

The man-eaters of Kumaon

Jim Corbett

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Colonel Jim Corbett. Enthusiastic 'sportsman' and hunter of wild prey in the jungles of the Indian subcontinent. The book relates hunts of man-eating tigers taking place in the thirties in the foot-hills of the Himalayas due west of Nepal.

The man-eating tiger is an anomaly. The great majority of tigers are indifferent to man. The reason for the exceptions are almost always an incapacitating wound that hampers it in its regular habits and thus reduces it to prey on man, so much easier to kill than its normal prey. The source of the wounds could be earlier bulletshots or quite often spikes from porcupines, often up to ten inches long broken and bent into a U-shape when hitting the bone. Such spikes fester and do not get dissolved. It is a mystery why the tigers are not more careful, the author muses, when leopards almost never are afflicted. An added reason for the man-eating habit could be simple old age, especially the wearing down of the dental equipment.

A man-eating tiger on the other hand can be a real danger, typically terrorizing a district, claiming hundreds of victims during a few years¹. To kill one is not that easy, the tiger is an animal of stealth, careful and unpredictable, and besides the villagers who are victimized were usually not armed. So enter the scene Colonel Corbett. In the book he describes the hunting of half a dozen different man-eating tigers, in great detail describing the terrain, without really evoking it, and the hardships and frustrations involved. Grown up in the jungle, he is adept at imitating the call of various beasts, also like a forensic expert, amazingly skilled in extricating a maximum of information from pug-marks (i.e. the footprints of a tiger), scratch-marks and other almost imperceptible signs, as to age and state of health, recent whereabouts and possibly future intentions. He also reminds the reader that the tiger is not aware that humans, unlike most mammals, lack a keen sense of smell, thus one should always move with a tail-wind to prevent the tiger to approach from behind. Many a times he comes very close, only to see the tiger disappear. At the time of his hunts he is already an older man, around his sixties, finding the climbing in steep terrain rather tiring: as is the climbing into trees, often forty or fifty feet high, finding an uncomfortable perch on the outlook by a kill. He prefers to do it alone. An accompanying party, when unarmed is an added responsibility, and if armed an additional hazard. In fact, he made it a rule never to accept a hunt, unless the rewards were taken away (who wants to be degraded to a mere reward-hunter) and an assurance that no competing parties were allowed.

To kill a tiger is not that easy. The shot has to be well-aimed. A beast of prey like a tiger is far more resilient than a human. Even severe wounds tend to heal quickly, and one

¹ The Campawat tiger, his first assignment, is thought to be responsible for 436 deaths. And it has been estimated that the man-eating tigers he killed, might have been responsible for about 1500 victims in toto.

of the tigers he shot in the head, splintering the bones of its skull, only reacted by rage.

Once he stealths up to a tiger in its sleep, killing it. It makes him feel bad, because as a hunter you should give your opponent a fair chance. Still, the savings of lives somehow justifies the transgression against an unwritten code of honor. A fearless man, yet he admits, that the stalking of a tiger, which more often than not means that the tiger is stalking you (and here he is looking out for a sixth sense, sometimes instinctively sensing danger with no apparent clue), is an extremely nerve-racking business.

Like the dedicated hunter he develops an intimate rapport with nature and its animals, finding the slaughter of wild-life reprehensible. How much better is it not to capture a living tiger on the photographic plate or film, far more endurable than the trophy on the wall. So in his last short chapter he relays his frustrated attempts to catch tigers on film. To attain this evasive goal, he went to great lengths, like damming water in a creek, to mask the sound of his movie-camera. As a writer Corbett is an amateur, lacking, as noted above, the professional ability to evoke. But the memories of his hunt are still vivid in his mind as he ten to twenty years later tries to put them on the page. The insistence to get things right, to dwell on details, and to give interesting asides, makes the stories arresting, reminding us of a time, not that deep into the past, when the life of man, be it of disadvantaged Indian peasants, were at the mercy of the wild beasts, as it had been for time immemorial. But signs of human control and debasement show themselves, like the lumbering party felling the trees in the pristine jungle, requesting his assistance to rid it of a dangerous pest.

Corbett was born in 1875 and already in the 20's sounded the alarm about declining wildlife and the threat of lumber-interests. He toured the Indian subcontinent to bring awareness of the issues, and after getting seriously sick in war-time duty for which he volunteered, he in later life retired to Kenya, continuing his conversational movement, succumbing to a heart-attack in 1955.

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