

KILLING OF THE CHOWGARH MAN-EATER

In this chapter we are going to discuss one of the most widely known and discussed events, the dramatic final scene of killing the man-eater of Chowgarh. This scene is probably central in the dispute between different opinions about Corbett as a hunter and about his integrity as a writer.

Corbett killed the Chowgarh man-eater tigress on April 11th, 1930. This is one of the three precise killing dates that we know from Corbett books (other two are the killing of Rudraprayag leopard, and the Thak tigress). This date must have survived because while hunting the tigress, Corbett used the map of Kumaon to map the villages frequented by the tigress, and after killing her, Corbett put the place and the date of killing on the same map.

There are two main sources of this dramatic showdown and our text mostly discusses the details that do not match in these two sources:

- (1) Corbett's story "Chowgarh Tigers" is the first source, and
- (2) Corbett's letter to his sister Maggie, where Corbett describes how the elusive tigress was finally put to rest, is the second source.

The first source, the story of Chowgarh tigers, was written in the first half of the 1930s, as the story was included Corbett's first, self-published book "Jungle Stories" (printed in 1935). The story became a part of the book "Man-Eaters of Kumaon." The letter was written on the day of killing, on the April 11th, 1930, only couple of hours after the hunt. It is obvious that when writing his story several years later, Corbett did not use his letter to Maggie. Possibly he did not use the letter to Maggie because he was confident he remembered every detail of the hunt extremely well. Otherwise it is difficult to believe that Corbett did not

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remember writing such a letter. Anyway, these two texts were written in different times, and there are several big and small discrepancies if we compare them.

Let us first of all listen what Corbett says in his published account of the event, and then have a look at his own description of the events from his own letter written on a fresher memory. We will pay a special attention to the contradicting information between these two sources. The following is an excerpt from the story "Chowgarh Tigers." We hope that Corbett fans do not mind reading this famous excerpt from his book "Man-eaters of Kumaon." Contradicting details are given in **bold** for the readers to see and compare easily:

"I had gone out that day at **2 p.m.** with the intention of tying up my three buffaloes at selected places along the forest road, when at a point a mile from the bungalow, where the road crosses a ridge and goes from the north to the west face of the Kala Agar range, I came on a large party of men who had been out collecting firewood. In the party was an old man who, pointing down the hill to a thicket of young oak trees some five hundred yards from where we were standing, said it was in that thicket where the man-eater, a month previously, had killed his only son, a lad eighteen years of age. I had not heard the father's version of the killing of his son, so, while we sat on the edge of the road smoking, he told his story, pointing out the spot where the lad had been killed, and where all that was left of him had been found the following day.

The old man blamed the twenty-five men who had been out collecting firewood on that day for the death of his son, saying, very bitterly, that they had run away and left him to be killed by the tiger. Some of the men sitting near me had been in that party of twenty-five and they hotly repudiated responsibility for the lad's death, accusing him of having been responsible for the stampede by screaming out that he had heard the tiger growling and telling everyone to run for their lives. This did not satisfy the old man. He shook his head and said, "You are grown men and he was only a boy, and you ran away and left him to be killed". I was sorry for having asked the questions that had led to this heated discussion, and more to placate the old man than for any good it would do, I said I would tie up one of my buffaloes near the spot where he said his son had been killed. So, handing two of the buffaloes over to the party to take back to the bungalow, I set off followed by **two of my men** leading the remaining buffalo.

A footpath, taking off close to where we had been sitting, went down the hill to the valley below and zigzagged up the opposite pine-clad slope to join the forest road two miles further on. The path passed close to an open patch of ground which bordered the oak thicket in which the lad had been killed. On this patch of ground, which was about thirty yards square, there was a solitary pine sapling. This I cut down. I tied the buffalo to the stump, set one man to cutting a supply of grass for it, and sent the other man, Madho Singh, who served in the Garhwalis during the Great War and is now serving in the United Provinces Civil Pioneer Force, up an oak tree with instructions to strike a dry branch with the head of his axe and call at the top of his voice as hill people do when cutting leaves for their cattle. I then took up a position on a rock, about four feet high, on the lower edge of the open

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ground. Beyond the rock the hill fell steeply away to the valley below and was densely clothed with tree and scrub jungle.

The man on the ground had made several trips with the grass he had cut, and Madho Singh on the tree was alternately shouting and singing lustily, while I stood on the rock smoking, with the rifle in the hollow of my left arm, when, all at once, I became aware that the man-eater had arrived. Beckoning urgently to the man on the ground to come to me, I whistled to attract Madho Singh's attention and signaled to him to remain quiet. The ground on three sides was comparatively open. Madho Singh on the tree was to my left front, the man cutting grass had been in front of me, while the buffalo now showing signs of uneasiness was to my right front. In this area the tigress could not have approached without my seeing her; and as she had approached, there was only one place where she could now be, and that was behind and immediately below me.

When taking up my position I had noticed that the further side of the rock was steep and smooth, that it extended down the hill for eight or ten feet, and that the lower portion of it was masked by thick undergrowth and young pine saplings. It would have been a little difficult, but quite possible, for the tigress to have climbed the rock, and I relied for my safety on hearing her in the undergrowth should she make the attempt.

I have no doubt that the tigress, attracted, as I had intended she should be, by the noise Madho Singh was making, had come to the rock, and that it was while she was looking up at me and planning her next move that I had become aware of her presence. My change of front, coupled with the silence of the men, may have made her suspicious; anyway, after a lapse of a few minutes, I heard a dry twig snap a little way down the hill; thereafter the feeling of unease left me, and the tension relaxed. An opportunity lost; but there was still a very good chance of my getting a shot, for she would undoubtedly return before long, and when she found us gone would probably content herself with killing the buffalo. There were still four or five hours of daylight, and by crossing the valley and going up the opposite slope I should be able to overlook the whole of the hillside on which the buffalo was tethered. The shot, if I did get one, would be a long one of from two to three hundred yards, but the .275 rifle I was carrying was accurate, and even if I only wounded the tigress I should have a blood trail to follow, which would be better than feeling about for her in hundreds of square miles of jungle, as I had been doing these many months.

The men were a difficulty. To have sent them back to the bungalow alone would have been nothing short of murder, so of necessity I kept them with me.

Tying the buffalo to the stump in such a manner as to make it impossible for the tigress to carry it away, I left the open ground and rejoined the path to carry out the plan I have outlined, of trying to get a shot from the opposite hill.

About a hundred yards along the path I came to a ravine. On the far side of this the path entered very heavy undergrowth, and as it was inadvisable to go into thick cover with two men following me, I decided to take to the ravine, follow it down to its junction with the valley, work up the valley and pick up the path on the far side of the undergrowth.

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The ravine was about ten yards wide and four or five feet deep, and as I stepped down into it a nightjar fluttered off a rock on which I had put my hand. On looking at the spot from which the bird had risen, I saw two eggs. These eggs, straw-coloured, with rich brown markings, were of a most unusual shape, one being long and very pointed, while the other was as round as a marble; and as my collection lacked nightjar eggs I decided to add this odd clutch to it. I had no receptacle of any kind in which to carry the eggs, so cupping my left hand I placed the eggs in it and packed them round with a little moss. As I went down the ravine the banks became higher, and sixty yards from where I had entered it I came on a deep drop of some twelve to fourteen feet. The water that rushes down all these hill ravines in the rains had worn the rock as smooth as glass, and as it was too steep to offer a foothold I handed the rifle to the men and, sitting on the edge, proceeded to slide down. My feet had hardly touched the sandy bottom when the **two men**, with a flying leap, landed one on either side of me, and thrusting the rifle into my hand asked in a very agitated manner if I had **heard the tiger**. As a matter of fact I had heard nothing, possibly due to the scraping of my clothes on the rocks, and when questioned, the men said that what they had heard was a deep-throated growl from somewhere close at hand, but exactly from which direction the sound had come, they were unable to say. Tigers do not betray their presence by growling when looking for their dinner and the only, and very unsatisfactory, explanation I can offer is that the tigress followed us after we left the open ground, and on seeing that we were going down the ravine had gone ahead and taken up a position where the ravine narrowed to half its width; and that when she was on the point of springing out on me, I had disappeared out of sight down the slide and she had involuntarily given vent to her disappointment with a low growl. Not a satisfactory reason, unless one assumes without any reason that she had selected me for her dinner, and therefore had no interest in the **two men**. Where the three of us now stood in a bunch we had the smooth steep rock behind us, to our right a wall of rock slightly leaning over the ravine and fifteen feet high, and to our left a tumbled bank of big rocks thirty or forty feet high. The sandy bed of the ravine, on which we were standing, was roughly forty feet long and ten feet wide. At the lower end of this sandy bed a great pine tree had fallen across, damming the ravine, and the collection of the sand was due to this dam. The wall of overhanging rock came to an end twelve or fifteen feet from the fallen tree, and as I approached the end of the rock, my feet making no sound on the sand, I very fortunately noticed that the sandy bed continued round to the back of the rock.

This rock about which I have said so much I can best describe as a giant school slate, two feet thick at its lower end, and standing up not quite perpendicularly on one of its long sides.

As I stepped clear of the giant slate, I looked behind me over my right shoulder and looked straight into the tigress's face.

I would like you to have a clear picture of the situation.

The sandy bed behind the rock was quite flat. To the right of it was the smooth slate fifteen feet high and leaning slightly outwards, to the left of it was a scoured-out steep bank also some fifteen feet high overhung by a dense tangle of thorn bushes, while at the far end was a slick similar to, but a little higher than the one I had glissaded down. The sandy bed,

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enclosed by these three natural walls, was about twenty feet long and half as wide, and lying on it, with her fore-paws stretched out and her hind legs well tucked under her, was the tigress. Her head, which was raised a few inches off her paws, was eight feet (measured later) from me, and on her face was a smile, similar to that one sees on the face of a dog welcoming his master home after a long absence.

Two thoughts flashed through my mind, one, that it was up to me to make the first move, and the other, that the move would have to be made in such a manner as not to alarm the tigress or make her nervous.

The rifle was in my right hand held diagonally across my chest, **with the safety-catch off**, and in order to get it to bear on the tigress the muzzle would have to be swung round three-quarters of a circle.

The movement of swinging round the rifle, with one hand, was begun **very slowly, and hardly perceptibly**, and when a quarter of a circle had been made, the stock came in contact with my right side. It was now necessary to extend my arm, and as the stock cleared my side, the swing was very slowly continued. My arm was now at full stretch and the weight of the rifle was beginning to tell. Only a little further now for the muzzle to go, and the tigress who had not once taken her eyes off mine was still looking up at me, with the pleased expression still on her face.

How long it took the rifle to make the three-quarter circle, I am not in a position to say. To me, looking into the tigress's eyes and unable therefore to follow the movement of the barrel, it appeared that my arm was paralyzed, and that the swing would never be completed. However, the movement was completed at last, and as soon as the rifle was pointing at the tigress's body, I pressed the trigger.

I heard the report, exaggerated in that restricted space, and felt the jar of the recoil, and but for these tangible proofs that the rifle had gone off, I might, for all the immediate result the shot produced, have been in the grip of one of those awful nightmares in which triggers are vainly pulled of rifles that refuse to be discharged at the critical moment.

For a perceptible fraction of time the tigress remained perfectly still, and then, very slowly, her head sank on to her outstretched paws, while at the same time a jet of blood issued from the bullet-hole. The bullet had injured her spine and shattered the upper portion of her heart.

The **two men** who were following a few yards behind me, and who were separated from the tigress by the thickness of the rock, came to a halt when they saw me stop and turn my head. They knew instinctively that I had seen the tigress and judged from my behaviour that she was close at hand, and Madho Singh said afterwards that he wanted to call out and tell me to drop the eggs and get both hands on the rifle. When I had fired my shot and lowered the point of the rifle on to my toes, Madho Singh, at a sign, came forward to relieve me of it, for very suddenly my legs appeared to be unable to support me, so I made for the fallen tree and sat down. Even before looking at the pads of her feet I knew it was the Chowgarh tigress I had sent to the Happy Hunting Grounds, and that the shears that had assisted her to cut the threads of sixty-four human lives the people of the district put the

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number at twice that figure had, while the game was in her hands, turned, and cut the thread of her own life."

I hope the inquisitive readers will not be bored to read the same fascinating hunting scene one more times. This time the account is much shorter, with much less details, but most importantly, it was written on the day it happened, April 11th, 1930. The letter was written for Maggie, the lifelong companion and the only family member for the second half of Corbett's life:

"...at **three o'clock** this afternoon I set out to tie a katra [buffalo] up at Saryapani where I have been tying up since the 31st. On the way out I changed my mind and instead of going to Saryapani turned down the forest track with the intention of trying the katra up where the Chamoli boy was killed on the 25th February. Most of the jungle had been burnt but I came on a nice bit of green grass on which several sambhar were feeding . It looked as good a place as any so I made the men (**I had three with me**) collect a few bindles of oak trees, and before leaving the katra I made a man go up a tree growing at the edge of the Khud and call as they do here when out with cattle. I, in the meantime, stood on a projecting rock nearby and once I thought I heard a movement down below me but could not be sure. Anyway the men had heard nothing so we left the katra, to go up the zig zag track to Dharompani where the Vivians and I had sat one evening looking down to valley. After going a few yards I came to a deep nala. As it looked a likely place for tracks I climbed down into it and **found the tracks of the man-eater**. The tracks were old, possibly made by the tiger when going away after eating out Vivian's katra. Anyway I decided to go down the nala and look for tracks where it joined the main ravine. The going was bad over huge rocks and in one place I wanted a free hand. By the way, I have forgotten to mention that I picked up two nightjar's eggs close to where the katra was tied so I handed the rifle over to Madho Singh. I got down alright and as Madho Singh joined me he put the rifle into my hand, I had eggs in the other, and whispered that **some animal had growled like a pig or a bear, he was not sure which**. The nala was very narrow just here, and to our right and overhanging us was an enormous rock the top of which was about 8 feet above our heads. As the lower end of the rock the bed of the nala was on a level with the banks. I tip toed forward without making a sound and as I cleared the rock, I looked over my right shoulder and - looked straight into the tiger's face. She flattered down her ears and barred her teeth and slipped forward but by then I had **slipped the safety over** and the bullet went

through her heart. It was all over in a heart beat and the tiger was dead as a nail. I am glad I got her like this – no sitting up and no fuss. She was just what I expected her to be – old and thin; cracked pads and teeth worn down to the gums, but her coat, on the whole, is not bad. I told Vivian last year that she was 8-4. I might be an inch out – not more. I did not break the eggs and the nightjar was glad to get them back.

There are a few conflicting details in these two sources, as indicated in bold in both texts. These details are:

- (1) In story Corbett mentions starting his hunt at 2pm, in the letter – at 3pm;
- (2) In story Corbett mentions two accompanying men, in the letter – three men;
- (3) In story Corbett does not mention the presence of sambars, in the letter he does;
- (4) In story Corbett does not mention seeing the old tracks of the man-eater, in the letter he does mention seeing them;
- (5) In story the men whispered to Corbett that they heard a tiger growl, in the letter his men whispered him that they were not sure if the sound was from a pig or a bear;
- (6) In story Corbett mentions his rifle's safety catch was off when he saw the tigress, in the letter – he opened the safety over after seeing the tigress;
- (7) In story, after seeing the tigress, Corbett moved his rifle agonisingly slowly, in order not to alert the tigress, in the letter the tigress made a move but he beat her and it was "over in a heartbeat";

It is clear that that both of these sources cannot be true, and that there could be various reasons they do not coincide. There are several things we should take into account before we start discussing these discrepancies.

Firstly: Corbett wrote the letter on the **same day**, only couple of hours later after killing the tigress, so the letter was written with a much fresher memory than the story. The story was written some **3-5 years** later. So basically, we need to trust the letter more than to the story, as the loss of memory during several years is quite probable.

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Secondly: Corbett wrote the letter to Maggie in order to let her to know that the hunt was over, how it went, and that he was safe. In the story, on the other hand, Corbett tried to give his readers as many details as he remembered. Therefore although the letter is written on a fresher memory, it does not contain many details that were not important for Corbett (or better to say - for Maggie) that moment. The story, although written much later, was written with the intention to provide as many details as possible. Compare: this episode in the published story version contains 2585 words, and the same episode in the letter version contains only 548 words. So the story version is more than five times longer, with many more details.

So, on one hand, we need to trust the letter as the primary source, but we should remember as well that Corbett might have omitted some secondary details in his letter. For example, meeting villagers, and the dispute between the father of the killed Chamoli boy with other villagers, is completely absent in the letter to Maggie. Corbett only mentions "On the way out I changed my mind and instead of going to Saryapani turned down the forest track with the intention of trying the katra up where the Chamoli boy was killed on the 25th February," without mentioning the reason of changing his mind - talking to the villagers and the father of the Chamoli boy.

Most of the differences mentioned above must be attributed to the gradual memory failure and should be resolved in favour of the letter. There can be no other explanation, as these details (2pm instead of 3pm two men instead of three men etc.) do not make the story more exciting. Also, failure to mention of old tiger tracks in the story must be attributed to the memory failure, as the presence of the tiger tracks (even the old ones) would have given the reader some additional thrill.

What Corbett's men told him about the growl they heard is also different in these sources: tiger (in the story) vs pig or the bear (in the letter). This contradiction most likely is the result of a combination of the memory failure and sub-conscious sublimation: after forgetting to mention the presence of the old tiger tracks, Corbett's memory possibly compensated this miss by mentioning the "tiger growl" which is absent in the letter.

The most important difference is the last moment of the hunt: how did Corbett turned hit rifle and fired after he saw the tigress ready to attack him from behind. This is something he would never forget, so we can not explain this difference with a memory failure.

According to the letter (which was written straight after the hunt), the tigress made the move ("slipped forward"), but he was faster and it was "over in a heartbeat." According to the story, the tigress did not make any moves, and in order to bring his rifle in a position to fire at the tigress, Corbett had to turn of the rifle agonisingly slowly, in order not to alert the tigress.

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Which of these descriptions should be considered correct, and why Corbett's description of the ending of the episode are so different?

Martin Booth believed that the true course of the events was given in the letter, and that Corbett dramatized the story in order to make it a better read. If we want to accept this point of view, we have one problem to overcome: was this **physically possible**? I mean was it possible that Corbett beat the tigress in speed in this situation?

Let us remember, that when Corbett saw the tigress,

- (1) he was standing with his back to the tigress,
- (2) his rifle was facing towards the totally wrong direction from the tigress,
- (3) he had the nightjar eggs in his left hand, and finally,
- (4) the tigress was only eight feet from Corbett (less than 2.5 metres).

So Corbett was in the worst possible situation to shot the tigress. He was facing the other way, unlike the tigress that was facing him; Corbett was not ready to shoot, unlike the tigress that was well prepared to jump. Even if Corbett's both hands were free, the quick reaction and momentous shot at the tigress without grave consequences for Corbett would have been quite impossible.

Let us listen to Peter Byrne, professional hunter from Nepal, one of the first researchers of Corbett legacy, who dedicated a book to Corbett hunting exploits. In his book Byrne specially analysed the Chowgarh tigress killing scene and discussed exactly this situation, namely, what would have happened if **Corbett did not have eggs in his left hand**. This is what Peter Byrne writes: "in this case he would almost certainly have been carrying the rifle in both hands, and would probably have attempted to swing around and draw down on the tigress the instant he saw her. My guess is that he would have got a bullet into her because Corbett was very quick, and a first class shot. But the sudden action would almost certainly have provoked an instantaneous reaction on the part of the tigress, which in this case would have been an attack. And an attack from a big cat, at close range, a cat that is fully prepared, with its back legs tucked under it, tensed, ready to hurl itself forward, would not have been stopped by a .275 bullet. Squarely shot, even in mid air, the cat might have been mortally wounded. But the impetus of its spring, plus the fact that it had Corbett squarely on its path, with its eyes targeted on him, plus the minimal distance involved – eight feet – would have had the cat on top of him, biting, tearing, even in its dying throes. And even a single bite from a big cat can well be fatal, certainly, in the case of man, if it is in the head and neck area of its victim."

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So in the view of a professional hunter, **even if Corbett had both of his hands free**, the instantaneous action on his side, mentioned in Corbett's letter to Maggie, would not have been possible without grave consequences for Corbett. But as we know, Corbett did not even have both hands free, so the "instant turn and quick fire" scenario becomes truly impossible. By the way, Corbett also mentions that the eggs in his left hand forced him to act very slowly and thus saved him.

What about the scene described in the story? Is it possible to come to the conclusion that the true course of event of the final scene of hunting are faithfully described in the story? I will now try to explain the possible psychological factors behind the human-tiger behavior in such a close encounter.

Psychology of close encounter

When humans, like many other living beings, are suddenly finding themselves in a deadly situation, they as a rule resort to instinctive actions. The stimulus of danger is too strong to allow a well thought and logical behavior. So what our powerful instincts tell us? There is a famous "flight or fight instinct" for most of the living organisms. According to the story, Corbett did not resort to any of them although the danger was more than deadly. Was this possible? Yes, even very likely. Scholars found that fight and flight are not the only instinctive responses to such deadly situations in humans and some animals. There is a third extremely important but often neglected action - freezing. Therefore, the instinctive response to critical situation actually has three versions: "fight, flight or freeze." And it is a well known fact that in the most critical situations, like sudden attack or the imminent strong violence, humans often freeze. Despite the popular misconception that freezing in a critical situation is a deadly mistake and will surely lead to the death, freezing is actually a life-saving instinctive response, particularly **when a human is facing a predator**.

Why is this so? Animal psychologists unanimously declare that if you suddenly find yourself facing a deadly predator, under no circumstances you should try to run. Long evolutionary interaction between our ancestors and the predators taught our ancestors that predators attack as soon as you start running for your life. There is a fascinating book, written by a professional safari guide from Botswana Peter Allison. The title of his book tells it all: "Whatever You Do, Don't Run: True Tales of a Botswana Safari Guide." The idea of the book and title is very simple: only food runs! So your best option for survival if you meet a big cat or other dangerous predator is to stay still and not to try to run away.

Of course, tigers, lions and other stealth predators attack not only the running prey. As a matter of fact, they much prefer to attack their prey while the prey is unaware of the presence of the predator. But if the prey sees the predator, predator either abandons the

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hunt, or stops and expects the prey to behave like a prey – to run. The situation at the giant slate was a classic example of the psychological duel between a human and a big cat.

The tigress saw Corbett first, and most likely if Corbett did not have a glance above his right shoulder, in a second or two the tigress would have made a jump, leaving Corbett no chance or time to respond. But Corbett looked back, and the imminent attack was arrested. As her cover was blown away, the tigress most likely anticipated the human to start running away, but Corbett froze, and he quickly realized that the first move was up to him. This thought was absolutely correct. According to Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, Bushmen, living in close interaction with the lions, taught her (and her family members) that if they meet a lion in close proximity (and Elizabeth together with her brother had such a close meeting with a male lion), they should not to run, but to stop for a while and then start walking away in an oblique line (from the book "The Old Way", 2006). In this situation, facing the tigress from less than two and half metres, any sharp movement would have been interpreted either as an attack, or the desire to run away, both inevitably triggering the immediate tiger response. Peter Byrne is very clear about the chances of a hunter trying to stop a tiger from such a short range with a not so heavy rifle. So the very slow movement, without any rush, and without taking eyes from the eyes of the tiger, was probably the only correct way to behave. Hard to imagine what was going on in Corbett's head while he was turning his rifle for 280 degrees with one hand, but we know that after he fired the shot, he was unable to remain on his feet.

Therefore, I maintain, that the behavior of both Corbett and the tigress in this extremely tense episode, as it is described in the story, is absolutely natural. So although the scene might seem to many readers far-fetched and over-dramatised, the behaviour of a human and a predator is quite natural.

By the way, Corbett, a first-class naturalist with a keen eye, noticed the instinctive freezing behavior of humans during the danger earlier in his life. In a story, written about his trusted hunting friend Robin, Corbett specially mentioned this feature of human behaviour. When responding to the all-out attack of a wounded leopard, Robin run away for his life, but Corbett remained frozen where he was, and later Corbett remarked:

"Our reactions to the sudden and quite unexpected danger that had confronted us were typical of how a canine and a human being act in an emergency... in Robin's case it had impelled him to seek safety in silent and rapid retreat; whereas in my case it had the effect of gluing my feet to the ground and making retreat rapid or otherwise impossible."

So if we compare these two accounts, describing the details of the dramatic encounter with the Chowgarh tigress, one from the written story, and another from the letter, we must come to a conclusion, that the events described in the letter, implying turning around in a split second and killing a man eating tigress which was ready to jump, without provoking

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her to jump, is virtually impossible. On the other hand, the events described in the story are much more realistic, both from physical as well as psychological point of view in reference of human and bit cat behavior.

If we accept that Corbett told the truth in the story, we are automatically coming to the conclusion that **he did not tell his sister the true course of event** of hunting on the day when it happened. This is a serious problem. We need to find a good reason why did Corbett tell his sister something different, instead of describing thing as they were in reality? Loss of memory is out of question, as Corbett was writing his letter to Maggie just a couple of hours later after the hunt, possibly even still feeling the inner tremor from the near-death encounter. So what was the reason for Corbett to change the details of the final encounter with the tigress?

Is it possible to propose that Corbett wanted to impress his sister, and invented a story that from this impossible situation, with his back to the tiger, and with only one free hand, he managed to beat the tiger in speed, instead of admitting candidly that he was on a mercy of a man-eater? Readers might agree this explanation is extremely unlikely.

But there is another and much simpler explanation why Corbett did not tell the full truth to his sister. When a family member loves another family member very strongly, the loving family member is often consciously spared of any negative or scary events that happened to the loved family member. Corbett and Maggie were the two most dedicated people for each other. As the older and caring sister, Maggie nursed Jim on several occasions after doctors were losing hope for his revival. None of them married and they both were completely dedicated to each other. From Corbett letters we know that Maggie was sending her brother cakes while Jim was after man-eaters. We also know that Maggie sometimes tried to stop her brother from going after man-eaters. We know it was Maggie who made Corbett to give a word that his hunt for the Thak tigress would be his last hunt for a man-eater. And it was Maggie who asked her brother to be back by December 1st 1938 whatever the result of the hunt was. And we certainly know how diligent Corbett was in keeping his word to Maggie from the Thak man-eater story. Loving someone and knowing that your loved family member is hunting a man eating tiger, is already a nerve-wrecking experience. Therefore, it seems very natural to think that Corbett wanted to spare his sister from realising how close her brother came to his own death on April 11th 1930. Therefore, I suggest that when writing a letter, Corbett restrained himself from mentioning the scariest detail of the hunt. And the scariest detail of this hunt was that Corbett's life was entirely in the mercy of the dreaded man-eater.

We do not know for how long did this situation actually last, as Corbett was not in a position to tell accurately the time elapsed. For him the tense moment was definitely stretched in time, as it is for many people in a grave danger. But any stretch of time, from a

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few seconds to possibly a minute or two, while Corbett was slowly turning his riffle, he was balancing on the edge of his death. For Corbett this was the scariest fact of this dramatic hunting event, and to me it is natural that he did not reveal this detail to his caring sister. It is also symptomatic that Corbett did not mention in the letter that after shooting the tigress, he found his legs were failing him. Instead, his words are downplaying the danger he underwent, and describe how happy he was that he got the tigress so easily: "I am glad I got her like this - no sitting up and no fuss."

According to our current medical knowledge, such extremely stressful moments leave unwanted legacy on the heart. If this is true, Corbett's heart must have been definitely affected with such stressful events. And who know whether Corbett's death in 1955 from a massive heart attack was partly corroborated by the accumulation of the negative effects of the most stressful events from his hunting career. Killing of the Chowgarh tigress was possibly one of the most stressful events of Corbett's long career of a man-eating tiger and leopard hunting.

The important methodological lesson of this story for Corbett researchers is that when discussing controversies in Corbett writings, apart from such a factor as gradual memory corruption, we should also take into account the psychological factor. More precisely, we should treat Corbett's letters written to Maggie with a great care, as in his letters to Maggie Corbett could have omitted or changed the scariest details of the hunt in order to downplay the danger he was experiencing.

Martin Booth was very sceptical about other elements of the story as well. For example, the possibility that Corbett had nightjar eggs in his left hand sounded to him totally unbelievable. "This really is a good deal to believe," wrote Booth, "To accept the tale one has to believe that Jim was stupid enough to collect the eggs (why not to get them later?) when stalking a man-eater he knew to be in the vicinity..." It is after this accusation that Booth cites Corbett's letter to Maggie, in order prove that Corbett does have discrepancies between his story and his letter to Maggie. Unfortunately, Booth fails to acknowledge, that the fact of holding eggs (and even returning the eggs back to the nest) are clearly present both in the story and in the letter.

To understand why Corbett picked up the unusually shaped eggs, we should remember that when he was going down the nala, he was not expecting the man-eater to be **that** close. Yes, there were pugmarks, as this is mentioned in the letter, but they were old. Yes, his men whispered that they possible heard the growl of a pig or bear, but he knew tigers do not betray their position when they are stalking someone. On the other hand, let us remember that Corbett was a born naturalist, and for him seeing a couple of uniquely shaped nightjar eggs was quite a thrilling experience. And above all, we should remember when Corbett was going down the nala, his goal was to go up the other side of the deep

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ravine and from the distance of about 200-300 metres watch the tethered buffalo. Corbett would have definitely followed Martin Booth advice and collected the uniquely shaped eggs later if he could have known that his meeting with the man-eater was only a seconds away.

Booth questioned also the possibility of Corbett managing to turn his rifle very slowly with his right hand alone. He even did an experiment to check if this was physically possible, and reported that he himself was not able to do this movement (despite him being a trained sportsman with strong hands). We must give a credit to him though when he reports that one of his hunting friends was able to repeat Corbett's movements.

To conclude this discussion, I would like to say that yes, there are clear contradictions between Corbett's description of the hunting the Chowgarh tigress in his book and his letter to his sister. Most of these contradictions were the result of a memory failure, and the information provided in a letter should be considered correct. But in his description of the most dramatic moment of the hunt, when he was facing the tigress, Corbett's written account of the hunt in a story is a more precise description of real events than his letter to Maggie. This discrepancy most likely arose because Corbett deliberately changed the sequence of events in his letter in order to conceal from his sister how close he came to his death on that day.

How long the slow turning of the rifle took? Corbett did not know how much time did the turning of the rifle took, but for sure, in such situations this would seem like an eternity. People caught in critical situations (for example, in earthquake or a road accident) often report that time slows down and each second seemed like minutes. And as this moment is so nerve wrecking as it is for millions of the readers of Corbett books, would be even more for Jim's sister, for whom Jim was the only person she lived for. Therefore, Jim's desire to spare her from this experience is quite natural to understand.

I do not know what you think of my argument, dear reader, but even from the factual point of view, is much more realistic to believe that Corbett did not describe his nerve-wrecking slow turning in a letter to his sister in order to spare her from negative emotions, than to believe that he did a totally unbelievable split second turn with a rifle in one hand and eggs in the other hand, and shot tigress without even dropping the eggs. It would be also extremely difficult to believe that Corbett concealed doing this unbelievable feat in his book in order to make his reading more thrilling.

Yes, we can all agree that the situation in which the Chowgarh tigress was killed was extraordinary. However, the detailed comparison between Jim's story and his letter, written for his sister, and the psychological analyses of the close encounter of a human with a lethal predator (from both sides) strongly suggests that in his story Jim Corbett simply described the events of the actual hunt. Most of the contradicting details of the hunt, described in his letter to Maggie and in the story, were the result of gradual corruption of his memory. And

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most importantly, we came to the conclusion that Corbett most likely tried to spare his sister's nerves by concealing the scariest moment of his hunt, when his life was at mercy of a dreaded man-eater.

In the conclusion we can say with a confidence that we can criticise Jim Corbett for occasional memory failures and we should be careful when deciding which of the sources is to be trusted when there are discrepancies. Several such cases are analysed in this book. But we cannot accuse him of deliberate changing of the real events in order to make his stories a better read. Following his usual writing style, Corbett only gave a detailed description of this extraordinary hunt at best as he remembered it.