



“The Man Who Loved Leopards”

Jon Wynne-Tyson
Fontwell, West Sussex

Old Douglas Henshaw was a bit of a rough diamond in his taciturn way, there's no denying. I suppose we hadn't a lot in common except for the prisoner of war camp in the forties. But after my wife died I met him in the Croyden Co-op, though it was only when he gave his name to the girl at the counter that I realised who he was. He had settled quite near me after retiring from his scrap metal business, so I looked him up and began to see him fairly often. I think he felt I didn't know anyone much, and I suppose he was right. Once Mary had gone I couldn't be bothered to keep up with the come-round-for-drinks brigade, and once the neighbours got the message that I wasn't interested in being a useful lone male for the local widows and fancy-free, I was left pretty well alone. Anyway, Douglas was as keen a draughts player as I am, which was what brought us together in the camp, and that's as good a basis for friendship as any.

Even so, I sometimes wonder if he would ever have told me about the leopard if Doris, his wife, hadn't happened to let it slip during one of their battles. Not that he *told* me much even then, any more than he told Doris.

“But there must be some reason why he wants to keep a leopard in the garden,” I said to her once when he was out feeding it.

“Of course there is,” she said crossly, almost as though she would have liked to blame me for the whole thing, “but I can't for the life of me get out of

him what it is. Sometimes I wonder if he isn't a bit, well, you know...” And she tapped her temple significantly.

Without being unkind, I suppose you could say Doris was a little on the brassy side. Still a good-looking woman, if rather over-weight, but too keen on the paintbox for my taste. If she had given in and admitted that her hair was grey, not the startling gold you were asked to believe, I would have had more respect for her. But, poor woman, I suppose she deserved some compensations. It was obvious to me, the outside observer, that the situation was beginning to get her down. After all, not every one wants a leopard in their garden, not even if there is an obvious reason.

When I say “garden,” by the way, don't get me wrong. I don't mean some forty by ninety feet plot consisting of an herbaceous border, a flowering cherry, a square of lawn, and a small area for beans and rhubarb behind three feet of privet.

No, indeed. Douglas Henshaw's garden was no simple example of the suburban art of horticultural



FICTION

compression. Although surrounding what admittedly was a pretty average kind of bungalow, it covered no less than ten acres, almost all of it untamed woodland and a positively encouraged tangle of bramble, thorn, wild rose, honeysuckle and other prolific ingredients of an undergrowth that advanced on the bungalow like a veritable jungle.

Jungle, perhaps, is the key word. Douglas had no interest in gardens as such. It was jungle he was after.

"I think they let you read too much of that Kipling man," Doris said on one occasion, meaning by "they" her husband's long-dead parents.

"Don't be daft, Doris," Douglas replied, turning over a page of "Wildlife Monthly," "I hadn't even heard of Kipling until I left school."

"Well, whatever it was," Doris said firmly, "it's a great pity it ever happened. Imprisoned we are by that wretched animal. Imprisoned."

By this she meant they could never leave the place for more than a few hours, while as for holidays, well that was something Doris had to be content to read about in travel agents' brochures. Stuffed with "far-away," "two-centre," in-season and out-of-season offers their living room was. Not that Douglas showed the slightest interest. He'd done all the travelling he wanted years before, much of it in the army. It may have been something that happened out East that got him hooked on leopards, but that's only a guess.

Be that as it may, Douglas was for them, Doris wasn't, and that, as the Irish woman said, is where the trouble started.

Holidays apart, the mere cost of keeping the creature was horrific. It was not just a simple matter of having to face an enormous butcher's bill week in week out. There was no 'phoning the butcher and saying "Send me a side of old cow or half a hundredweight of trotters." The meat had to be brought in from all sorts of different places, mostly a good way off, and the reason for this was the secrecy, which worried Doris stiff.

Douglas was a loner. Very independent. Hated red tape, bureaucracy, officialdom. This whole leopard thing had been done on the quiet. He had built the cage himself, having the bars made up by a blacksmith over fifty miles away. He smuggled them home by night, a few bars at a time, bolting them

together by himself in the unseen centre of his private jungle.

Before making a cage to keep the leopard in, of course, he had to erect enough barbed wire to keep humans out, and it takes a lot of wire to enclose ten acres. Doris said it was like living in a concentration camp. But she was frantic about the secrecy. She wanted everything done above board, but he wasn't having any. Not just because he grudged the cost of the licence or was afraid the neighbours might object, but because he had his own ideas about how to keep leopards and didn't want any officious environmental-health pipsqueaks popping in every five minutes and checking on him. Besides, he might not even have got a licence, for keeping leopards is a suspect matter very properly covered by the Dangerous Wild Animals Act, and before a private individual can set up home with one of the big cats he has to give evidence of his experience and suitability. The local vet must also be in the picture and gets a fat fee for supervising the health and security aspects. In short, a District Council that for one reason or another is a bit jumpy about parcels of its district being turned over to jungle can make an awful lot of expensive trouble for the kind of person who is not keen on toeing the bureaucratic line. On the basis of "know thyself," Douglas had probably made the right decision.

But it did for his marriage. To start with, Doris was just fidgety and scratchy, like the leopard. Bit by bit she got a real hate on, first toward the leopard — though God knows the poor brute had never asked to be shut in a cage a stone's throw from Purley — and later toward Douglas. As their only close friend, I can tell you that bungalow had more snapping and snarling going on within its four walls than in any five square miles of average Asia.

She moaned a bit to me, of course, and I tried to see her point of view.

"I wish I could help," I said, "but Doug's not easy to reason with over things he cares about."

She sniffed. "Cares? I don't see much sign of it."

"I'm really sorry," I said. "For both of you. You and the leopard, I mean."

She sniffed again. "It gets its meals regular. I don't see it's much to complain about."

"All right," I agreed, glad to turn the topic away

from Doris, "but a small cage in the middle of a Surrey garden isn't exactly a leopard's home from home."

"Where am I but in a cage?"

"At least you can get out from time to time. To the shops, the hairdresser."

"That animal wouldn't want to. Animals are different."

"I don't know," I said. "The more I see of zoos, the more I hate them. You should see the one in New York, in Central Park; the gorillas, the polar bears, the big cats; so listless and bored it'd make you weep."

"I can cry on that account without going to New York, thanks very much," she said. "People think too much about animals, not enough about humans. Humans come first."

"I doubt that's the point," I said. "I don't think we're going to behave much better toward each other until we've learned to treat other forms of life more decently. That man who said cruelty is indivisible made a major statement in very few words."

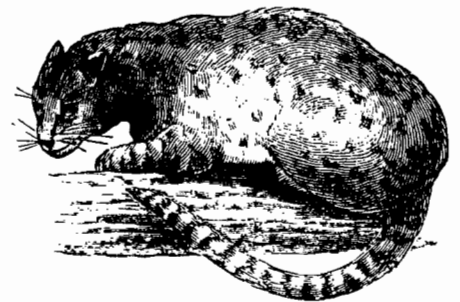
But I'd lost Doris who was rubbing at a china tiger with a duster as though she'd have liked to erase it.

Be that as it may, Douglas spent hours outside the leopard's cage in his deckchair, watching the animal pacing up and down or just lying around dozing. It had no company but Douglas and I'd guess it was bored out of its mind. Doris seldom went near it, and when she did there was no rapport. If that leopard was sensitive to vibrations, it had no feeling of being loved by Doris. I rather doubt that Douglas could be said to have loved it exactly, either, though he once said he did; maybe it was in the sense that one loves a steak or a lamb chop. He certainly liked owning it and being near it, and perhaps he got a kick from feeling he had beaten the system and was getting away with something no-one except Doris and myself knew anything about. But one could keep a rare stamp or a bit on the side on that basis, without love really entering into it.

For myself, I visited Douglas less and less often as the years went by. It was very depressing seeing the leopard getting older in that rusty iron cage. Douglas never made any real connection with the animal,

either; not that I could see, anyway. I mean, you see pictures of people who keep big cats as pets, playing with them, taking them for walks, even sleeping with them. There was none of that with Douglas. All he wanted was to sit in his chair and watch his leopard pacing up and down, day in day out, while its coat got mangier, its eyes more dull, and the cage in its clearing grew darker year by year as the surrounding trees closed in above. I used to imagine a leopard's eye view from the cage, wondering what frustration or yearning there might be in its heart for the slats of blue sky, white cloud and green leaves that were all it knew of the world outside.

Mind you, leopards are mainly nocturnal, so maybe Douglas's poor beast did most of its speculating at night, but I can't be sure about that because I never saw it except in the daytime. Douglas said it had "adapted," by which I suppose he meant it shared his habit of being awake by day. It was a silent, sullen animal, as well it might have been, and I could never get out of Douglas whether it was incapable of roaring for some reason or other, or whether solitary leopards out of sight or smell of their own kind just don't have cause to be vocal.



Carol Belanger Grafton,
Old-Fashioned Animal Cuts,
New York: Dover, 1987

What happened toward the end, of course, was that the animal fell sick. I was only surprised it hadn't happened sooner. Douglas was worried silly about this, but it was a classic case of being hoist with one's own petard. He couldn't enter the creature's cage and tend it, even if he knew what attention it needed. Doris, unsurprisingly, used it as a lever to get him to come out in the open and bring in the authorities, but he would have no truck with the idea.

"What would a bloody vet know, anyway?" he demanded.

"All they understand is pussy cats and old dears' pekes. They'd have it shot within five minutes."

"They might take it to a zoo," Doris said. "Zoos must know about treating sick leopards."

"It'll get better" was Douglas's answer. "It's natural for an animal to be in health. It's probably been upset by condemned meat. I maybe shouldn't have got cheap horse from that knacker."

And then he did what I found hard to take, but I dare say it was some sign of his depth of concern. He got some live dogs from a home for strays and shoved them into the cage, assuming that if the leopard killed its meat on the hoof, so to speak, it might be getting what it needed.

In the end, Doris could stand it no longer. The silly woman went down to the leopard's cage one night and opened the door, I suppose thinking it would be asleep and not likely to make its getaway until daybreak. She had no time to regret her mistake. It must have smelled her coming and crouched there in the dark. Anyway, it was through that door and on to Doris before she could have known what had hit her. In the morning Douglas found what was left of her body six feet from the cage, her head nearer nine. One of her legs was missing altogether. Of the leopard, not a trace.

At that point Douglas did several things, all of them ill-judged. Firstly, he made the assumption that the leopard, with a good meal in its belly, was resting up somewhere in the garden and would return to its cage out of habit and hunger in a day or two. Secondly, he buried Doris in a clump of gorse and birch where the soil was sandy and easy to dig. Thirdly, he went back to his bungalow and took various rather amateurish steps to make it seem Doris had gone away for an unspecified time. Then he sat

back and waited for the leopard to return. It didn't. Days passed. He knew he had burned his boats, but he wasn't too worried. What he had not allowed for was that however carefully he kept the tragedy to himself, the abrupt disappearance of Doris must make some impact, however small, on third parties. She was known in the local shops, she had that gold hair done over once a week; she kept in touch with a few people by letter. Anyway, the police turned up eventually, didn't believe Doug's story, and within a few days had turned up Doris. She wasn't much to look at by then, poor soul, and to the police the case was plain sailing.

Only then did Douglas admit that Doris had been killed by the leopard. What leopard, the police wanted to know. Well, this being a murder charge they went to a spot of trouble, going over every inch of those ten acres as well as scouring the surrounding countryside. There was no trace of a leopard, alive or dead.

I did what I could for Douglas, but I had been abroad when the disaster happened and didn't know a thing about it until I returned. By then he was behind bars, tried and sentenced. I went to the police, of course, and confirmed there had indeed been a leopard. But in the absence of the beast, and with the case closed, they preferred to assume I was a well-meaning friend prepared to perjure himself. I pointed out the cage, the barbed wire, the whole set-up, but they would not accept that as evidence. The seemingly hacked remains of a woman's body in three feet of sand was much less circumstantial.

So with Douglas's rather grudging agreement I tried to sell his bungalow so that he would have some capital to fight them with. But it was a bad time to sell and Douglas seemed to go off the idea. He appeared to have given up. Then one day I was down on the woodland at dusk, checking on the fences, when something hit me a nasty smack on the head. At first I thought it was a piece of branch from the tree above me, but when I bent down I saw it was a human shinbone. Its humanness didn't get through to me then and there, but the next day I went back with a triple extension ladder and got into the fork of the tree which was a real whopper with radiating branches making quite a platform thirty feet or more above the ground. There I found what I had suspected I would find, the remains of a leopard and some other bits and pieces that might have been Doris.

I thought Douglas should be the first to know. But

all he said was "Oh, yes?" Just like that.

"But Doug," I said, "for Christ's sake, man, don't you see what this means? It'll get you out of here."

"Into what?" he said.

"Life," I said. "Freedom."

"They're relative terms," he said.

I couldn't believe my ears. "But look," I said, "you're not connecting with the facts. We can prove you are innocent."

"But I'm not, am I?" he said.

"Well, of course you are."

"Would Doris think so? The police? The district

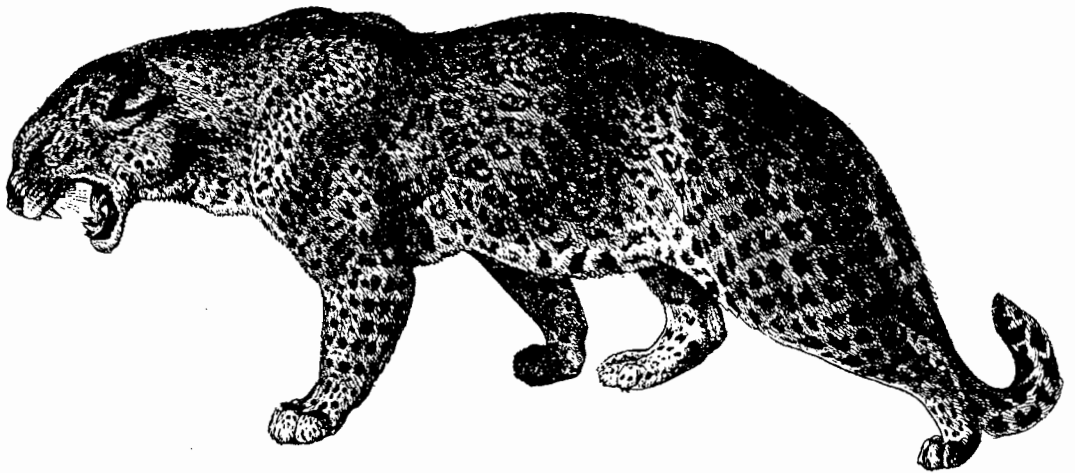
council? The leopard?"

"This is defeatist talk," I said.

He shrugged. In some strange way he seemed content.

"Thanks all the same," he said, "but it isn't worth the bother. I've made some kind of a life in this place. I'm reading more than I've ever read before. I don't see much point in fighting the system. Let's give them best."

I couldn't move him. I visited him twice more, then I gave up. In the end I concluded that that was what he really did want. But from time to time I lie awake at night gazing at the stars and trying to guess what frustration or yearning there might be in my friend's heart as he looks out from his prison cell at the slats of blue sky, white clouds and green leaves that are all he knows of the world outside. □



Jim Harter, *Animals*, 1949
Copyright-Free Illustrations.
New York: Dover, 1979