

THE SCOURGE OF PUNANI

Researched and Written

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It was a beautiful Saturday morning, so typical of this part of the island and Manikkam the Thapal peon of Mr. Altendorff the Railway Inspector at Punani, made his way on foot to Kalkudah, along the road bordered by the scrub jungle.

Though Manikkam was well aware that he was treading perilous ground, on that crisp clear morning he didn't have a care in the world. With the thapal bag strung over his shoulder he walked quickly with a bouncy gait and head up in the air, perhaps even whistling to himself the notes of the latest Tamil hit tune and ignored the excited chirping of the birds. Yet Manikkam was guilty of gross insubordination, for Altendorff had given him strict instructions not to use the 'new road', an order that he had conveniently ignored and for which he was about to pay the supreme penalty.

The great feline, with pangs of hunger beginning to tighten his belly, had been hunting for the last four or five days and was about to cross the Punani road at the 28th mile post when he saw the approaching human figure. He immediately crouched low, blending perfectly with the dry, brown underbrush. As the figure of Manikkam drew close to the ambush the big cat crouched still lower, annoyed by the chirping of the birds. Then the adrenalin coarsed through his veins, drawing his lips back in an evil snarl and filling his mouth with thick saliva, which dropped down the side of his jaws to wet the dry grass below his head. The powerful hormone made the strong, tense muscles of his hindquarters ripple and the tip of his tail to flick rhythmically. Yet not a sound escaped his lips. Manikkam stopped in mid stride and the whistle died on his lips as he, just for a split second, saw the spotted feline face emerging from the scrub. The man-eater of Punani had made his last human kill. The date was 16th August 1924.

Punani lies on the Polonnaruwa, Valachchenai road, what was at one time known as the Manampitiya road and famous for its wild life. Today, it is on the border of the A and B programmes of the Mahaweli Scheme. The Manampitiya road is the main trunk road to Batticaloa with the code name A 11. But in 1921 it was wild country, with the road only about 6 feet wide and bordered all along the way by secondary forest, scrub and tall grass. Punani at that time was just a name on the map, with no resident community, and the only people moving about in the area were the tobacco cultivators coming from the Batticaloa side, a few contractors with their labour gangs doing some work for the Government, loggers and the railway workers.

Like most man-eaters in recorded history, especially in the sub-continent of India, one could never ever say precisely when one first appeared in an area or when one first acquired a taste for human flesh. A man-eater suddenly appears out of 'nowhere' to terrorise the jungle communities in the vicinity, in some cases an entire district, until accounted for or disappear as suddenly as it arrived. 'Punani' too appeared suddenly in the area somewhere in the early 1920s.

With the fatalism typical of the jungle living folk of the east, the leopard was taken for granted even after many human kills had been made. No one had bothered to report the incidents to that State Authorities or strangely as I found out in my research, even to the police. This was the situation prevailing in Punani when A.H. Altendorff was posted by the Railway Construction Department as an inspector in charge of the extension to the Batticaloa - Trincomalee lines, in February 1921. Yet it was early in 1923 that he first heard of the man-eater. This was when, during an inspection a contractor had casually mentioned that a boy who had been helping him in the kitchen had been

missing and that it was suspected that he had been carried away by a leopard. Though Altendorff immediately suspected the presence of a man-eating leopard he only got the confirmation a few days later when two workmen returning to their homes in Batticaloa were attacked and one of them, carried away. Altendorff at once got the information to the Government Agent and the leopard was Gazzetted. Thus was born the first and only officially recorded man-eating leopard in the annals of the island.

Despite the Gazzette notification and news items, though not very prominent, hardly any one was interested in the leopard, except those who lived or worked in the area haunted by the cat. Almost all his victims were those who travelled along this section of the road and strangely most of them were in close proximity to the 28th mile post.

'Punanis' reign of terror went unabated for more than a year after Altendorff first heard of him, by which time he had lost all fear of human beings attacking even groups of people and even carts. When the official count of his victims had risen to about seventeen, the Government Agent Eastern Province, decided to ask for assistance to destroy the creature.

Shelton Agar was the man he turned to. Agar was a planter in the central hills and was also a well known hunter who had accounted for a number of killer and rogue elephants in the Batticaloa District. The GA now wired him, offering a reward of Rs. 100 a princely sum in those days, for the destruction of the leopard.

Capitan Shelton Agar had never shot a man-eater before, as a matter of fact he had never even heard of one, till he received the GA's telegram on the 22nd May 1924, as in his own words he says "..... is something quite unique as far as I am concerned". Ironically, at this very moment he undertook to search the jungles of Punani for this spotted terror, that great naturalist and undoubtedly the greatest name in man-eater hunting, Jim Corbett was tracking the jungles along the pilgrim route to Badrinath in India, in search of the most famous leopard of all time, the man-eating leopard

of Rudraprayag who ate up more than a 125 human beings and whom he ultimately shot in 1926 after hunting for eight long years. It is interesting to note that Corbett, by that time had accounted for many more man-eaters, the greatest among them being the Champawat tigress in 1907, the Panar leopard in 1910 and the Muktesar tigress in 1911. Yet, like the rest of the world, except those who lived in India in the 1920's, Agar was completely ignorant of Corbett's exploits. For that great, but extremely modest man committed his adventures to writing, under great persuasion, for the first time in 1944.

So, understandably the GA's telegram "..... rather took my breath away and caused me to become quite excited." By noon the following day, after a journey of 175 miles, Agar was at the spot where the man-eater had killed his latest victim.

Having recruited some local folk, Agar examined the site of the attack and found that a fierce fight had taken place between man and beast before the former finally succumbed. Having followed the trail Agar found the gory remains, but as the kill seemed to have been abandoned by the man-eater, Agar decided not to sit up for the culprit.

For the next few days Agar patrolled the Punani road, both by day and by night and on one occasion was chased by an angry elephant. Regrettably, during this period he shot off a whole family of leopards, two adults and their three quarter grown cubs that he found on the Punani road close to the danger zone. This he did, as at one stage he believed that no single leopard could cause this amount of destruction and thought that a number of big cats were responsible. Here of course Agar was acting in complete ignorance of the hunting of man-eating big cats and even lacking the rudimentary knowledge of the nature of such a beast. There is little doubt that had he been aware of this, being the type of hunter he was, he would have surely have spared this grand family. It seems a shame that Corbett waited so long to publish his adventures and impart his knowledge to the world. For all these expert hunters of man-eaters like Corbett himself, Anderson and Carrington - Turner among many others almost always had precisely identified the



beast long before they ever set eyes on him. This they did by carefully examining the pug marks and primarily sexing them, then looking out for any physical defects or disabilities, either once again from the spoor or the way he killed his prey or even by the way he had dragged the kill. Further they spoke to people who had seen the man-eater for information of any exceptional markings on the hide or for that matter any salient feature that would identify the beast visually. Agar was of course handicapped here, as there was no one at that time who had seen the animal and lived to tell the tale. Due to this, these gentlemen hardly ever 'drew a bead' on the wrong animal. There have been instances when leopards and tigers have come to baits that they have been sitting over, and they have not even bothered to lift their weapons as they knew that this was not the animal they were hunting. There have however been cases when they have shot the wrong animal in doubt, but these have been the exceptions rather than the rule. The greatest exception was

perhaps the very animal that Corbett was hunting in India at the time when Agar was hunting 'Punani', the leopard of Rudraprayag, where Corbett fired in doubt and firmly established identity – post mortem.

For another week or so Agar hunted the man-eater using all his experience in hunting, including sitting up over a live bait in the form of a goat, but without success. With professional duties pressing him and as there had been no more human kills, Agar returned to the hills, hoping to come back to Punani on receipt of further information.

Though the man-eater would undoubtedly have taken a few more victims from the time that Agar left Punani, there's no evidence extant to show this and Agar himself says that after a time he had more or less given up the idea of going after the man-eater. Then on the 16th of August he received a telegram from the GA, Batticaloa, requesting him to destroy a rogue elephant in that area. Responding promptly and upon reporting to the GA, he was informed of the latest kill by the man-eater. The victim was none other than the unfortunate Manikkam, the thapal peon. As this kill had taken place only 29 hours before, Agar put off going after the rogue and decided to put all his efforts to get the man-eater.

By early afternoon he had arrived at the 28th mile post. He was accompanied by Altendorff the railway inspector, whom he had met earlier that day at the Valachchenai ferry. It was he who was responsible for informing the GA promptly about the kill, an action which Agar says was a key factor in destroying the man-eater. The ground around the mile post showed that the kill was instantaneous and clean, with no evidence of a struggle. The total lack of any blood indicated to Agar that the leopard had not released his initial death grip, till the corpse was dragged away. Agar lost no time in following the drag mark and before long, having passed the spot where he had found the remains of the victim in May, he came upon the body or rather what remained of poor Manikkam. The sight was not pleasing, but it told Agar all he wanted to know. Manikkam had been killed by a terrible bite at the base of the skull and neck, which had twisted the head around. All the

insides and a good part of the left leg had been consumed. The body was still fairly fresh and the right leg, face and arms had still not been touched. Agar was now sure that they had disturbed the cat at his meal and that undoubtedly he was lying close by. Agar hastened to construct a 'machan' or platform over the kill and by the time this was completed and the remains placed in a suitable position it was almost dusk. Agar decided that they should hurry to the car and get the required equipment to pass the night on the 'machan.' They had not gone more than forty yards from the kill when Manger, Agars driver, looked over his shoulders to find the leopard had come back to the kill. A whispered "leopard sir" brought instant reaction from Agar, who spun around and in one movement had the rifle at the shoulder, squeezing the trigger. The man-eater jumped back at the shot and the next moment had vanished into the undergrowth. Agar was almost sure that he had missed. Continuing on to the car and having gathered what they needed, they began their return journey to the kill, now in total darkness.

Years of living in the jungles and among its denizens, a man develops a very powerful sense of observation. He begins to notice the slightest changes in surroundings, the minutest alteration in wind direction, the smallest change in sounds and for instance may be even a little pebble that wasn't there on the path the previous day. Perhaps due to this or stemming off it, a man who spends a good part of his life in the jungle, loving it, cherishing its beauties, yet knowing and appreciating the hazards a jungle can present, where the inexorable law is the 'survival of the fittest' acquires through the years a very acute sixth sense, which is rudimentary or perhaps even non-existent in the urban dweller. Now this warning system told Agar to stop. As much as he wanted to continue an unbearable urge held him back. Swinging around and getting his men to shout as loud as possible, they made their way back to the car, disappointed but alive to fight another day.

By the time Agar and his party returned the next morning, the man-eater had removed the kill, and by following the drag marks they once again came across the remains. What was left was a pathetic little mass of flesh and bone, the head

partly eaten. Yet Agar instinctively knew the man-eater would return to finish off this little bit. Hastily he erected a 'machan' and having climbed it sent Manger and the rest of the men back to the car to get the equipment.

Now Agar was alone, and he was aware that the leopard was close by. To a jungle lover, when he is in the jungle there is always a shortage of time. The more he is in the forest the longer he wants to be there. Yet now for the first time Agar started to calculate the time, and he knew it would be at least two hours before his men returned. The tension was unbearable, and Agar who was quite used to sitting absolutely still in a jungle hide found it difficult to stay in this fashion now. He kept looking around, and jumped at the belling of a sambhur, his skin started to crawl as something cold touched the back of his head and was relieved to find it was only a bead of sweat that travelled down his spine. His trained eyes narrowed and his pulse quickened as he saw a brown patch in the undergrowth that wasn't there a minute ago. A drop of sweat from his forehead fell on the stock of his rifle, and he realised that what he had seen was only a patch of light that filtered through the bush, as the sun slowly changed its position in the heavens. He was startled again as he felt the human remains move and swung his head. This quick movement disturbed the porcupine that was sniffing at the rotting flesh, making it runaway knocking over the remains of the skull, so that its empty eye sockets now gazed straight back at Agar, and he couldn't take his own eyes away from that. As his gaze stayed riveted to that toothless grin, his mind went back to the writing he had seen below that drawing of a skull "one day I was like you, someday you will be like me" and for once he could see no humour in the line. He shivered, as he remembered a cable he had received from some one dear a few weeks back "very anxious please stop hunting leopard". It was now too late. He had pitted himself against fang and claw, and the finely honed, acute instincts of the finest of the big cats. There would be no turning back. Time dragged on leaden feet, and suddenly Agar gripped his rifle as a red wattled lapwing screamed and took wing. The next moment his men broke cover, bringing with them his equipment and a flask of coffee.

It was while Agar was drinking his coffee that Mangar, his driver appeared and in a few minutes, they send the rest of the men away and settled down to spend the remaining part of the day and perhaps even the night on the '*machan*'.

The jungle was still, as it usually is in the afternoons, and Mangar had positioned himself on the '*machan*' watching the right flank while Agar was watching the left, the remains and also the back. It was about 3 o'clock when Agar suddenly felt that they were being watched, and in the next instance felt more than saw, the slightest of movements to his left. Slowly looking over his shoulder Agar could see nothing in the undergrowth at first, yet what was that patch of white? His heart beat faster as he realised that he was looking directly at the underbelly of the leopard and the next moment made out the whole form, as the man-eater sat on his haunches and looked from him at the remains.

Cold steel had never felt so good in Agars hands, as the 470 slowly came up to his shoulder. Just like Manikkam there was no struggle. The high velocity bullet entered 'Punani' on the right side of the neck, shattering tissue and muscle, then breaking his back. The man-eater was dead before his head touched the ground.

The leopard measured 6 feet 3 inches from tip of nose to tip of tail, not a very large animal, in fact rather small when compared to the Rudraprayag leopard who measured 7 feet 10 inches, but stood slightly taller than the average leopard. A close post mortem examination showed the cat was in fine condition with long canine teeth and no apparent sign of any disabling injury. His pads, head and neck too had been slightly larger than average. He however had a number of knife wounds, some very new, showing that some of his victims had fought desperately for their lives. No obvious physical reasons for his man eating habits were found. An autopsy revealed human hair and teeth, establishing with out doubt the identity of the leopard.

Agar very concious of posterity gifted the skin to the National Museum, where the mounted specimen can still be viewed.

Like the tigresses of Champawat and Muktesar, and the leopards of Panar and Rudraprayag and a host of other man-eating big cats of the Indian sub continent, the Punani leopard had paid with his life for trying to sate the only, and the most powerful urge that no life form on this earth can resist, hunger. Yet in doing so, they had all committed the ghastly crime that would never be pardoned in the realm of man, though perhaps man himself may have been responsible for the making of the criminal. Their offence, they had chosen for their prey, the only animal in the world that walks on two legs, that can smile and talk.

The Authors Note

The preparation of this chapter entailed a vast amount of research and the greatest difficulty I had was that many articles written about the leopard differed, some slightly and others largely from one another. The most surprising fact was that all these accounts varied mostly in the final act where Agar actually shoots the leopard. I have however, having carefully studied the articles and papers and together with my experience of jungle lore decided that Agars own account would be the most acceptable at this point.

The official count of the leopards human victims is 20. But I am sure it must be well above this. Agar and a few others say that almost all the kills took place along the Punani-Batticaloa road and near the 28th mile post. The man-eater obviously knew that the road was well used and this was undoubtedly the reason why he got most of his 'official' victims there. But there is no reason to believe that he did not get some of the jungle dwelling people, just because no one reported of missing persons. I have had the experience in some remote villages in the north central province, where parents have casually told me "our second son has left home without telling us, he must have got a job somewhere, he has not even been seen in the area", no report to the police, the village headman does not bother as long as the relations don't bother. This was in 1987, well, in 1920.

The 1924 Administration Report of the National Museum acknowledges Capt. Shelton Agars gift of the man-eaters skin, which was later mounted by taxidermist E.C. Fernando and exhibited to the public in 1926.

Another man-eater was recorded in Sri Lanka, but this creature was neither gazetted as such nor officially recorded. This animal as usual, suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the early 1950s, along the pilgrim route between Pottuvil and Kataragama (see Yala National Park) in an area known as Pottana and commenced eating up pilgrims during their annual march. Due to this he became known as the Pottana man-eater. During my research I came across absolutely no documented reference to this leopard and encountered very few people who remembered the incidents. My knowledge of this creature is what I have gathered together through the years and here I am specially indebted to Park Warden Zainudeen who filled me up with a fair amount of information.

The precise time is once again obscure, but it was somewhere in the early nineteen fifties when the leopard first killed a man named Muththia at the Pottana well and ate him up. No record had been kept of his human kills but I gathered that it would have been about 7, during the three years that he operated. Here, it must be said that the leopard had never been known to have killed away from the pilgrim route. On the fourth year after the first killing, the pilgrims started camping at Uda Pottana and the killings ceased as mysteriously as they had begun.

I think I am correct in concluding that the leopard was not a confirmed man-eater and only took the opportunity to seize two legged victims

when absolute hunger overtook him and the chance presented itself. This obviously came during the annual pilgrimage. The leopard had obviously eaten a corpse that was lying in the jungle and got his initial flavour of human flesh, for these pilgrims often never buried their dead along the route, instead left them lying about in the jungle after the last rites.

As a lover of the jungles and it's denizens I think before I end this chapter I should say something on behalf of the man-eating leopards of Punani and Pottana. Perhaps it would be fitting that I permit that great hunter of man-eaters and greater naturalist Jim Corbett to say this for me. He refers to tigers, but I am sure it applies to all members of the big cats

“A man-eating tiger is a tiger that has been compelled, through stress of circumstances beyond it's control, to adopt a diet alien to it. The stress of circumstances is in nine cases out of ten, wounds, and in the tenth case old age. The wound that has caused a particular tiger to take to man-eating might be the result of a carelessly fired shot and failure to follow up and recover the wounded animal, or be the result of the tiger having lost it's temper when killing a porcupine. Human beings are not the natural prey of tigers, and it is only when tigers have been incapacitated through wounds or old age that, in order to live, they are compelled to take to a diet of human flesh”.

