



**DONORS:**

Tom and Renetta Cade, David Frank and Western Sporting Publications

## Memories of My Mentor

by Rushil Sergill

Celebrated as a well known Ustaaad (Master) in his field by all aware of falconry, Mr. Osman, the 'Afghan falconer', created an awareness of his 'tigers of the air', and contributed to his generation regarding serious conservation efforts around the world.

My journey with Mr. Osman started through my father, who was one of his first disciples. Mr. Osman was my father's second guru. The years passed as my father lost touch with his guru, caught in the hectic web of urban living, work and family. Then I was born in 1989 and as a child the falconry bug bit me - much to my father's delight!

One weekend we drove down to meet him. When we reached Dehradun Lukshmi Road opposite the Himani gas agency, there stood an old black gate with a few fruiting trees inside. There came this old man with four vicious dachshunds charging to greet us. A soft melodic voice said "Hello Capt. Shergill. How are you?" We sat down and had tea while my father and Osman Sir and Madam Zulekha, his wife, were catching up and telling me stories.

Soon came my turn. Slowly and steadily Osman started testing me on my knowledge of falconry. He wanted to see if I had that same burning passion that he and my father shared.

The true test began. Just as he had asked my father back in the 1970's to make a Dho-gazza net, he now wanted to see if I could. He wanted to see if I had the patience for it. It took almost half a day and two very sore hands. I hoped that Osman saab would approve of it. With a lovely smile and a swaying nod he said "Ok" and looked at my father and cheekily said "Capt. Saab you took an entire day".

That was my initiation. I was approved as a Shakid (pupil). From then on we had telephone conversations daily. Over the years I learned much about falconry, history, culture, flora and fauna, and herbal remedies. But the icing on the cake was to hear the old stories on trapping, training and hunting with his birds.

I made frequent visits to Dehradun to meet my guru and his wife. It was always an honor to spend time with them. We would go for short drives to the mountains, the forest and places where he used to hunt. I would listen to all his old stories and absorb everything. He was an encyclopedia! I used to stay at Raghvender Singh's place who was also a student of Mr. Osman. Every evening we would all meet and regale each other with the day's events.

Osman sir taught me how to make the Bal Chattri. While I was making it, he told me about its history too - Bal meaning hair and chattri meaning umbrella (dome). Hair was taken from the horse's tail to make the nooses in the old days. In time I learned the art of trapping. With my first bal chattri I caught one very special bird, a passage Shikra which I named "Isis". She was my very first bird and hence very close to my heart. With the guidance and help of my father and regular telephone conversations with Osman sir I trained her. One day she fell seriously ill. I was extremely perturbed and made a few frantic calls to Osman sir to find out "What to do"? He then asked me to check her mouth to see if she had frounce. Sure enough, it turned out to be just that. He then told me about the age old remedy of using alum water, casting the hawk upside down and spraying it in the affected areas and then gently scraping the affected areas. But as my father was out of town and the fact that I had no experience with a sick bird, I was extremely reluctant and fearful of doing the above myself. I then made

He is James Coopers Mohican – the last of his tribe – but falconers and outdoorsmen everywhere are fortunate to have his memoirs of hawking during a very special time and in a special place few of us have been or know much about.  
-Dr. Tom Cade – Falconer and Founder of the Peregrine Fund

a decision to use modern medicine. I used a concoction of flagyl with a mix of an herb known as "Katha" which is commonly used in an Indian mouth freshener known as "Pan". In time she recovered and was introduced to the hunt.

In Osman saab's dictionary Falconry was not "just a hobby"... it was a way of life, a calling, as he put it. Born on 24th March 1925, Osman saab's affinity for birds of prey started at the age of 8 when his grandfather presented him with a Turumti (Red headed merlin). He never looked back.

As a young boy Osman saab was truly fascinated with the hawk-eagle. This species of birds of prey was completely new to their family. While roaming/hunting/fishing in the Doon valley and Musoorie, he often studied them. One day, while out on one of his hunting trips, he spotted a mountain hawk eagle. Osman saab he did not step out of his house without his dho-gazza and a pigeon decoy. Within moments, he set up the trap and trapped his first hawk eagle. He named her "Kohistani" ("Highlander"). He truly loved that bird. He described her as a "phenomenal hunter". But his most phenomenal feathered friend was "Kali Rani", a Shaheen falcon with whom he spent 16 years.



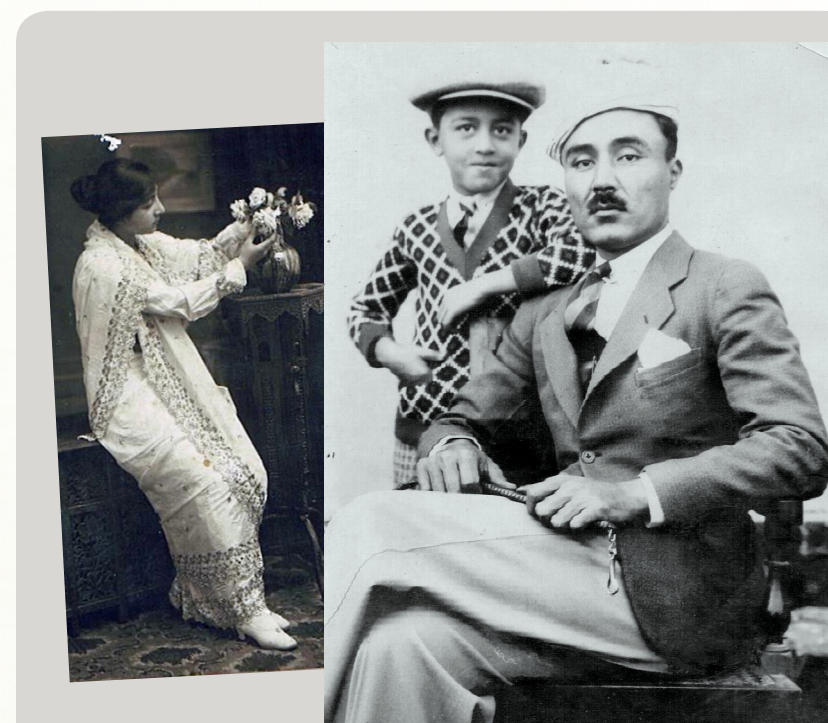
Osman's closest falconry companion was his father Prince Azim. They would take turns handling and hunting the birds, and shared almost all their spectacular experiences. He was really attached to his father and missed him dearly after he passed away.

He wrote about himself, his father and his cousin and a place called Clouds End: "Just then it was the glitter of youth; the understanding of those who really were qualified to extend such unstinted praise to my life's heyday that knocked at my heart. Today I look back at those events with a feeling of sadness as I realize that out of the trio on the hillside that day, I now am the only one left to tell the story of what had happened. For father and cousin Rauf, Cloud's End is a far cry. My happy reflections dissolve away like the pretty shoals of sunset as the unknown dark of the future awaits to paint the thoughts of bygone times black against the brilliant sky of yesteryear."

Osman saab was quiet a poet by heart and loved quoting Old Persian poets.

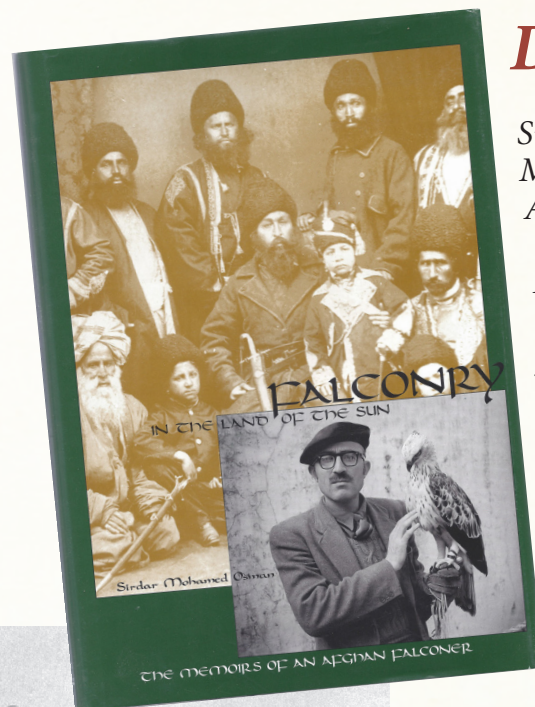
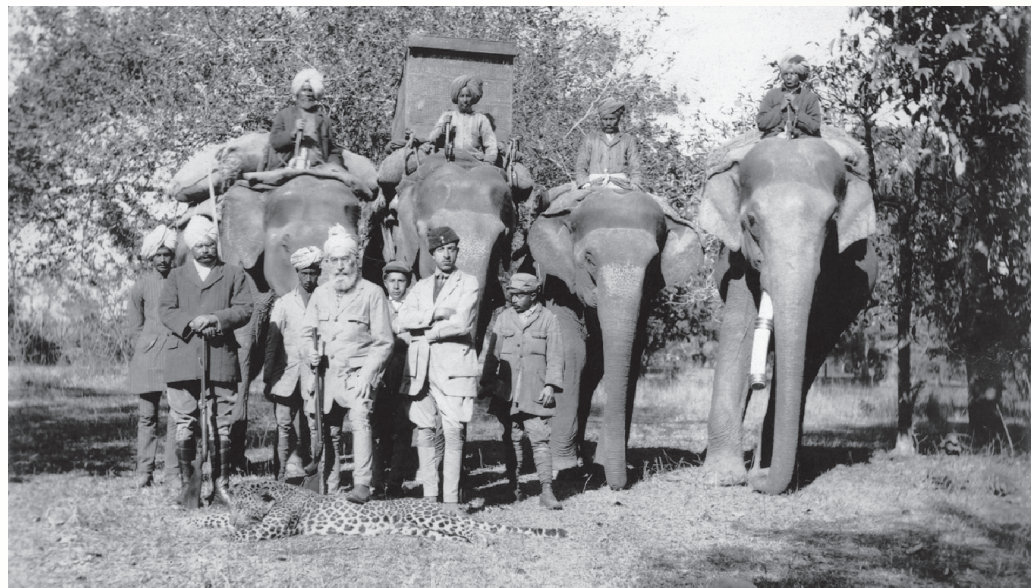
After his wife passed away he quoted the Poet Hafiz "If after a hundred years you were to pass over my tomb my dusty bones uprising in the sepulcher would dance in their gladness."

I would like to think he started and ended with these magnificent meteors in the sky, these spectacles of glory, these magnificent kings of the wind...these captivating birds of prey that bonded relations for father and son ...mentor and disciple ....man and bird.....heaven and earth.....



Photos of Sirdar's mother, and of him and his father, whom he was especially close to and shared his love of falconry with. Photo left- a family of tribesmen, Sirdar in the middle on his father's knee.





## Dr. Tom Cade's Intro from "Falconry in the Land of the Sun"

Sirdar Osman is descended from a distinguished family of falconers who trace their ancestry back to the rulers of Afghanistan. Mr. Osman's great grandfather was Amir Sher Ali Khan, his grandfather was Amir Mohamed Yaqub Khan, his father, Prince Azim, his closest hunting companion, and other contemporary family member were also falconers.

For political reasons, the British government banished Mr. Osman's immediate ancestors from Afghanistan and resettled them in India. He grew up on the family estate near Dehra Dun, and he began his falconry training under the tutelage of his father in the Doon Valley in the fading years of the British-supported raj, when falconry was still practiced in grand style by the maharajahs (Great King and Prince) and rajahs (King) of the Indian princely states. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Mr. Osman continued hawking after the demise of the raj and the emergence of India and Pakistan as independent nations, hunting in isolation with his father and a few relatives. In one passage he comments, "What was once deemed a sport of the highest order is today frowned upon." But he has endured for seventy years, and in that time he learned a great many interesting things about birds of prey.

His chapters on hunting with hawk-eagles—the Bonelli's eagle, changeable hawk-eagle, and mountain hawk-eagle—are particularly informative. There are also interesting treatments of the golden eagle, various falcons, particularly the saker, laggar, peregrines, and red-headed merlin, goshawks and shikras, and even the great grey shrike, for which he developed a unique method of tethering. He makes reference several times to the hawking eagles as quarry with sakers. This is evidently an old Afghan specialty which employs the use of buzzards and tawny eagles during the training process.

Like all true falconers, Mr. Osman became a keen naturalist. Interwoven throughout his accounts of raptors and hawking are vignettes about the natural history of the Doon valley and other areas, from which one gains insight into his deep sense of loss as nature gave way to cultivation and settlement with the ever-growing Indian population. His reflections contain a certain sadness and resignation, but they are also expression of poetry and reverence for life. He is James Fennimore Cooper's Mohican—the last of his tribe – but falconers and outdoorsmen everywhere are fortunate to have his memoirs of hawking during a very special time and in a special place few of us have been to or know much about.

## FROM FALCONRY IN THE LAND OF THE SUN

Sirdar Mohamed Osman was a notable falconer and naturalist who's ancestors were Afghani royalty. Mr. Osman produced over forty scientific papers and books concerning birds of prey and wildlife.

He led an amazing life and traveled throughout India, Pakistan and Afghanistan in pursuit of his falconry. Sirdar Mohamed Osman was born in Dehra Dun India. He did his Senior Cambridge from St. Joseph's Academy Dehra Dun to later serve as Project Manager in the Hillmand Valley Authority in Afghanistan. He returned to Dehra Dun in 1953 and joined the Oil and Gas Commission of India to finally retire as Geophysicist in 1983.

S. M. Osman led an amazing life centered around his falconry and the in-depth study of wildlife. His adventures cover much of Central Asia. This entire area has always been referred to as "The Land of the Sun". travels in this This area is rich in the history of falconry. His lineage boasts several generations who have spent a great deal of time immersed in the sport.

S.M. Osman was fortunate to have been able, in a great place, the Doon Valley, and time, to trap and train and hunt with all of the different peregrine subspecies. His experiences also cover all the hawk-eagles and short winged birds.

Although a great number of migratory peregrines did pass through the Doon valley, the majority passed through the Indus Valley just to the west, at Dera Gazi Khan and the neighboring city of Dera Ismael Khan. The bustling hawk markets of Amritsar and Lahore were the focus of many falconers of the day. It is only natural that a few of Osman's birds would come from them.

Osman's writing shows clearly how sensitive he has been to his surroundings. He views his world through keen eyes and with the enthusiasm of a young boy who was only just seeing the world for his first time, yet his writing is filled with mature insight into the world. He lived in a time and place which has been separate from the Western world; his original thinking is thought provoking to falconers and naturalists.

