

Upon determining that the leopard had not crossed the suspension bridges across the Alaknanda River, as Jim Corbett thought he might, the hunter had them closed off at night. This was no inconvenience to anybody but the leopard because nobody dared travel anyway. Those nights Corbett was looking for the leopard elsewhere, the bridges were plugged firmly with wicked thorn bushes; the blockage to the bridge at Rudraprayag proper was left open when Corbett was free to keep a vigil. His perch, a slippery, flat rock atop a 20-foot platform supporting the cables, was not one to inspire confidence to other than a member of the Flying Wallenda family. With no handholds, merely reaching this hiding place was a venture of the first order since the

rickety bamboo ladder pressed into service was four feet short of the top. If getting there was all the fun, staying atop the rock in gale-force mountain night wind — the *dudu* — practically guaranteed to keep one in stitches. Several times, roaring gusts of glacier-frozen air almost blew Corbett from the platform onto the broken and jagged rock fangs 60 feet below, from which his crushed body would neatly bounce into the wild torrent of the Alaknanda. For 20 nights he sat alert and freezing on the platform above the river gorge waiting for the leopard he had missed from six feet away. The only animal he ever saw was a lone jackal.

If one thing has struck me in researching and compiling the extraordinary events surrounding Corbett's pursuit of

the Rudraprayag leopard, it must be the truly strange quirks of fate that affect the principal characters, both human and animal. The remarkable nature of close calls on both parts, largely due to the tiniest of factors, almost sets one to wondering whether or not things really are "written" somewhere. Take the case, a few weeks later, when Corbett decided to re-block the Rudraprayag bridge and join forces with William Ibbotson and his men.

Because there wasn't enough room for the whole party in the bungalow, Corbett and his men moved out in favor of Ibbotson and his wife, Jean. Corbett erected his 40-pound canvas tent on a small hill overlooking the pilgrim road. For some unaccountable reason, the shelter was pitched under a huge prickly-

KILLER CATS



Photo by Leonard Lee Rue

pear tree that overhung the thorn shelter or fence around the tent meant to keep the leopard out. Corbett originally had it cut halfway through but changed his mind in the middle of the operation, appreciating that the tree would provide shade during the hot part of the day when he was resting from his night hunts. He must have had a lot on his mind, because by the time he figured out that he had provided a perfect bridge for the cat to get into the enclosure, it was so late at night that he decided to let it go. With six Garhwalis from his staff and a local cook, Corbett went to bed with the top of the tent left open, the bright moonlight bathing the interior of the fence in a soft, silver light.

About midnight, Corbett woke suddenly to the sound of hooked claws

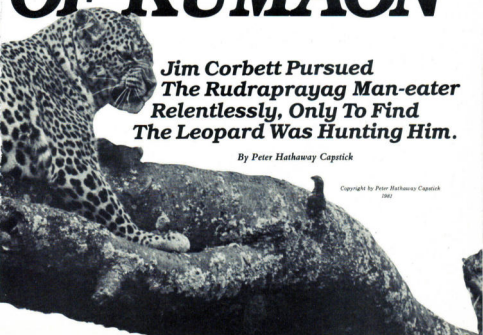
digging into the bark of the tree. Grabbing the loaded rifle at his side on the bed, he swung his feet down and into his slippers just as the prickly pear tree creaked and cracked. There was a howl from the cook — who had been sleeping, snoring on his back — of "*Sahib, Bagh, Bagh!*" Corbett didn't need to be told it was the leopard. Running out of the tent, he just missed getting off a shot as the man-eater scampered away up a hill. Corbett followed for a short distance, but it was clear that the leopard had kept going, out of range. The terrified cook, awakened at the cracking of the partially cut-through tree, had opened his eyes to stare smack into the leopard's face as it was gathering itself to drop down on the sleeping men. What if Corbett hadn't heard the claws?

What if the tree hadn't cracked and unnerved the leopard into running instead of charging? What if? In any case, the tree

Continued on pg. 66

Editor's Note: This is the fourth of a six part series from Peter Capstick's book, Death In The Silent Places, reprinted through special arrangement with St. Martin's Press, Inc. Death In The Silent Places is available from the NRA Book Service, 4620 Lee Highway, Arlington, VA 22207. Copies can be purchased by using order number ASB17095. NRA member's discount price is \$12.55 plus \$3.00 postage and handling.

OF KUMAON



**Jim Corbett Pursued
The Rudraprayag Man-eater
Relentlessly, Only To Find
The Leopard Was Hunting Him.**

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

Copyright by Peter Hathaway Capstick
1981

Killer Cats

Continued from pg. 23

was cut down at dawn, heat be damned.

The next kills of the Rudraprayag leopard were cows, people tending to be very hard to procure. Corbett and Ibbotson sat up over the first kill without success, shifting to a very ingenious blind built inside a large haystack when the leopard struck again, clearly having abandoned the first cow. Again, the most fantastic luck pervaded the scene. All had.

Corbett and Ibbotson had built a double-decked blind in the tall haystack, using planks and wire mesh to create a hay-covered structure identical to the original but containing two platforms, one above the other, for the two hunters to sit on. Corbett took the lower seat with Ibbotson above him. About 10 o'clock on a brilliantly moonlit night, Corbett heard the man-eater coming down a hill behind the blind, then he heard the now familiar rustle of hay as the leopard once more slipped under the blind to look over the kill. He was literally the thickness of one plank away from Corbett. A slow minute oozed by as the hunter waited, his breath held. Then the big, pale cat began to crawl out from under the rick, directly in front of Corbett's gun port, offering a simple shot at about one yard's distance. Just as his moonlit form started to come into view, there was a squeak. Instantly, the leopard ran off to the right and up a hill past the angle where he offered a shot. Ibbotson, who was probably unaware of the cat's presence, had gotten cramps in both legs and had shifted position at the critical second. Kismet? Makes one wonder.

Two more days passed before the leopard killed another cow, but not before scaring its owner nearly to death. The man lived alone in a small hut with one room divided by a rather ramshackle partition of rough planks. One area was for sleeping and the other contained a kitchen — which had been left open. The Garhwali was awakened by a sound across the divider and, sitting up, clearly saw the leopard in shafts of moonlight as it tried to find a way into the bedroom. Pacing the kitchen for over an hour, the man-eater tested each board, trying to tear it loose as the man cowered, soaked in cold sweat, watching helplessly a few feet away. Unable at last to reach the juicy morsel blubbering in terror so near, the leopard walked out of the kitchen and killed the man's cow, which was tethered against the side of the hut.

In an effort to assist the hunters, the government had sent a shooting lamp and a massive double-spring gin trap, the same sort of affair that would have been used for bears in America. A full five feet long, this brute weighed 80 pounds and had springs so powerful that two men were needed to set the jaws — studded with

three-inch teeth — in position. Figuring this would be a very good chance to use it, Corbett and Ibbotson carefully set it on a natural approach to the dead cow, pegging down the chain. That night, the hunters, neither of whom apparently suffered from hayfever, settled down in another rick 20 yards from the cow and began to wait as thick clouds slid in, covering the sky like a manhole cover closing above their heads.

An hour slipped by without event when suddenly both men were startled by a terrific eruption of furious roars near the cow. Aha! At last! Corbett flicked on the shooting light, a heavy battery-operated rig, and saw the leopard jumping madly around, both forelegs caught in the trap. Firing the first barrel of his .450 Express, his bullet neatly cut the half-inch chain, freeing the leopard. As it ran off at phenomenal speed, considering that both front legs were pinned by the heavy trap, he fired and missed; so did Ibbotson with his barrels. As might have been expected, Corbett managed to screw up the electric light while reloading, so it would not work.

This scenario was unfolding in what was practically downtown Rudraprayag. As the villagers heard the four shots, they assumed that the leopard had been killed, and they poured out of their houses shouting their joy, swarming toward the place where the trapped cat had disappeared. No good yelling at them; they were making too much noise to hear anything. Corbett scrambled down from his blind which, incidentally, was in a tree at the edge of a chasm hundreds of feet deep. Ibbotson got a second lamp, a gasoline type, working and lowered it to Corbett. When the second man got down, they went after the man-eater, Corbett with his rifle to his shoulder and Ibbotson carrying a lamp above his head. A very superior way to get killed, if not especially imaginative. Cursing his luck for having shot away the restraining chain, Corbett tried to find some sign of the cat on the rocky, boulder-strewn terrace by the feeble glow of the lantern. A low growl drew his attention to an outcrop of rock and a small depression behind it. There, crouched and snarling, was the leopard. Corbett shot it instantly through the head.

The field went wild with exulting Garhwalis as Corbett examined the body. He didn't know why, but something just wasn't kosher here. It was a huge male leopard, presumably the one that tried to break into the man's bedroom the night before; it had been shot in the center of an area where scores of people had been killed and eaten. It had to be the Rudraprayag leopard. The hill people said they clearly recognized it. Ibbotson was convinced it could be no other. So, why the feeling of doubt? Only that Corbett had seen the man-eater the night he creased its neck with a bullet, and despite the poor light, he simply wasn't convinced

this was the same animal. Persuading Ibbotson not to notify the government for a few days, Corbett tried to get the Garhwalis to keep up their precautions in case he was right. The more people that came from distant villages to see the body, swearing they recognized it, the more positive Ibbotson was. But not Corbett.

That night, as Corbett lay doubting on his pillow, a pale yellow form slipped from shadow to shadow, icy amber eyes locked on the throat of a young mother squatting outside her hut. In a soft rush of motion without the slightest sound, four great fangs crunched home. Crossing the Chatwapi bridge — which had unaccountably been left open — the Man-eater of Rudraprayag had hunted and killed at the first village he came to.

When the girl's husband called to her, the leopard displayed an almost unbelievable show of strength. Carrying the body of a 150-pound girl — she was unusually large for a Garhwali woman — the leopard took her completely across two fields and made a jump straight down a 12-foot ledge to a path. From the clear spoor, despite the fact that the impact of the jump would have increased the gravity of the body by two or three times, he did not let one part of her body touch the ground.

Carrying her another half-mile, the leopard tore off her clothes and ate a few pounds of flesh from both her upper and lower body, leaving the corpse in a patch of brilliant green grass beneath a vine-covered jungle tree. It was here, guarded by 20 men beating drums, that Corbett and Ibbotson were shown her remains the next day. They began to wait for the man-eater to return late that afternoon, under the distinct impression that they were hunting him.

Man-eaters have a most disconcerting way of turning this relationship around. ■

Editor's Note: The next episode of Killer Cats of Kumaon will appear in the April 1982 issue of American Hunter.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Corbett, Jim (James E.). *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946
- . *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948.
- . *The Temple Tiger and More Man-eaters of Kumaon*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- . *Jungle Lore*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- . *Man-Eaters of India* (A Corbett Omnibus). New York: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- Perry, Richard. *The World of the Tiger*. New York: Atheneum, 1966.