

Jim Corbett thought it could work. As he sat smoking, he examined carefully the land below, noting each feature, planning the feasibility of a beat. Below him lay a natural amphitheatre between the hills. A severe valley cut through, worn by a small stream over eons of patient time. On the far side of the depression, the stream had hit rock and turned from east to north, flowing out of the amphitheatre through a narrow gorge. There were also two hills, one so steep it was unlikely to be climbed by anything less than a bird, the other some two thousand feet of slope with little cover. Slowly the idea took shape. If he could form the line of beaters across the ridge that ran between the stream and the very steep slope, the tigress should be forced from what he guessed to be her present position in a thick wood slightly more than a half-mile per side, to seek the most likely line of escape. This would, logically, be through the gorge. But, how to get the terrified men to leave the safety of their homes to beat drums and throw rocks to drive a tiger? It would take a big party to beat the hillside effectively. But, then, perhaps the Tahsildar had powers of persuasion...

The next morning at ten o'clock, the Tahsildar and one other man showed up at Corbett's bungalow. The hunter's heart sank. Then, as he watched with growing admiration for the tax collector's persuasion, a small army of men armed with an astounding collection of derelict firearms, drums, horns and gongs began to stream up the hill until, by noon, they were only two short of three hundred beaters. Considering their abject fear of the tiger, it was a brave showing indeed.

The Tahsildar had declared a full amnesty on the highly illegal guns, which had been dug up from hut floors and collected from hollow trees; he had gone even further by agreeing to supply ammunition for those who had none. Of course, the value of the guns was in their noise effect, and there was little doubt that they would finish the day doing far more harm to their owners and other beaters than they ever would the tigress. For this reason the Tahsildar decided to go with Corbett rather than risk picking a chunk of burst gunbarrel out of his skull from one of the old pieces. When at last the whole crew was assembled, Corbett addressed them, giving his instructions after walking them to the ridge where the dead girl's skirt was still fluttering with lonely pathos in the mountain breeze. The beaters should form a line across the top of the hill, giving Corbett and the Tahsildar time to get across into position on the opposite hill. When Corbett waved his handkerchief from the slope well below a lightning-struck pine, they should start the beat with a burst of gunfire and all the noise they could manage. It was by no means a classic tiger beat, as the men were

# THE KILLER OF

## When Corbett Came Face-To-Face He Held An Empty



Photo by Leonard Lee Bar

# CATS KUMLAON

**With The Champawat Tigress,  
Rifle. By Peter Hathaway Capstick Part II**



not to move down the valley but rely on their stationary racket at the head to move the man-eater. It would have to be enough; to enter the jungle valley would be suicide.

Corbett and the Tahsildar started off, assured that everybody understood his instructions, skirting wide around the valley and descending to the pine tree. At this point, the Indian, who was getting blisters from his patent leather shoes, begged a halt to take them off. As he sat down to do so, the beaters took it for the signal, and the amphitheatre rocked with gunfire, horn blasts, shouts and rolling, bouncing rocks crashing down the slopes into the jungle below.

Too much, too early.

Corbett was fully 150 yards from the place where he intended to ambush the tigress, a lunar landscape nightmare of steep, broken rock and scree. Nonetheless, he took the run at full speed, desperate he would miss the chance. Only his hill breeding let him reach a patch of two-foot-high grass near the gorge, heaving for breath, his neck yet unbroken. The grass would have to do, he quickly concluded, sitting down and keeping absolutely still, with half his body hidden. As any experienced sportsman knows, it is motion that betrays, not color. He took a deep, steady breath. If she was coming, it would be soon.

At the head of the valley, the beaters were going absolutely mad, a good sign they had caught sight of the man-eater. Suddenly, Corbett saw a flicker of tawny, striped motion as the Champawat tigress came into view, bounding down the slope to the hunter's right front, some 300 yards away. Corbett snicked the safety off his express rifle. It was going to work. She was headed for the gorge.

Two distinct shots boomed and echoed up the hillside. God! No! The damn fool Tahsildar had emptied both barrels of his decrepit shotgun at the man-eater as she passed, far out of range. Instantly the tiger swapped ends, racing back up the hill, straight for the unsuspecting line of beaters. A worthless long range bullet of Corbett's whapped with sterile force into the rocks at the edge of the jungle. Jim Corbett felt sick to his stomach. It wasn't just a failure; it was a disaster. Amy second

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## Killer Cats

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he would hear the shrieks of agony and terror as the big tigress burst from cover and tore mauling and biting through the line of beaters. How many widows would there be tonight because of his bright ideas?

As he held his breath helplessly, he was stunned to hear a roar of guns and voices exploding in joy from the ridge, so loud they made the first seem like whispers. Having heard the two shotgun blasts shortly followed by one shot from the *sahib's* big double gun, they were certain that the tiger had been killed. Startled by the terrific outburst of sound, the tigress again ran down the valley, breaking into the open to Corbett's left and heading straight for the mouth of the gorge. As she hurdled the stream in a single, fluid bound, the .500 modified cordite rifle came up, the front bead nestling coolly in the wide view of the rear sights, Corbett holding low on her shoulder, as the rifle had been sighted in at sea-level and would shoot high in this thin air. As he felt the rear slip and the crunch of recoil from the first barrel, the tigress stopped completely, apparently unhurt. Turning toward the patch of grass, she presented a perfect angle on a left shoulder at about thirty yards, staring straight at Corbett. As the big bullet smashed home, she flinched, but did not go down. Her eyes blazed, ears laid back, the low moan of a snarl built in her throat, as Corbett watched her over the sights, trying to decide how he would handle the charge.

It was quite an interesting problem, you see, because Corbett was completely out of ammunition. Never having thought he would have a chance for more than two shots, he had brought only three, including one extra for an "emergency." The first had been wasted on the long shot up the valley, and the last two spent at thirty yards. Now, it looked as if he would have to pay the price of his indiscretion. For what must have seemed several weeks to Corbett, the most dangerous man-eating cat in the world and the unarmed man looked into each other's eyes across 90 feet of Indian hillsides.

I know you're asking the same, rather obvious question that runs through my mind: Is this guy Corbett nuts? Is he a couple of bubbles off plumb? Who goes man-eating tiger hunting with only three cartridges? Not me, for ever-loving, bloody

damn sure! I wouldn't go to Sunday school without at least 20 rounds, two large knives, one handgun and a pocket full of grenades, if they'd let me. It's easy enough to get yourself a one-way ticket west with any cat, man-eater or not, but to get nailed because you only brought three cartridges would be just too much.

Despite the variety of opinions on the subject, there apparently is a God. Or, by either a function of the deity or a good London gunmaker, the Champawat Man-eater was harder hit than Corbett had expected. She did not charge the man. Instead, she slowly turned, waded the stream and, crossing a tangle of broken rocks, forced herself up a slanting narrow ledge that ran across the front of the very steep hill. Reaching a projecting flat slab, she pulled herself onto its surface and began clawing and biting at a small bush whose windblown seed had taken root in a crack of the slab.

His heart having restarted, Corbett shouted for the Tahsildar, up the slope and under the big pine tree, to bring his gun. Getting a rather involved answer out of which Corbett could only discern the word "feet," he figured the hell with it and ran up the hill, grabbing the slug-loaded shotgun away from the tax collector. As he tore back down the slope and across the stream, toward the tigress on the rock slab, the man-eater stopped ripping up the bush and came toward Corbett. Hardly having glanced at the gun, he went up to within 20 feet of the growling tigress, who was making it pretty clear she did not like him. Lifting the old gun to his shoulder, Corbett was bound to have gotten some idea that it just wasn't his day. As he looked at the breach to be sure it was closed, he noticed a gaping crack some three-eighths of an inch between the barrels and the breech-block. There was no way to know—other than firing it—if it would blow up in his face. If the separation had been caused by the two shots the Tahsildar had pegged at the tigress a few minutes ago, it could well take off Corbett's head as he pulled the trigger. At the very least he ran a grave risk of being permanently blinded by the blow-back of burning gases erupting through the gap. Nonetheless, he lined up the baked potato of a foresight on the center of the tigress' open mouth and squeezed the trigger.

With a great burp of black powder smoke, the old gun fired. Twenty feet away, the tigress swayed and jerked forward, falling in a heap with her head overhanging the edge of the rock. She had probably been dead before the shotgun slug ever hit her. The slug, which barely broke the skin of the right forepaw, had been so ineffective that Corbett later pulled it out with nothing more than his fingernails.

The men from the ridge now came down

with swords, axes, spears and every other form of weapon, hot on the idea of whipping up a bunch of tigerburger. As there were many among the men who had lost wives and children to this same tigress, their enthusiasm can be understood, but Corbett got them calmed down before they could chop the cat into chunks. It would be important, Corbett knew, to show her body to as many of the hill people as possible so that they would know it was the same tiger and that she, unlike the spirit she was supposed to be, was well and truly dead.

Examining the body, Corbett noticed that both canine teeth on the right side of the mouth had been broken off long ago, one all the way down to the socket. Unable to eat her natural prey, she had been forced to take up man-eating. Corbett says that the injury was the result of a bullet wound, but whether there was clear evidence of this or it was mere reasonable surmise is not recorded.

There is an interesting epilogue to the death of the Champawat Man-eater. After the skin was taken, the body was given to the people, who whacked it up into small pieces to carry in lockets as charms to protect the bearer from becoming tiger food. Shortly thereafter, Corbett received a curious little package from the Tahsildar of Champawat. It was a bottle of alcohol containing the fingers of the girl who had been the last victim of the tigress. They had been eaten whole. Corbett sank this pathetic package in a holy lake near a Hindu temple. The girl's head, which had been found severed when the beaters came down the hill, was burned on the exact spot where the tigress had fallen. Somebody, presumably, remembered to dig up the leg.

Leaving Champawat with the skin of the tigress tied over the back of his saddle, Corbett and his men happened to pass the small house just outside Pali Village where the woman lived who had been struck dumb by her experience with the man-eater the year before. Thinking she would like to know that her sister's killer was dead, Corbett went up to the house and spread out the fresh skin on the ground. The dumb woman, hearing her children chattering excitedly, came to the door. The minute she saw the tiger skin, her impediment vanished, and she ran back and forth shouting at the top of her lungs for the village people and her husband to come and see what the *sahib* had brought.

The Champawat tigress was the first of an amazing number of man-eaters Corbett would kill over his 32 year career in Kumaon. Yet if he was lucky beyond the powers of reason not to have become her four hundred and thirty-seventh victim, he would push that luck to the breaking point in his future hunting life, certainly with tigers, but especially with the other great man-eater of India, the leopard. ■