



KILLER CATS OF KUMAON

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

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"Leopard Limb" by Gay Cohetnach

Jim Corbett continued to hunt the leopard despite the growing sense of helplessness that gripped him. Several days after the trap incident, he tried enticing the man-eater into range by imitating the mating call. Everything went fine as Corbett sat in a high pine tree, the leopard steadily approaching to within 60 yards. What happened? Another leopard — a genuine female — started calling from the mountain behind Corbett, and the man-eater chose her. As an *ersatz* Jezebel, Corbett was a complete failure.

That Corbett was getting desperate is evidenced by the fact that one night he took himself into the suicidally dangerous idea of waiting on the ground near a dead cow killed by the leopard. It looked like a good chance — a snug place in the hollow at the base of a big rock to shelter him, a bush directly in front for cover, where he was sure he could kill the leopard easily as it came back for the cow, which had been undisturbed.

Slowly the evening wore on without any sign of the cat. As the darkness thickened, Corbett took relief in the dense scattering of very dry leaves all over the area which would clearly indicate the position of the

killing weapon in a triple murder; an old evidence tag was attached to the knife at the time of the purchase.

Corbett's mind raced. Should he stay here blind and deaf for another six hours until light? What would his chances be to cover the 500 yards to the nearest hut? In the end, he realized that with his nerves already frayed from months of flirting with death, he might well be either dead or insane if he stayed. Shouldering the rifle, afraid to use the light for fear of drawing the man-eater, he stumbled his way through the rainy blackness, the knife tight in his white-knuckled fist. To his unspeakable relief, he had made it. The next day, the kill proved to be untouched. Crisp, clear pug-marks showed over his own footprints on the road. Corbett had survived the most terrifying night of his venturesome career with the most dangerous of animals, a night he would admittedly relive in cold, sweating nightmares.

The last human victim of the Man-eater of Rudraprayag was killed on April 14, 1926, a final and classic example of the skill and daring of the animal that had survived for more than eight years of steady man-eating.

A Lucky Shot In The Dark Ends Corbett's Year-Long Vigil Of Frustration And Fear, Stopping The Man-Eater That Claimed 125 Victims.

man-eater for the shooting light taped to his rifle. As the hours dragged by, Corbett became more and more uneasy at the thought that the leopard had seen him settle in at the base of the rock and was waiting for a chance to attack. Moment by moment, he struggled to beat back the rising fear that threatened to burst into unreason and terror. Blacker and blacker became the sky as clouds moved in, and he was forced to rely entirely on the dry leaves to hear the approach of the cat. And, then, the last offense was gone. Heavy rain sluiced down, dampening the leaves and covering any small sound with its own wet noise. Badly frightened, Corbett knew that now would be the time the leopard would choose to come for him. He took off his coat and wrapped it tightly around his neck as protection from the terrible fangs, tying it securely with the sleeves. The rifle was now useless, and Corbett knew it. With grim determination, he shifted it to his left hand and drew his knife, a wicked looking Afridi stabbing dagger he had bought as a curiosity from a deputy commissioner in the North. With three notches in the handle, it had been the

Walking from the small spring at Bhainswara Village that April evening were a widow, her 12-year-old son, her daughter of eight, and a neighbor's boy the same age. Carrying water back to their common-walled, two-storied home, the widow was preceded by the neighbor's son and her daughter, and followed by her own son. In single file, a few feet apart, they proceeded up a long flagstone courtyard to one of a set of short steps used in common by these two families. It was broad daylight still, and when the neighbor boy happened to look into one

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of the ground floor storage rooms of one of the houses, he was not surprised to see what he thought was a large dog lying there. Paying no attention, he said nothing.

The woman was halfway up the steps when she heard the clang of a brass water vessel dropping behind her. Putting down her own pot, she turned around to see what had happened. At the bottom of the stairs was her son's water jug, overturned, but no sign of the child. Going back down the steps, the woman picked it up, looking around for her son. When he did not appear, she thought he had run off to escape punishment for his clumsiness, and she started to call after him. The rest of the neighbors had heard the crash and came out to see what was going on. Because it was now starting to get dark, one old man lit a lantern and began to look around the many storage rooms on the first floor, presuming that was where the boy had gone to hide. In the dull glow of his lamp, he noticed something shiny on the flagstones and bent down next to the widowed mother. His fingers came up red and slick. At the old man's yell of horror the rest of the village pored into the courtyard; one of them was an experienced hunter. Borrowing the lantern, he followed the blood trail out the courtyard, over a low wall, and into the edge of a yam field. Here in the soft dirt were the big tracks of the man-eater. Panic swept the village, although clearly the boy was dead.

It seems almost an axiomatic observation that fate would again intervene to prevent Corbett from being able to kill the leopard over the body of the boy. While the hunter was waiting for the Rudraprayag Man-eater to return to his kill — which he was in the actual act of doing — another male leopard crossed the man-

eater's path and attacked him, a defense of the local cat's territory. As Corbett sat waiting in the dark, he listened to a fantastic battle between the two big males, hoping that somehow the strange leopard would be able to kill the man-eater. No such luck. Although the fight lasted for quite a long time through various stages, the man-eater was driven off and never returned to the body of the boy.

Time was growing short for Corbett, now back with Ibbotson. In addition to the sensation-frenzied press which demanded the death of the man-eater and the removal of Corbett in favor of some other hunter, he was scheduled to be sent on assignment to Africa in a short time. After the months of unrelenting frustration, Jim Corbett had decided that the Man-eater of Rudraprayag was either too smart, too lucky, or both to be killed in ambush over one of his victims, and that some other method of hunting, less vulnerable to the quirks of outrageous chance, would have to be adopted.

One thing had caught his attention during his long stay in Garhwal — the formation of a pattern. Since established patterns are more or less predictable, it was exactly what he was looking for. In this case, it was the fact that the man-eater had the habit of walking down the pilgrim road between Rudraprayag and the village of Golabrai just south of Rudrapra, the location of a pilgrim shelter where three persons had been killed over the years and the proprietor himself badly mauled in the summer of 1921. He was the only other person beside the woman with the clawed arm caught by the leopard who had survived. On the average of once every five days, the pug-marks of the cat could be seen on this road. So, reasoned Corbett, spending 10 nights in ambush along the path might very well provide a shot.

Ibbotson, who noticed how shaky Corbett's nerves were, was against it, but Corbett was adamant. If at the end of 10 consecutive nights the leopard had not been killed, he would pack it in and give up, going home for good.

Those 10 long, dark nights seemed 10 centuries to Jim Corbett, perched in a *machan* built in a roadside mango tree; a small goat tied below was his only companion. The first night, despite constant vigilance, the only sound he heard was the warning bark of a *kakar*, a barking deer. The next nine nights he heard or saw nothing at all. It looked like the end of the campaign; the man-eater was clearly the winner. Meeting with Ibbotson on the 11th day, they were reluctant to abandon the hunt, leaving an untold number of Indians to certain death. But, facts had to be faced. In his government position, Ibbotson simply had to get back to his important duties elsewhere. As for Corbett, he was already three months late for his African assign-

ment and could not delay further. Still, no other hunter in India wanted any part of a leopard who had already eaten more than 125 people, so there was no replacement forthcoming. As a last resort, Corbett considered canceling his passage to Africa, and Ibbotson gave thought to taking a leave of absence to continue the hunt. Yet these were important matters affecting the entire business careers of both. It was left that they would take that night to think about the matter and make their decisions in the morning. As for Corbett, he would at least go down swinging, spending his last night back in the mango tree along the Golabrai Road.

That the leopard was still in the close vicinity was without question; over the past 10 days he had three times broken into houses, killing a goat, a sheep, and on the last try, nearly a man whose interior door was just too strong for the cat. To Corbett's dismay, a party of 150 pilgrims had arrived at the nearby shelter that day. Although he could do nothing about it, Corbett told the innkeeper to keep them from moving around and to stay quiet, as there was no way such a big group could fit into the shelter.

As he took up his position in the mango tree in the late afternoon, Corbett noticed that a packman with a flock of sheep and goats and two noisy dogs had penned the animals in a heavy thorn enclosure some 100 yards from his *machan*. Ibbotson had left for the bungalow nearby, and Corbett was alone with the bait-goat when evening fell. Several days past full, the moon would not rise for some hours, and it would be much longer before the deep recesses of the mountainous terrain would be reached by its beams. Corbett was in his practiced ready position, enabling him to flip on his small flashlight and shoot with a minimum of movement and disturbance. Around 9 o'clock he noticed a light carried by somebody leave the pilgrim shelter and go across the road, a foolhardy errand whatever its purpose. In a minute, it was carried back to the shelter and blown out. Once again, complete gloom settled into Golabrai.

A few seconds after the light was extinguished, the two big dogs at the packman's thorn enclosure began to bark insanely. Corbett flinched. It had to be the leopard they had seen, and from the direction of their barking, the man-eater was coming down the dark road. The cat had likely seen the lantern and was on its way to the shelter to make a kill. Then, as Corbett listened through the night, the dogs shifted the direction of their attention toward him. Had the leopard seen the goat? He must have, and was using the mango tree as cover to get closer. But would he kill the bait or just slip past and attack the pilgrim shelter? By the dogs having stopped their clamor, Corbett knew the cat had lain down to look the

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