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## Jim Corbett, The Humanist Hunter

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### ABSTRACT:

Jim Corbett was a naturalist, hunter, humanist and a lover of the poor in India. His admiration for the courage, faith, hard work, honesty and compassion that he came across among the poor made him fall in love with them. In fact, he named one of his books *My India*, which is a tribute to the simple and honest village folk. His escapades in the jungle at night in search of man-eaters make thrilling reading. He never takes people to task when they act in panic during his hunting expeditions because he confesses that he could have acted no differently if he were in their position. His knowledge of the behaviour of wild animals in the jungle and his ability to track a particular animal that was a man-eater among a number of other tigers in the wild makes fascinating reading.

Key words: Naturalist, hunter, knowledge of the jungle, humanist, expert tracker, courage, compassion, honesty

Jim Corbett, an Englishman born in Kaladhungi, which is now part of the Uttarakhand State in India, was born on 25 July, 1875. His life has been made into a film. He went to Kenya to spend the later part of his life and passed away there in 1955. While the film was being shot close to the jungle that had been his hunting ground, a villager from around Kaladhungi, who had been a small boy during Corbett's hunting days had walked quite a long distance to see "Carpet Sahib". Such had been his popularity among the villagers. He took a lot of interest in wildlife and the forests around the place where he lived. He did not get past his school education and was employed in the railways and became a contractor shifting cargo, especially coal, from across the Ganges to railway wagons. He was interested in hunting and became an expert hunter. When tigers or leopards turned man-eaters in the region his help was sought to eliminate such animals to avoid human deaths. He was greatly loved by the villagers in the region. He wrote about his experiences in his books *Jungle Lore*, *Man-eaters of Kumaon*, *The Man-eating Leopard of Rudrapur*, *My India* and *The Temple Tiger*.

His work as a railway contractor brought him close to people of all castes and creed and, though a Christian, he could easily empathize with people of all faiths. His experiences in life as a hunter and as a contractor gave him insights into the sufferings as well as the strengths of the people around him. He had a sister named Maggie who was always helpful in giving whatever medical help that she could for people in an area where one had to travel miles to have access to a doctor. He was a hunter, a humanist and a great friend of the poor. It may appear paradoxical to refer to him as a humanist in the same breath of calling him a great hunter. It is only when one reads his books does one understand that he was indeed a humanist. There are innumerable instances from his narrations where his humanity becomes manifest.

Jim Corbett evolved as an expert hunter from learning the use of a catapult to the ultimate use of a gun. Hunting in the jungle, especially when he had to go on foot at night, was not for the faint-hearted. He couldn't afford to shoot down a wrong animal, which, unfortunately happened sometimes in spite of the care he always took. Sometimes he became desperate to complete his task within a time limit (he had to go over for the task on leave).

He could identify by reading the pugmarks at the sight of a human kill the age and gender of the man-eating tiger or leopard. He could also know from the killing of cattle whether there was any defect the animal had suffered either by gun shots from other hunters or a fight with other animals. There was always a reason for a tiger to turn a man-eater. It could have had its limbs or jaw embedded with the sharp quills of a porcupine the animal had tried to hunt; could have become weak to hunt its natural prey because of old age; could have been a cub that was fed on human flesh that its mother had provided. After successfully hunting the man-eater to let the villages live in peace close to the jungle, he never failed to analyze the reason for the animal becoming a man-eater. Almost invariably he found the reason while stripping the animal of its hide. There could be porcupine quills that could have become a U hook hitting the bone and bending back. The animal's attempt to extricate the quill would have resulted in a suppurating wound.

Corbett was a great observer of the behaviour of wild animals, both hunting animals and hunted ones. A normal tiger, as opposed to a man-eater, he would say, is a gentleman and shy, not afraid, of human beings. If a tiger or tigress rather growls on seeing a human it is a warning to say not to approach any closer. It is probably looking after its cubs to which humans would pose a threat. Once Corbett, while tracking big game in a bush, inadvertently happened to look directly into the face of a tiger that was eating an animal that had been killed just a while earlier. A swipe of its paws was all that was required to bring down Corbett but the tiger, a gentleman as it was, left the place quietly in one bound before Corbett retraced his steps in a hurry. While hunting a man-eater, Corbett would always warn, one must be very careful of the rear because tigers would always stalk their prey from behind. There was no motorable roads at the time and Corbett had to walk miles to reach the area of action.

As a hunter, he approached the possible place where the man-eater was likely to be hiding very quietly and always up the wind so that his own scent wouldn't be carried to the animal. He made it a point not to have any companion with him when he was likely to have to use his gun. He advised his companions to climb a tree and wait in silence till he returned. It would be difficult to protect himself as well as the companion in the event of a sudden

charge from the tracked animal. While waiting for a maneater to shoot it down from a machan at night there was an instance when, in his wild imagination, the movement of an ant close to his face was mistaken to be that of a tiger. He was gifted with great eyesight and sometimes could successfully shoot down a tiger at night from a machan just with the light provided by the stars. There were occasions when, in the absence of stars or the moon at night he managed to wound the animal he was waiting for from the sound of cracking bones. There were instances when after he took position on the machan it became quite cloudy making the night quite dark; sometimes it actually rained drenching him like a drowned rat and forcing him to wait for dawn shivering in his uncomfortable perch.

Once while hunting a particular tiger that he had only managed to wound, he had to go without food for two nights. A fellow hunter's gun shot at close quarters had damaged his ear drum leading to enormous swelling of his face almost closing one eye. Luckily while moving to complete his unfinished task the big facial abscess opened giving him immediate relief from pain and suffering. Immediately after having the animal brought home, he went to sleep which he had been deprived of for two consecutive nights.

As a railway contractor, he had engaged people of all caste and creed for the task of shifting coal from ferries to railway wagons. Once he came across a man who was lying down on the banks of the river running close to the railway yard with his feet being washed down. He immediately knew that he was suffering from cholera and that he was waiting for his death. Corbett helped the man to his feet, had him stay in one of the vacant laborers' quarters, and nourished him back to health. When the man regained health under Corbett's care for a month or so and was ready to leave for home Corbett put a ticket for home in his hands along with Rs 250, a really big amount in pre-independent India. Lalajee, which was the man's name, had told Corbett's his story. He had been a thriving grain dealer once before being cheated by his partner forcing him to become an employee of another merchant. It was during running an errand for the merchant that he had contracted cholera. He was sure of losing his job after the long absence. He had told him that if only he had Rs 250 to invest he would build his own business in a year. So, Corbett surprised him by loaning the amount which Lalajee accepted falling prostrate on the former's feet promising that he would return the amount within a year. Corbett was sure that Lalajee would return the amount because "the poor in India will never forget a kindness" but was skeptical about the deadline he had set himself. Corbett was proved wrong because Lalajee did return the amount within a year along with interest calculated at 25%. Corbett accepted only the principal and received from Lalajee every year a basketful of mangoes from his orchard till he remained a contractor in the region.

Corbett was invited to Kumaon to kill a maneater that had killed hundreds of people over period of time. While interacting with people in the area he came across a woman who had lost her sister about a year ago. Two sisters had gone into the jungle close to the village to cut grass and one of them had been attacked and taken by the tiger. The traumatic experience robbed the surviving sister of her power of speech. Within four days of arriving at the region Corbett succeeded in tracking and killing the tiger referred to as "The Champawat Man-eater". While returning on with tiger's skin Corbett stopped at the dumb sister's village to show her the tiger that had killed her sister. The woman became excited shouting to her husband and children to see what the sahib had brought. She had regained her speech.

Once he was approached by a low caste couple to provide them with the job of carrying coal to wagons. It was a difficult job and the man had developed blisters in his hands. When Corbett found that the man could read and write and that he was good with numbers he made him his accountant. It was this man whose job it was to calculate the wages due to people of all castes. He was very meticulous and honest and, unfortunately, died of malaria. He was so much loved by everybody that his funeral was attended by a very huge number of people. Corbett admired the man saying he would consider himself blessed to have such a death mourned by so many people from all faiths.

He was a skilled hunter and did undertake the hazardous task of tracking maneaters in the jungle. Once while hunting a man-eating leopard (*The Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*) during night, he had merely wounded it and thought of tracking it the next day. But the villagers insisted, against his advice, that he pursue the wounded animal immediately while a dozen men would accompany him with burning splinters providing light. They promised never to run away if the animal charged. Corbett approached carefully a depression in the land where the leopard could be hiding. Suddenly the leopard charged with a blood-chilling roar and the villagers took to their heels as one man. Luckily the fleeing villagers had dropped the burning splinters that provided Corbett enough light to shoot down the animal. After hearing the shot the villagers stopped and slowly returned one by one. Honest and sympathetic as Corbett was, he didn't look at their faces so that they wouldn't feel guilty, and simply asked them whether they had brought poles to carry the animal. He did not scold the villagers for having left him in danger saying that had he been one of them he would have done the same thing. He knew that the angry roar of a charging leopard would scare anyone to death.

Jim Corbett loved wild life as much as he loved the simple villagers living close to the jungle. During days when neither roads nor fast transport was available, Corbett bravely undertook the unenviable task of killing maneaters. He was always interacting with simple and honest village folk whose faith in him and loyalty always amazed him. Though a Christian he never questioned the villagers' faith or superstitious beliefs. He loved them as they were, which was why he was loved and respected. He played a key role in establishing India's first national park in the Kumaon Hills, the Hailey National Park, initially named after Lord Hailey. The park was renamed in Corbett's honour in 1957.

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