

Photo by Jessie Cullen



# Killer Cats Of Kumaon

**DEADLY STEEL JAWS SNAP SHUT,  
AGONIZED SNARLS  
SHATTER THE STILLNESS,  
BUT THE MAN-EATING LEOPARD  
LIVES TO KILL AGAIN.**

**BY PETER HATHAWAY CAPSTICK**

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**I**t was not a set-up as easily hunted as on the other side of the river. The heavy vegetation of the jungle ravines allowed too much cover for the leopard to approach the dead girl's body, so the men elected to place Ibbotson — who had a telescopic sight on his rifle that not only improved accuracy but by magnification gathered twilight long after a rifleman with ordinary sights would have been unable to see — in a tree overlooking a distant patch of forest where the leopard was believed to be lying-up. If the man-eater came this way, it would be an easy shot. Jim Corbett would cover the rear in case of an approach from that side.

The darkness slipped in quietly, broken only by the alarm of a frightened barking deer. The leopard was moving. But where? Dusk yielded to night; only a few minutes of shooting light were left, even for the scope sight. From his tree perch, Corbett started when a pine cone came rolling down the hill behind him from only 30 yards away. Instantly, he knew he was the hunted. As he listened to his heart pound, the light dropped away altogether, and he sat, helpless, listening to the leopard creeping closer. The fact that the

heavy electric shooting lamp refused to work was not a source of great relief, so Corbett called to Ibbotson to cover him while he climbed down and lit the backup lamp, a gasoline mantle type called a "petromax." Getting it lit, he felt a good deal better, although the brilliant light did not project well, tending to blind the carrier. But still, it was one hell of a lot better than trying to climb the jungled hill by Braille.

Close to Ibbotson, who carried the lamp, Corbett walked "shoot-gun." The pair started up the rugged ridge, hearing the stalking leopard close behind. They had covered only 50 yards when it happened: Ibbotson slipped on a rock, smashing the base of the lantern, the ash mantle disintegrating with the impact. If the small blue flame pumped by pressure from the fuel reservoir was not extinguished in three minutes, the heat would cause the bloody thing to explode. A half-mile of impossible terrain to cover in three minutes closely followed by a man-eating leopard, in complete night blindness, was the prospect.

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Corbett wrote that he had never experienced a more terrifying trip than the eternity scrambling by feel alone up that black ridge. By some small miracle, they made it to the footpath that ran along the ridge's lip, but they were far from home-free. The path, such as it was, ran through a series of buffalo wallows and patches of broken stone, at last reaching a series of rock steps. Climbing these, they found a small courtyard and a door. Fetching the door a hell of a kick, Corbett demanded that it be opened. No answer. Taking a box of matches from his pocket (one wonders why these were not judiciously used to get up the slope) Corbett swore to set the roof on fire. The door opened.

Inside were more than a dozen Garhwals of various ages and both sexes, apologetic at having kept the *sahibs* waiting. Surely, though, they understood the people's fear that it could have been the demon leopard speaking to them in a man's voice. Corbett appreciated their terror very well. He hadn't expected to be alive at this moment himself. Borrowing a broken-down oil lamp from this house, Corbett and Ibbotson got directions to the place where their men were housed. It took no little nerve to go back out into the night, but with the dim light they managed to find the courtyard and flanking two-story houses where they were told their men would be. When they called out, a door opened, and they climbed the stairs to the second floor. Just as they reached safety, a village pye-dog came over, wagging his tail in friendship. After sniffing the hunters, the dog trotted over to the head of the stairs they had just climbed. Looking down them, he gave a panic scream of fear, and barking insanely, backed away with his hair on end as if his tail had been plugged into an electrical outlet. The dog, with its better

night vision, could clearly see the leopard in the courtyard below.

The next dawn — one Corbett had been convinced he would never see — the body proved to be untouched. Still, Corbett placed the gin trap and poisoned the corpse with arsenic, despite the fact that the leopard had already ingested large amounts of strychnine and cyanide with no apparent effects. Despite his efforts, the leopard never did return to the dead girl.

When a cow was killed shortly thereafter, Corbett again placed the trap between the carcass' feet. The leopard ate the cow with his forepaws resting on the trap's springs the second night, then abandoned the body. To be double-sure, the hunter poisoned the remains and was later surprised to find that they had been eaten by a leopard. But, it was an ordinary leopard, not the man-eater, a wanderer who had happened on the cow by chance.

Jim Corbett abandoned the hunt in December of 1925 until March of the next year, during which time 10 people were added as confirmed kills to the man-eater's scorecard. The last victim before his return was a small boy who was completely eaten, leaving nothing to draw the leopard for another meal. Back to square one, Ibbotson, who was not about to share Corbett's rock platform at the Rudraprayag bridge, had a platform constructed in an archway of the suspension tower where the two men sat for five nights with no result. Ibbotson, who had to leave on urgent government business, left Jim Corbett to hunt alone. Over the span of a week or so, the leopard killed four goats, two cows and a dog, one of the cow carcasses offering Corbett another missed chance. Just as the leopard was approaching, a woman in a nearby house made a loud noise and spooked the man-eater. Another woman and her child had a very lucky but painful escape during this same time. While they were asleep in their house, the leopard tore open the front door and gripped the woman's arm in his jaws, dragging her across the floor to the opened exit. As the cat backed out the opening, the woman had the presence of mind to slam the door on him — and her arm — enabling her to keep him out. Her arm was horribly mutilated, and she had been clawed in the breast. But the child was unhurt except for a head wound.

Corbett and Ibbotson continued their maddening game of hide-and-seek with the man-eater every night, somehow always missing what should have been "an easy shot." So, too, did the leopard on several occasions follow the hunters, waiting patiently for that one lapse of alertness that would bring a flashing attack. After the body of a man named Gawiya had been recovered, Corbett heavily dosed the corpse with cyanide, which was unquestionably eaten by the

leopard. It was then tracked to a hill cave. The cave was sealed off for 10 days, but proved to be empty of the cat, dead or alive. Apparently, he had been able to withstand the poison and also escape the cave through some unseen opening which led out to another part of the hill. That he was still alive changed from conjecture to fact when he killed and ate a 70-year-old woman, leaving enough of the body to provide a focal point for the continued efforts of the two frustrated hunters.

It's difficult to say conclusively that any one episode in the incredible saga of the Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag was more exceptional than another, but the events surrounding the ambush set up over the old woman's body were so weird that even Corbett swears he would not have told them had he not had witnesses.

After chasing the leopard around the rock slopes for a day with the usual results, it was concluded that, as the body was not in a proper location for the building of a *machan* or tree platform, a combination of set-guns, poison and the gin trap would be used.

The body was lying at the edge of a ravine on a small piece of flat ground against a high bank. After the vile business of cutting incisions in the corpse for the insertion of cyanide capsules, a .256 rifle of Ibbotson's and Corbett's extra 450 rifle were most carefully arranged, sighted and set with trip-lines cut from Corbett's fishing reel. In addition to giving the leopard the chance to touch the trip-lines as it went to or from the kill, the ends of the lines also were attached to the corpse's waist, so the slightest tug would cause both guns to fire. Because the .256 had a hairset trigger, a distant sneeze would be enough to jar it off. Particular care was taken with the setting of the gin trap. Even though the leopard could theoretically come from any direction, there was one place which offered a natural approach to the kill, across a strip of flat ground some 15 feet long. Here, the earth was removed bit by bit until a recess had been made which perfectly fit the height and outline of the big trap. When the dirt had been carried away to an unsuspecting distance and scattered, every dead leaf, twig or other bit of natural debris was painstakingly replaced over a cover of green leaves and a thin layer of dirt. So perfect was the camouflage that even Corbett couldn't pick out the trap from the surrounding ground. As a final touch, a series of wild, thorny bushes were transplanted from the hillside to form a subtle funnel into the trap jaws. When the men left to take up their wait in a *machan* some distance away, they were absolutely convinced that nothing "bigger than a rat" could conceivably get to the body without meeting death in one of three forms.

The late afternoon began to chill off as the sun eased lower, and the hunters

relaxed on the comfortable *machan*. Although they were more than 200 yards from the dead woman's body, there was always a chance the leopard would show on his way from the thick mountain jungle where Corbett had been trying to get a shot that morning, and both men watched carefully without any hint of the cat until darkness. As the blackness settled in the hollows, leaving the ridge tops capped with golden light, the hunters put down their rifles. Though it was too dark for a shot, they were not depressed. Three chances remained for this to be the last night of the man-eater's life — the trap, the rifles and the poison.

When the sun was completely gone, something happened that neither Corbett nor Ibbotson had thought of: it began to rain. A sense of despair drained Corbett as he whispered his fears to his companion. The mere weight of the rain on the earth over the trip-pan of the trap might set it off, so lightly was it cocked. And what of the hair-trigger .256? Would the rain cause the silk fishing line to shrink? The smallest increase in tension would fire the rifle, ruining the whole ambush. Worried, the two lay on the *machan*, staring into the blackness, the continuous rain soaking them through with an icy, night chill. Ibbotson had just asked Corbett for the time. "A quarter to eight," had been the whispered answer, the low words no sooner out of his mouth when the blackness was shattered with a terrible series of snarls and roars, coming directly from the kill. Could it be? Yes! The Man-eater of Rudraprayag was finally caught. Nothing could escape the grip of that savage trap. Risking their necks, Corbett and Ibbotson leaped blindly off the edge of the *machan* to the ground. Frantically, they scrambled to get to the petromax lamp hidden nearby, and while Ibbotson was trying to light it, the commotion of the leopard stopped. Ibbotson soon had the lamp working and the pair made for the trap as fast as they could go, circling around to approach from the top of the bank above the body. Working their way up to the edge, both were thrilled to see that the place where the trap had been hidden was not just an empty hole. But, the higher their hopes rose, the deeper they plummeted when the bright sweep of the lamp showed the dull, steel outline of the sprung trap 10 yards farther down the slope. It was mournfully empty.

Bitterly dejected, the hunters went back to the *machan* and settled down to sleep away their frustration, unable to imagine how the leopard had escaped all three of their traps. At the first hint of dawn, they were able to find out, spelled clearly in the tracks on the rain-softened earth.

The man-eater had come up to the place in exactly the manner Corbett thought he would have, but that was the last thing he

did that was expected. Instead of crossing the little flat spot hiding the trap, he had circled below it and come for the body on the side protected by the thorn bushes planted there. With no hesitation, he had then ripped three of the bushes out by their roots to make a hole and, on the safe side of the triplines, had figured out how they worked. Disengaging them, he had gently pulled the body in such a direction to create slack, relieving the tension of the triggers. Having defused the set-up, he began to feed, starting with the two parts of the body not having any poison embedded in them, the head and neck.

Pleasantly satiated — and probably feeling deservedly smug — the leopard then decided to leave and take shelter from the rain. By the craziest twist of luck, just as he was stepping over the hidden gin trap, the additional weight of the wet covering of dirt (possibly combined with the tiniest disturbance of his own passing) caused the trigger-pan of the trap to release the exact moment he was over it. With a snap like a gunshot, the vicious steel jaws clashed over the knee joint of the man-eater's left hind leg. By all rights in heaven or hell, he should have died there, but he didn't. Impossible to believe under even the most liberal application of the laws of chance, it happened that while the trap had been carried there from Rudraprayag, somebody had dropped it, the impact against a rock having broken off one of the three-inch intermeshing steel teeth. Just one lousy tooth. But which one? The one located precisely, exactly where the jaws closed on the leopard's leg. After his initial roars of fear and surprise, the cat had simply pulled his leg free through the gap caused by the missing tooth and walked away. Even a couple of inches on either side of the gap would have held the leopard so firmly he would have needed a locksmith to get free. But no. Get out your calculator, professor, and tell me the odds on *that*! ■

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