The Story of the Leopard Gloves

That Christmas we wanted to plan a camp on the Jaldacca in the Dooars for Christmas, so Philip Wibmer and I decided to drive down to his brother-in-law's Garden, spend the night and make the arrangements, as he didn't have a telephone. We arrived in a nearby village around dusk and the villagers hailed the jeep, and asked us if we could get rid of some leopards that were killing their livestock. The leopards had taken up residence on the village green.

Night falls very quickly in India, by the time we had the shotguns loaded with our own home made Lethal bullets – rifle bullets were rationed to 5 per person per year during the war and were still scarce -and set through the windscreen, it was dark. So we couldn't see anything as we bumped our way onto the green, which had bushes on three sides. But we could hear the snarling of the leopards all around. We drove round in circles trying to spot them in the headlights. Finally a leopard and a three-quarter grown cub ran across. Now we realized it was a mother leopard teaching her cubs to kill. This was bad news. Once leopards learn they can kill cattle

with little risk, they'll continue doing it.

We decided we had to kill the mother or a cub to entice her out. I saw two shadowy shapes and took a shot. A leopard went down. It wasn't the mother and she stayed hidden, roaring her anger along with the other cubs. Philip put a bullet through the head of the cub and said we had to pick it up. But we couldn't get out of the jeep to do it in case the mother charged

So his plan was for him to drive by and me to lean out, grab it by the tail and tow it off the green. I finally grabbed the tail, towed it about a yard and nearly fell out. It was at least 4 ft long and probably weighed about a hundred pounds. The head

crunched under the wheels. Still Phillip was determined it was the only way to get it, as the other leopards were going berserk in the bushes. So we made another futile attempt.

Finally Phillip decided he had to risk getting out to toss it in the back of the jeep. We showed it to the locals before continuing our journey. Hopefully the leopards moved away. The next day we had it skinned and eventually I had the pelt made into gauntlets I wore for many years when I returned to England.

We arrived at his brother-in-law's bungalow to find he was away from home and his servants distraught because there was a tiger roaming the grounds. So we resigned ourselves to sitting on the verandah with the shotgun. But first we had to make some more Lethal bullets as we'd used ours up on the leopard. That meant taking the shot out of the cartridges and ramming it in again mixed with melted candlewax..

I'm not sure how long we spent sitting there listening to its coughing before we heard the most blood-curdling howl that only a Siamese can make and a cry of rage from the tiger. We could see nothing and sat listening to the sounds of the strangest fight.

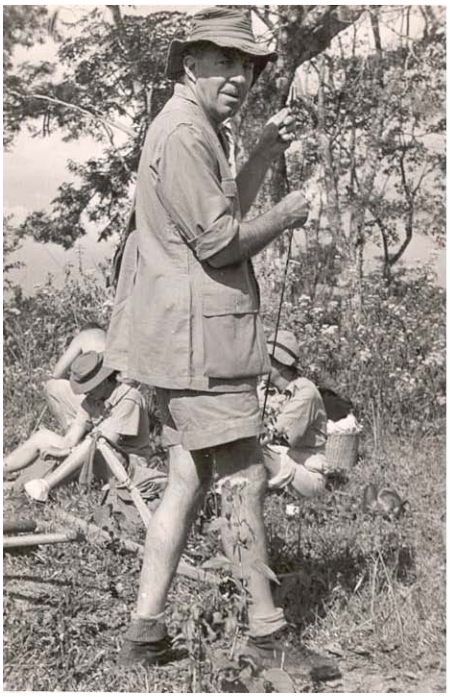
The fight went on for 20 minutes as we sat helpless on the verandah. We could hear the tiger screaming in pain so we assumed Hong-Kong had attacked him on the back of the neck. The fight ended with the tiger fleeing and Hong-Kong badly mauled and dying. But this was not the strangest story of his life

It so happened my parents had given the untamable Siamese Hong-Kong and a kitten to him on their first Home leave in '48. Hong-Kong adopted the kitten and forced it to walk under his belly even when it was full grown. And he was big enough to do it. Hong-Kong was very protective of his cat so maybe the tiger had been stalking it. . When our parents came home on leave in '48 they had left Hong Kong with friends. Their house was on stilts and he took up residence underneath; much too cunning to be caught, going out to hunt at night. Then the friends heard from the villagers that a strange pale cat-like creature was leading a pack of dogs on hunting raids. They were terrified, as it had a peculiar cry only Siamese can make, and they wouldn't go out at night when the pack was hunting.

When we came back to collect Hong Kong, he wouldn't come to us. So finally we set a leopard trap for him. I'm not sure what we used as bait, as for leopards we'd use a goat set in a separate half of the cage. When Mummy leaned in to take him out he scratched her down the arm and sped off. Finally he was trapped again and kept in the cage. That's when Philip's brother-in-law offered to take him. From then on his nickname was Dog.

We made the arrangements to go camping on the Jaldacca for Christmas and then Philip and I returned to Darjeeling. Then we all drove back down in the Land Rover. There we were joined by our friends Bob and Susie. (Bob had been our district Doctor when we lived in Ranicherra and had survived Japanese prisoner of war camp.)

As usual, we took our Christmas provisions with us, especially the Christmas pudding, but did a little fishing and shot a few jungli morghis as well.



30, 60, 61lb Mahseer. How better to judge their size!

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Boxing Day picnic on the banks of the river Philip's brother-in-law, Susie, Philip, Jill, Jack, Ann

Sue, Ann, Sunshine, Jill, Freddy, after New Year's Eve Ball 1948

We went back to Darjeeling for the New Year's Eve Ball and this is what we looked like the day after, sitting on the bank of the Teesta river at Mangitar. Certainly not with much energy to do anything.

I don't remember who 'Sunshine' was but Freddy Oakley was the Manager of Ging Tea Estate, which my father supervised.

We used to have shooting parties at Rungneet too. I remember my first shoot there. We were going out for pheasant and I was standing in line between my father and mother when the beaters put up this black bird almost under my father's nose. It sailed over my head and I my mother brought it down then turned to me a said: "Why didn't you shoot it?" "Well," I replied I was waiting for a pheasant." It transpired that was a local pheasant but certainly not the beautiful English bird I was expecting.

However I redeemed myself later. It was the custom to get a barking deer for the beaters to eat. As they were beating, a deer jumped out in front of me. I was so startled I fired and the deer went down. But I felt so bad when I looked that deer in the eyes as it crumpled to its knees and died.

Often our forays would take us into river beds not meant for cars, not even our tough Land Rover, and we'd get stuck, usually in some swampy ground. Here I'm trying to wedge something under the wheel.

On our next trip we drove about 200 miles across Bengal to Victor's Pullan's Garden. Victor was one of the few independent tea planters in India and his huge house, Tirrihana, was

nicknamed the Gin Palace.

Bob had saved Victor's life after a tiger had mauled him. Victor's Garden was plagued with tigers, rather like Baghmari. He had gone out with two elephants, mahouts and his Sirdar to hunt a tiger that was terrorizing the area. He was on the back of a young elephant that had just been broken in. They had tracked the tiger, which suddenly turned and sprang at the elephant's head. The elephant reared and threw Victor on the ground. The other elephant bolted with the Sirdar. Victor laid, stunned, on the ground. The tiger came over and started chewing Victor's leg then,

inexplicably decided to chew on the stock of his rifle, the barrel of which was pointing right at him. Finally the Mahout got the other elephant under control and came back to find Victor. They carried him to the house and fetched Bob.

Bob knew he'd have to amputate Victor's leg before the gangrene spread. But he had few facilities for an on-the-spot operation. So he made Victor drink enough Scotch to knock him out, then poured more over the wounds as an antiseptic. With the men holding him down, he amputated his leg. It undoubtedly saved his life.


Victor & 8ft python

When I knew him he had a state-of-the-art prosthetic leg so it didn't stop him from doing much – except for climbing into a machan up in a tree. While we were there a pair of tigers he named Percy and Lucy, was killing cattle, So after being told about a dead cow he had a machan built in a nearby tree, about 10-12ft of the ground. (This is high enough so a tiger can't jump up.) The cow was staked so the tigers couldn't drag it off. Philip and I agreed to sit up over the kill

We expected the tigers to come at dusk or later at night. Whichever they did, they would lie up and watch over the kill for an hour or so before, to make sure the coast was clear. We went up about 4pm and quit at 11pm when neither of the tigers had appeared.

Nothing is quite so difficult as sitting still with a loaded gun for hours on end. We almost decided to shoot one of the wild pigs snuffing around, which wouldn't have come if a tiger was nearby, but couldn't even get a clean shot at one. Next day we heard the tigers had made an earlier kill somewhere else and had eaten that.

Later Victor told me some Indians had killed Lucy with a machine gun from a floodlit jeep. A sad end to a pair he'd come to respect for their wiles.

After this trip we went back to Darjeeling. My time in India was coming to an end and life in the West to begin. Though my memories might be refreshed by returning, my heart would be broken by the changes. There is no going back.