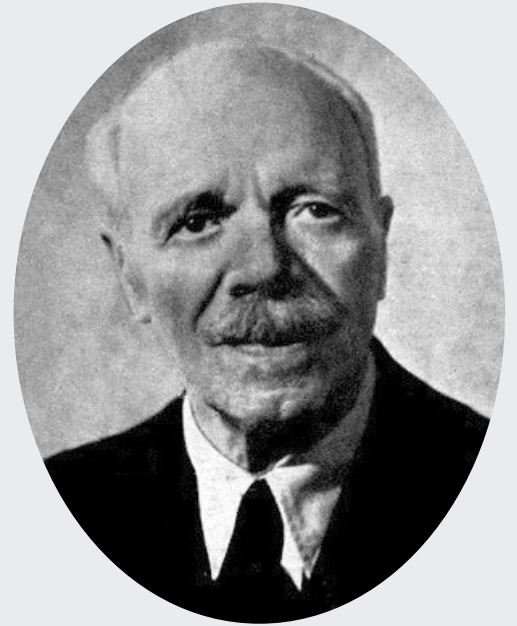


Primary Source:

*My India (1952)**



Introduction

Jim Corbett (1875-1955) was born in Nainital, India, to a British family. At the time, he would have been called an Anglo-Indian. Starting at age nineteen, he spent the next twenty years of his life working for the Bengal Railway Company at Mokam Ghat in Bihar. In his free time, he went to “his” village of Choti Haldwani, near Nainital in the foothills of the Himalayas in what is now the Indian state of Uttarakhand. Corbett was a hunter-turned-conservationist as well as an author and a naturalist. He gained popularity with the reading public through his detailed descriptions of hunting man-eating tigers and leopards in India. He was also instrumental in creating a national reserve in northern India for the endangered tiger. In 1957, the park was renamed Jim Corbett National Park in his honor. This chapter narrates events taking place before World War I in Choti Haldwani.

PRIMARY SOURCE

INTRODUCTION

CORBETT, MY INDIA

* Jim Corbett, “Chapter 3: Mothi,” *My India* (Oxford University Press, 1952). Annotations by participations in the *History for the 21st Century* project.

Jim Corbett, My India, Chapter 3: Mothi (1952)



**Location of Nainital, where Corbett
was born, and near the village of
Choti Haldwani**

Chapter 3: Mothi

Mothi had the delicate, finely chiselled features that are the heritage of all high-caste people in India, but he was only a young stripling, all arms and legs, when his father and mother died and left him with the responsibilities of the family. Fortunately it was a small one, consisting only of his younger brother and sister. Mothi was at that time fourteen years of age, and had been married for six years. One of his first acts on finding himself unexpectedly the head of the family was to fetch his twelve-year-old wife—whom he had not seen since the day of their wedding—from her father's house in the Kota Dun, some dozen miles from Kaladhungi. As the cultivation of the six acres of land Mothi inherited, entailed more work than the four young people could tackle, Mothi took on a partner, locally known as Agee, who in return for his day-and-night services, received free board and lodging and half of the crops produced. The building of the communal hut with bamboos and grass procured from the jungles, under permit, and carried long distances on shoulder and on head, and the constant repairs to the hut necessitated by the violent storms that sweep the foothills, threw a heavy burden on Mothi and his helpers, and to relieve them of this burden I built them a masonry house with three rooms and a wide veranda, on a four-foot plinth. For, with the exception of Mothi's wife who had come from a higher altitude, all of them were steeped in malaria.

To protect their crops, the tenants used to erect a thorn fence round the entire village, but though it entailed weeks of hard labour, this flimsy fence afforded little protection against stray cattle and wild animals, and when the crops were on the ground, the tenants or members of their families, had to keep watch in the fields all night. Firearms were strictly rationed, and for our forty tenants, the Government allowed us one single-barrelled, muzzle-loading gun. This gun enables one tenant in turn to protect his crops with a lethal weapon, while the others had to rely on tin cans which they beat throughout the night. Though the gun accounted for a certain number of pigs and porcupines, which were the worst offenders, the nightly damage was considerable, for the village was isolated and surrounded by forests. So, when my handling contract at Mokameh Ghat[†] began paying a dividend, I started building a masonry wall round the village. When completed, the wall was six-feet high and three miles long. It took ten years to build, for my share of the dividends was small. If today you motor from Haldwani to Ramnagar, through Kaladhungi, you will skirt the upper end of the wall before you cross the Boar Bridge and enter the forest.

[†] A railway station at which Corbett worked.



View of an Indian village, by William Hodges, 1781-3

I was walking through the village one cold December morning, with Robin, my dog, running ahead and putting up covey after covey of grey partridge which no one but Robin ever disturbed—for all who lived in the village loved to hear them calling at sunrise and at sunset—when in the soft ground at the edge of one of the irrigation channels I saw the tracks of a pig. This pig, with great, curved, wicked-looking tusks, was as big as a buffalo calf and was known to everyone in the village. As a squeaker he had wormed his way through the thorn fence and fattened on the crops. The wall had worried him at first, but it had a rough face and, being a determined pig, he had in time learnt to climb it.

Time and time again the watchers in the fields had fired at him and on several occasions he had left a blood trail, but none of his wounds had proved fatal and the only effect they had had on him was to make him more wary.

On this December morning the pig's tracks led me towards Mothi's holding, and as I approached the house I saw Mothi's wife standing in front of it, her hands on her hips, surveying the ruin of their potato patch. The pig had done a very thorough job, for the tubers were not mature and he had been hungry, and while Robin cast round to see in which direction the marauder had gone, the woman gave vent to her feelings. 'It is all Punwa's father's fault', she said. 'It was his turn for the gun last night, and instead of staying at home and looking after his own property he must need go and sit up in Kalu's wheat field because he thought there was a chance of shooting a sambhar there. And while he was away, this is what the shaitan has done.' No woman in our part of India ever refers to her husband, or addresses him, by name. Before children are born he is referred to as the man of the house, and after children come is spoken of and addressed as the father of the firstborn. Mothi now had three children, of whom the eldest was Punwa, so to his wife he was 'Punwa's father', and his wife to everyone in the village was 'Punwa's mother'. Punwa's mother was not only the hardest-working woman in our village but she also had the sharpest tongue, and after telling me in no uncertain terms what she thought of Punwa's father for having absented himself the previous night, she turned on me and said I had wasted my money in building a wall over which a pig could climb to eat her potatoes, and that if I could not shoot the pig myself, it was my duty to raise the wall a few feet so that no pig could climb over it. Mothi fortunately arrived while the storm was still breaking over my head, so whistling to Robin, I beat a hasty retreat and left him to weather it.

***Landscape of the Corbett Tiger Reserve,
Uttarakand, India***



That evening I picked up the tracks of the pig on the far side of the wall and followed them for two miles, at times along game paths and at times along the bank of the Boar River, until they led me to a dense patch of thorn bushes interlaced with lantana. At the edge of this cover I took up position, as there was a fifty-fifty chance of the pig leaving the cover while there was still sufficient light for me to shoot by. Shortly after I had taken up position behind a rock on the bank of the river, a sambhar hind started belling at the upper end of the jungle in which a few years later, I was to shoot the Bachelor of Powalgarh. The hind was warning the jungle folk of the presence of a tiger. A fortnight previously, a party of three guns, with eight elephants, had arrived in Kaladhungi with the express purpose of shooting a tiger which, at that time, had his headquarters in the forest block for which I had a shooting pass.



Jim Corbett with the slain Bachelor of Powalgarh, 1930

The Boar River formed the boundary between my block and the block taken by the party of three guns, and they had enticed the tiger to kill in their block by tying up fourteen young buffaloes on their side of the river. Two of these buffaloes had been killed by the tiger, the other twelve had died of neglect, and at about nine o'clock the previous night I had heard the report of a heavy rifle. I sat behind the rock for two hours, listening to the belling sambhar but without seeing anything of the pig, and when there was no longer any light to shoot by, I crossed the river and, gaining the Kota road, loped down it, easing up and moving cautiously when passing the caves in which a big python lived, and where Bill Bailey of the Forest Department a month previously had shot a twelve-foot hamadryad.[‡] At the village gate I stopped and shouted to Mothi to be ready to accompany me at crack of dawn next morning.

Mothi had been my constant companion in the Kaladhungi jungles for many years. He was keen and intelligent, gifted with good eyesight and hearing, could move through the jungles silently, and was as brave as man could be. He was never late for an appointment, and as we walked through the dew-drenched jungle that morning, listening to the multitude of sounds of the awakening jungle folk, I told him of the belling of the sambhar hind and of my suspicion that she had witnessed the killing of her young one by the tiger, and that she had stayed to watch the tiger on his kill—a not uncommon occurrence—for in no other way could I account for her sustained belling.



[‡] King cobra.

Sambar hind and young stag



Tiger in high grass, Chandrapur

Mothi was delighted at the prospect of our finding a fresh kill, for his means only permitted of his buying meat for his family once a month, and a sambhar, chital, or pig, freshly killed by a tiger or by a leopard, was a godsend to him. I had located the belling sambhar as being due north and some fifteen hundred yards from me the previous evening, and when we arrived at this spot and found no kill we started looking on the ground for blood, hair, or a drag mark that would lead us to the kill; for I was still convinced that there was a kill to be found and that the killer was a tiger. At this spot two shallow depressions, coming down from the foot of the hill a few hundred yards away, met. The depressions ran more or less parallel to each other at a distance of about thirty yards and Mothi suggested that he should go up the right-hand depression while I went up the other. As there were only low bushes between, and we should be close to, and within sight of, each other, I agreed to the suggestion.

We had proceeded a hundred yards examining every foot of the ground, and going dead slow, when Mothi, just as I turned my head to look at him started backwards, screaming as he did so. Then he whipped round and ran for dear life, beating the air with his hands as if warding off a swarm of bees and continuing to scream as he ran. The sudden and piercing scream of a human being in a jungle where a moment before all has been silent is terrifying to hear, and quite impossible to describe. Instinctively I knew what had happened. With his eyes fixed on the ground, looking for blood or hair, Mothi had failed to see where he was going, and had walked on to the tiger. Whether he had been badly mauled or not I could not see, for only his head and shoulders were visible above the bushes. I kept the sights of my rifle a foot behind him as he ran, intending to press the trigger if I saw any movement, but to my intense relief there was no movement as I swung round, and after he had covered a hundred yards. I considered he was safe. I yelled to him to stop, adding that I was coming to him, then, backing away for a few yards, for I did not know whether the tiger had changed his position, I hurried down the depression towards Mothi. He was standing with his back against a tree and I was greatly relieved to see that there was no blood on him or on the ground on which he was standing. As I reached him he asked what had happened, and when I told him that nothing had happened, he expressed great surprise. He asked if the tiger had not sprung at him, or followed him, and when I replied that he had done everything possible to make the tiger do so, he said, 'I know, Sahib. I know I should not have screamed and run, but I—could—not—help—' as his voice tailed away and his head came forward, I caught him by the throat, but he slipped through my hands and slumped to the ground. Every drop of blood had drained from his face, and as he lay minute after long minute without any movement, I feared the shock had killed him.

There is little one can do in the jungles in an emergency of this kind, and that little I did. I stretched Mothi on his back, loosened his clothes, and massaged the region of his heart. Just as I was giving up hope and preparing to carry him home, he opened his eyes.

When Mothi was comfortably seated on the ground with his back to the tree and a half-smoked cigarette between his lips, I asked him to tell me exactly what had happened.

'I had gone a short distance up the depression after I left you', he said, 'closely examining the ground for traces of blood or hair, when I saw what looked like a spot of dry blood on a leaf. So I stooped down to have a closer look and, as I raised my head, I looked straight into the face of the tiger. The tiger was lying crouched down facing me at a distance of three or four paces. His head was a little raised off the ground, his mouth was wide open, and there was blood on his chin and on his chest. He looked as though he was on the point of springing at me, so I lost my head and screamed and ran away.' He had seen nothing of the sambhar kill. He said the ground was open and free of bushes and there was no kill where the tiger was lying.

Telling Mothi to stay where he was I stubbed out my cigarette and set off to investigate, for I could think of no reason why a tiger with its mouth open, and blood on its chin and on its chest, should allow Mothi to approach within a few feet, over open ground, and not kill him when he screamed in its face. Going with the utmost caution to the spot where Mothi was standing when he screamed, I saw in front of me a bare patch of ground from which the tiger had swept the carpet of dead leaves as he had rolled from side to side; at the nearer edge of this bare patch of ground there was a semicircle of clotted blood. Skirting round where the tiger had been lying, to avoid disturbing the ground, I picked up on the far side of it a light and fresh blood trail, which for no apparent reason zigzagged towards the hill, and then continued along the foot of the hill for a few hundred yards and entered a deep and narrow ravine in which there was a little stream.



Tiger hunt, by Thomas Williamson and Samuel Howitt, 1808



Etching of a tiger, by T. Landseer, c. 1823.



***Tiger hunt in a tropical forest,
etching by J. W. Lowry***

Up this ravine, which ran deep into the foothills, the tiger had gone. I made my way back to the bare patch of ground and examined the clotted blood. There were splinters of bone and teeth in it, and these splinters provided me with the explanation I was looking for. The rifle-shot I had heard two nights previously had shattered the tiger's lower jaw, and he had made for the jungle in which he had his home. He had gone as far as his sufferings and loss of blood permitted and had then lain down on the spot where first the sambhar had seen him tossing about, and where thirty hours later Mothi walked on to him.

The most painful wound that can be inflicted on an animal, the shattering of the lower jaw, had quite evidently induced high fever and the poor beast had perhaps only been semi-conscious when he heard Mothi screaming in his face. He had got up quietly and staggered away, in a last effort to reach the ravine in which he knew there was water.

To make quite sure that my deductions were correct, Mothi and I crossed the river into the adjoining shooting block to have a look at the ground where the fourteen buffaloes had been tied up. Here, high up in a tree, we found the machan[§] the three guns had sat on, and the kill the tiger had been eating when fired at. From the kill, a heavy blood trail led down to the river, with elephant tracks on each side of it. Leaving Mothi on the right bank I recrossed the river into my block, picked up the blood trail and the elephant tracks, and followed them for five or six hundred yards to where the trail led into heavy cover. At the edge of the cover where the elephants had halted and, after standing about for some time, had turned to the right and gone away in the direction of Kaladhungi.

I had met the returning elephants as I was starting out the previous evening to try and get a shot at the old pig, and one of the guns had asked me where I was going, and when I told him, had appeared to want to tell me something but was restrained from doing so by his companions. So, while the party of three guns went off on their elephants to the Forest Bungalow where they were staying, I had gone off on foot, without any warning, into the jungle in which they had left a wounded tiger.

[§] A shooting platform in a tree, sort of like a treehouse.



The walk back to the village from where I had left Mothi was only about three miles, but it took us about as many hours to cover the distance, for Mothi was unaccountably weak and had to rest frequently. After leaving him at his house I went straight to the Forest Bungalow, where I found the party of three packed up and on the point of leaving to catch the evening train at Haldwani. We talked on the steps of the veranda for some little time, I doing most of the talking, and when I learnt that the only reason they could not spare the time to recover the tiger they had wounded was the keeping of a social engagement. I told them that if Mothi died as a result of shock or if the tiger killed any of my tenants, they would have to face a charge of manslaughter.



Corbett House at the Corbett Museum, Kaladhungi, Uttarakhand

The party left after my talk with them, and next morning, armed with a heavy rifle, I entered the ravine up which the tiger had gone, not with the object of recovering a trophy for others, but with the object of putting the tiger out of his misery and burning his skin. The ravine, every foot of which I knew, was the last place I would have selected in which to look for a wounded tiger. However, I searched it from top to bottom, and also the hills on either side, for the whole of that day without finding any trace of the tiger, for the blood trail had stopped shortly after he entered the ravine.

Ten days later, a forest guard on his rounds came on the remains of a tiger that had been eaten by vultures. In the summer of that year, the Government made a rule prohibiting sitting up for tigers between the hours of sunset and sunrise, and making it incumbent on sportsmen wounding tigers to make every effort to bring the wounded animal to bag, and to make an immediate report of the occurrence to the nearest Forest Officer and police outpost. Mothi met with his experience in December, and when we left Kaladhungi in April he appeared to be little the worse for the shock.



Filming of a Bengal Tiger in contemporary Jim Corbett National Park, established in 1936. The park was originally named Hailey National Park, and is located in the Nainital district of Uttarakhand.

Image Citations:

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Jim Corbett, hunter and naturalist, 1944, Public Domain,
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