after all.

Unlike the more gregarious lion, the tiger is a loner, except during the mating season or when rearing cubs, which may themselves be undertaking on-the-job training under mom if she is a man-eater. According to the literature and experiences of the famous tiger hunters, tigers do not seem inclined toward man-eating unless injured and unable to pursue their usual table fare. Opinions vary, but unlike the irrefutable evidence of lions and leopards just doing what comes naturally when they take to eating folks, the majority of Indian man-eating tigers (and, to some extent, leopards) have been injured and in some way disabled. A high percentage of these cats run afoul of porcupines and get a face or a paw full of barbed quills, which are chewed off short and remain in the body to fester and cripple. Others wounded by trap-guns or native hunters are forced through reduced capacity to people-eating. Obviously, some are just old and decrepit, although even a very broken-down tiger can get the

fatal attention of one hell of a lot of people before cashing in.

Hunting man-eating cats is spooky and exacting business, I can personally assure you, and those that manage to pursue this most dangerous of hunting over a period of years and survive are, by definition, both talented and unquestionably lucky. I am the only one I know who has managed a respectable career based upon the latter consideration alone. But when it comes to India and man-eating cats, there is one name that looms through the legends like an oil tanker in a bathtub: Jim Corbett.

Born in 1875 in the town of Naini Tal in the region known as Kumaon in India's United Provinces, young Jim grew up in the 6000-foot-high mountain country and was a naturally gifted woodsman and hunter. His understanding and knowledge of the wooded *terai* and rocky jumbled chok ravines were rare even for a native *shikari*, or professional hunter. Matter of fact, if there was a white man who grew to know more about tigers, leopards and the many antelopes of that corner of India tucked against the L-shaped western border of Nepal, I haven't heard of him.

Jim Corbett became an official of the Indian Railways in his adulthood; a strange parallel with John Henry Patterson, who shared his occupation, rank, and of course, his man-eaters. Although he had hunted practically since he was old enough to walk and had killed a great number of tigers and leopards, he was really more of a student of the great cats than a hunter of them. A single glance at a three-day-old pug mark and *Sahib* Corbett could conjure out of a smudged track the age, sex, condition, bank balance, middle name and possibly the blood group of the tiger. His passion for logic and progressively conclusive deductions makes him seem to me very much a bush-going Sherlock Holmes (a character, incidentally, reputed by some to have been modeled after a remote relative of mine, Inspector Capstick, once head of Scotland Yard). Corbett's writings are studded with fascinating diagrammatic *ergos* usually stimulated by a mere bent blade of grass or misplaced drop of dew, and escalating into the damndest collection of correct diagnoses east of the Mayo Clinic. He was a fine writer and obviously a most sensitive man, but the one thing his many books give the reader is a feeling for absolute truth. Corbett's personal opinions are labeled as such, but his eye for detail leaves no question as to authenticity.

Over the length of his career, Jim Corbett killed man-eating tigers and leopards that among them accounted for more than 1500 human victims. What is rather statistically amazing but true is that he brought to bag both the highest-scoring tiger and the leopard with the largest recorded number of human kills: the Champawat Tigress and the Panar Leo-



pard, respectively. Between just these two animals there were 836 dead human beings. Try to guess the odds against both Corbett and the two cats being alive at the same time, let alone in the same country.

It's interesting that despite all the man-eating going on at the time, Jim Corbett's first experience of hunting a genuine man-eater was not until 1907 when he was 32 years old. Ominously, this particular animal, the Champawat Man-eater, was the first man-eating feline recorded in Kumaon and the tigress that to this day has never been surpassed in numbers of human victims. It had come from Nepal, driven out of that country by an army of Nepalese sent against it and chased over into India in 1903 (thanks a lot, chaps, but we already have plenty). To its score of 200 people killed in Nepal, it added another 236 during the four years it lived in the Kumaon area of Corbett's homeland. Despite large rewards and heavy hunting pressure, nobody could stem the growing terror of the Champawat Man-eater's depredation, and hundreds of square miles were in a complete funk. After the man considered the best *shikari* in India had failed utterly to connect, Corbett, by virtue of his reputation as a sportsman, was asked to try his hand at killing her. He started his hunt at the village of Pali some 15 miles from Champawat, the namesake of the man-eater.

Five days before Corbett's arrival, a woman gathering leaves from an oak tree had been pulled out of it by the tigress, which grabbed her by the ankles and jerked so hard that the skin of her palms was still hanging shredded from the branch she had grasped. That night and the next two, the tigress had stayed near the village, roaring throughout the darkness hours, completely paralyzing the people with terror. On Corbett's arrival it was all he could do to get them to open up for him, and the amount of human night soil around the doors showed that nobody had budged since the attack. Gaining the villagers' confidence with some fancy shooting of three mountain goats, Corbett talked a few of the bravest men into showing him the scene of the kill, where some bone splinters — all that was left of the woman — were gathered to be cremated.

While at Pali, Corbett heard the tragic story of an incident that had taken place nearby about a year past. Two sisters were out cutting grass when the Champawat tigress, which had been stalking them, sprang and killed the elder of the two. Gripping her body in her jaws, the tigress ran off with the dead woman, the younger sister chasing after the man-eater with a sickle to try to save the older. Before witnesses, she ran screaming behind the tigress for more than 100 yards before the man-eater, which was becoming distraught at such unlikely behavior, dropped the body and charged her pursuer. The younger sister sheared off, and the tigress let her go. But when the woman recovered from her run back in the village, it was discovered that she had lost her power of speech. When Corbett met her, he was told she had not uttered a sound in a year; obviously, a classic case of hysterical shock.

Corbett's first night of what were to be 32 years of man-eater hunting was spent with his back to a tree on the road that ran past the village, which makes one wonder whether or not Mrs. Corbett raised any idiots. Apparently not, because as soon as it was dark, Jim realized just what a handy main course he offered, and although he was too terrified to try to walk back to the village, he kept awake through the night listening to his own chattering teeth. To everybody's amazement, he was still alive at dawn. The next three days he spent chance-hunting in the vicinity until it was clear that the tigress had moved off.

Walking to Champawat, Corbett and the protection of his rifle drew a good crowd of Indian travellers, so that by the time Champawat was reached, the party had grown from eight to 30 men. Several of these hill men had been in another group of 20 men walking together for mutual protection some two months before on this same road. As they told the *sahib*, the terrible sounds of a woman screaming had been heard from the valley below, moving toward them as they huddled on the dirt track. Closer and closer came the agonized shrieks until they gasped to see a tigress come into sight carrying a naked woman by the small of her back, her hair trailing on the ground on one side of the cat and her feet in the dust on the other. In desperation, she beat her chest with her fists, wailing hopelessly for help from God or man. Ignoring the group of men, the tigress calmly walked past, 50 yards away, the shocked people frozen as the poor woman's cries slowly faded in the distance.

Since none of the men was armed, none of them showed any particular enthusiasm for taking the woman away from the man-eating tigress. Shortly thereafter, however, a rescue party with some guns came along and the forces joined. Their large numbers must have been enough to frighten the tigress, for after a mile of noisy following,

the woman was found, uncaten, lying on a flat rock. She had been licked clean by the killer yet was untouched but for the fang holes in her back. It was a piteous scene.

"Beyond licking off all the blood and making her body clean the tiger had not touched her, and, there being no woman in our party, we men averted our faces as we wrapped her body in the lion cloths which one and another gave, for she looked as she lay on her back as one who sleeps, and would awaken in shame when touched."

At Champawat, Corbett presented letters of introduction to the Tahsildar (tax collector), who was more or less the highest authority of the village and environs. The next day, on the Tahsildar's advice, Corbett moved to a *dak* bungalow (a rest home for people traveling on official business) a few miles away in an area where the man-eater had been most active. Bingo! As he stood talking to the tax collector on a hill, a man came running up from the village with news that a girl had just been taken by the tigress. Grabbing his rifle, Corbett ran down the slope and was shown the patch of fresh blood and broken beads where the teenager had been killed. He was amazed that she had been taken so silently, on open ground, from among a dozen people gathering kindling. For these survivors, the only hint of trouble had been a small choking sound made by the girl in the tiger's jaws.

At once picking up the pug-marks and blood spoor, Corbett tracked for half a mile, finding the young woman's clothes. As he observed, "Once again the tigress was carrying a naked woman, but mercifully on this occasion her burden was dead."

The spoor ran over a hill and through a thicket, the thorns of which had snagged several long strands of the dead girl's blue-black hair. Beyond this, a nasty bed of nettles, and as Corbett was trying to see if he could avoid them, he heard someone approaching from behind. It was a frightened old man with a gun, sent by the Tahsildar, of whom he was even more afraid than the tigress. Not wanting to waste time arguing, Corbett had him take off his heavy, noisy boots, and they proceeded painfully through the stinging patch of nettles. As the trail took a hard left turn and the cover grew thicker, the Indian's fear began to interfere with Corbett's concentration. Every few feet the man would grab the *sahib's* arm, swearing that he could hear the tigress only a few feet away. When the pair came to a stand of rocks 30 feet high, Corbett told the man to climb it and wait while he went on alone.

Some distance ahead, he had found the leg by the pool of water, detected the man-eater's presence through a sixth-sense warning, and finally had to give up the chase because of impending darkness. ■