

GLIMPSE OF ASSAM.)



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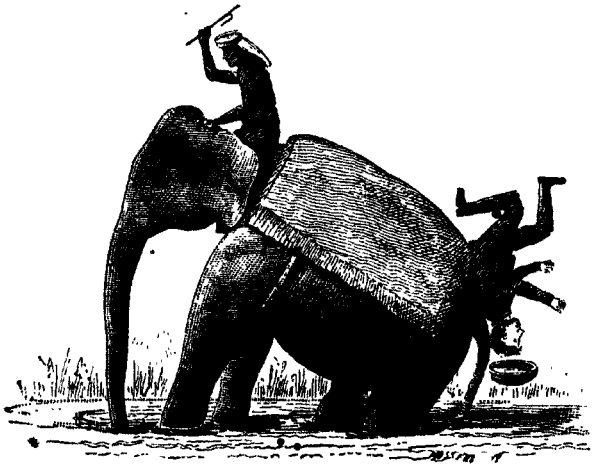
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ANIMALS.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE Elephant is one of the most numerous, useful and valuable among the wild animals of Assam ; travelling in many places is quite impracticable except on the backs of these strong surefooted beasts.

A good "sawarrie" elephant, that is, one trained to riding, walks from three to five miles an hour on a cleared path ; where the way is not open, they can break ~~one~~ through a thick tangled jungle, wade streams or swim deep rivers ; they are expert swimmers, and have been known to swim six consecutive hours without touching bottom. They go up steep places on their fore knees, and down on their hind knees, thus keeping their riders as nearly level as possible. When anything is dropped, a word only is needed from the "mahout" (driver) who sits astride his neck, and he picks it up with his trunk, and lifts it within reach. In approaching a bridge, he cautiously puts one foot forward and tries it ; if his ear detects the least sound of weakness, no amount of beating will make him go over it. They travel all day without food, and graze all night, seeming to require little sleep ;



**THE ELEPHANT SUDDENLY.
DECIDES TO SIT DOWN IN THE RIVER.**

before they are let out to graze the fore feet are chained together, lest they should run away and be lost. Almost every thing that grows is fodder for them ; coarse high grass, reeds, bushes, and branches of trees, which they snap off with the greatest ease. When the mahout brings them in for the night, he compels them to load their backs with fodder : long jungle grass, palm leaves, plantain trees, and tree branches are piled up and hanging to the ground on each side ; he comes in, an amusing sight,—a high heap of walking jungle ; however huge the load, it all disappears before morning in the queer pointed aperture under the foot of his trunk.

Elephants have a convenient water stomach for a hot country ; when crossing a river they stop and draw the water into their trunks, then throw it down their throats many times till satisfied ; when heated, they draw it out again and give themselves a shower bath, which may not be quite as agreeable to their riders as themselves.

Elephants, in their wild state, are very long lived, judging from dentition and other circumstances ; they are supposed to live from one hundred and fifty to two hundred years. It is reported that the remains of a dead *wild* elephant has never been seen by those who have travelled extensively through elephant jungle. Among the people there is a belief that they never

die ; others say that when they feel the approach of dissolution, they go to some place unseen by any one to end their days.

When domesticated, they are not as hardy and enduring as we would suppose from their size and strength ; great care is needed not to overwork them as they easily fall ill, and die from want of regular food and rest. The Assam species has a high ridged backbone which is apt to be chafed by any heavy burden ; to prevent this a wadded pad, called a "guddee" is fastened across the back when used either for burdens or riding. They soon know their keepers, and are wonderfully docile and obedient ; the "subjection of every beast of the field" to man at the creation, is strikingly exemplified in the elephant ; if he was conscious of his strength in comparison with his master's, he could never be tamed. The driver uses an ugly weapon, a short pointed iron rod with a hook on one side ; if the beast does not behave properly, he strikes the rod into the top of his head or ears, the blow often bringing blood, and a loud scream from the angry beast.

They are said rarely to breed in captivity, their numbers must therefore be replenished by capture, and the jungles of Assam are a prolific source of supply ; Government annually sell at auction the "Keddahs" in the different districts ; in addition to

the auction price, which is always large, Government have claimed a right of pre-emption of every elephant captured between six and seven and a half feet in height, and a royalty of Rs. 100 on every elephant not purchased by Government. The pre-emption claim has recently been removed.

The "Keddahs" surround salt springs where the herds congregate to drink ; a strong palisade of the trunks of small trees, set close together, is built around a large enclosure ; at the farthest point from the spring an opening is left, and the place watched ; when a herd enters, they are followed up by trained elephants with their drivers ; these get on each side of a wild one, and with strong ropes they are bound together and driven out ; they are kept tethered for some weeks, when they become tame and fitted for work.

The capturing time is most exciting. A large number of men are employed to make a terrific noise, yelling, screeching and drumming, to frighten the animals into close quarters ; sometimes they turn upon the men and give chase, but those accustomed to it seldom receive injury, they betake themselves to the shelter of a tree trunk, or a clump of bamboos, and though within a couple of yards of the pursuing elephant, they escape unobserved by keeping perfectly still : the slightest movement would result in their being trampled to death. The elephant, evidently

aware of their close proximity, kicks up the ground in anger, and runs away. Of course, many escape from the "Poong" when there are a large number and no tame elephants enough to capture them.

Sometimes drives are conducted by torch-light, and these are likely to be successful on account of the elephant's great fear of fire. This fear sometimes puts the traveller in danger, especially in the dry season when jungle fires are burning, a *frightened* elephant is quite *mad*, and may rush into the jungle to the peril of his rider. A painful instance of this madness occurred in Assam not long ago : a Government officer was riding his own elephant, when she took fright and dashed her master to the ground, stamped on him, and thrust her tusks into him, and before she could be got off, inflicted fatal wounds. Elephants are naturally very timid, the sound of a horse's hoof or the bark of a dog is sufficient to startle them, but they are of a very uncertain temper, shewing great timidity at one time, and the reverse at another ; this is troublesome to sportsmen and not every elephant can be trusted in the field. Sportsmen secure themselves from the grasp of a tiger by sitting inside a high box, called a *Houdah*, which is securely lashed above the Guddee, on the back of the elephant. Usually two or more elephants go in company to make the sport lively. Those fond of this amusement

may be interested in a description of a hunt in the Goalpara district.

“The late Raja, or Zemindar of Lukhimpore, possessed a splendid elephant; he had but one tusk, but that was a beauty. Mainah had been born in captivity and remained so till he was twenty years old, when he suddenly disappeared, apparently determined on seeing elephant life in the jungle. There was great grief in the Zemindari, for he had been born on the same day as the eldest son of his owner, and the Brahmins had foretold that as long as he remained in their possession the family would be prosperous. Every search was made and large rewards offered, but in vain; two years after, one day, he was found in his shed, as docile as when he went away. He had had an immense quantity of game shot off him, some fifty tigers, and many rhinoceri and buffaloes, and he was known to be one of the staunchest of elephants.

M. and I were anxious to kill a rhinoceros, and obtained the loan of Mainah for a hunt. We left Goahati the 29th of April, reached Barpetta May 5th; Sonapilly the 6th, where rhinoceri are generally numerous. We sallied forth, and whilst hunting for a wounded deer, we were charged by five buffaloes we had not seen. Mainah rolled over one big bull that rushed on him, and M. killed it cleverly; whilst the others, after

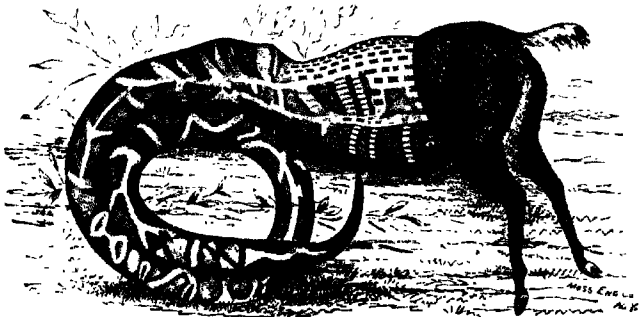
scattering our lineⁿ, turned their attention on me ; though I emptied my battery of four heavy rifles, my elephant only escaped being gored by her superior speed, for she had been a famous 'Kunku' and could foot it with the best. As the country had been disturbed by a party of elephant-catchers, we moved on to Basbarree ; on the way we came across a rhinoceros and killed it, also her young one unfortunately, as these are easily tamed, and worth from £60 to £100."

The country ponies are very small, and most of those owned by the Assamese, for riding or burden bearers, are cruelly treated and wretched objects. A short-legged sturdy breed of ponies are brought from Manipure, especially for the favourite game of Polo, Hocky, and sometimes for sale. Bhutan ponies are strong and serviceable ; many fine imported horses are kept by Europeans for riding, driving, or racing, but they require great care to thrive in this climate.

The ryots usually keep buffaloes or oxen to plough their field^s, and cows for their calves and milk ; this, they only eat as curd.

Pigs are kept only by Cacharis, Mirees and hill people.

Goats are kept by all classes for the kids especially ; the male kids are offered in sacrifice to the gods.



**PYTHON, KILLED NEAR
DIBRUHUB WHILE SWALLOWING A DEER.**

Fowls, which are the main dependence of Europeans for animal food, are chiefly raised by Mahomedans; to the Hindu they are unclean animals, but they make a strange distinction in favour of ducks and geese; many of these are used in sacrifice.

Assam abounds in snakes, many of a deadly kind, and a frightful number die annually from their bite. Clumps of bamboos are favourite places for them, and these abound in the jungle and in gardens. Natives are more exposed to danger than ~~Europeans~~, because they go barefooted and often sleep on the ground, where they are exposed to snakes crawling into the hut at night. Floors, four or five feet high, however, are not exempt, as we know from experience, even from the most deadly kind: the cobra may be found coiled up under furniture, or in a corner of the bathroom; another species, the Python, may be found in the fowl-house eating eggs or swallowing chickens whole.

In this country it is not quite safe to move about the house in the dark, or go out of doors without a lantern. Snake-charmers, always Hindustanee men, traverse the province in the cold season with baskets of snakes swung on their shoulders, tooting a small fife as they go along, till called on to exhibit. They lift a cloth from the top of a basket, and up springs a veritable cobra; with a waving motion of

his hand, and the shrill music of his fife, he excites the snake to spread his hood and dart his fangs at his hand ; if bit, he pretends to cure it by rubbing the spot with a snake-stone. For " buckshish " he will offer to bring a snake out of your own premises, and does it so cleverly that it seems a real fact.

There are a great variety of ground and house lizards ; a small species that creep over the house walls are quite harmless, and useful in devouring musquitoes and other insects.

Rats and mice are very numerous everywhere, and most destructive pests in every house unless hunted by cats. A large kind commit depredations in bamboo plantations. Ants, large and small, black and red, swarm everywhere, nearly every thing edible, and especially anything sweet, must be kept isolated, by being placed on a table with each leg in a cup of water, or castor oil, and this is only a safeguard when clean ; a tiny bit of dirt will be utilized as a bridge by an innumerable army in a short time.

The ravages of white ants are well known ; it is a tiny insect, like a maggot with a yellow head, armed with a powerful pair of nippers ; get one on your hand and you may pull his body off his head, but he does not let go his grip of your flesh. No house built of wood withstands long their ravages ; they turn to

dust the largest posts, build a mud covered walk up to the roof beams, and there do the same thing. On account of these insects, houses need annual repairs to ensure their safety in a blast of strong wind, or an earthquake, both of which are likely to test it in the course of a year.

It is quite surprising what these busy little insects will do in a very short time; only a day or two is needed to riddle through a chest of clothes, turning the entire contents into shreds, and this too, while the chest is under your eye, and you can see nothing to indicate what is going on by the army of marauders who have quietly entered the bottom. In one night, a gentleman's trousers, left hanging over a chair, were destroyed.

At certain stages, they swarm out of their nests in the ground *winged*, and fill the air, and are very troublesome about a lamp in the evening; at such times the crows have a "*feast of fat things*," for they are a mass of fat: the hill people eat them; the *queen* is a great delicacy with the Cacharis.

Musquitoes are very troublesome for about eight months of the year, and oblige every one to sleep under a curtain. Centipedes are common, but scorpions are seldom seen except in some particular locality. Leeches are very numerous in the rains; natives, travelling with bare legs through wet places, carry a

sharp-edged stick with which, every now and again, they scrape the leeches from their skins.

Fish are in great variety and abundant in every river, pond, tank, bheel, and ditch ; with the Hindu it is his only animal food, and, therefore, always in great demand, but the trade is limited to *one* caste ; any caste can fish for personal consumption, but on no account will any one *sell* fish but Dôms. In consequence there is often great scarcity in the market when the Dôms are busy with rice planting. Government *sell* the fisheries annually at auction. The best fish, those esteemed by Europeans, is the Roe, Hāl, the Indian herring called Hilsa, and the Pabho. Nets are usually used for fishing in rivers, and various shaped baskets are used by groups of women in ponds and ditches.

