

THE MISHMEE HILLS

AN ACCOUNT OF A JOURNEY MADE IN
AN ATTEMPT TO PENETRATE THIBET FROM ASSAM
TO OPEN NEW ROUTES FOR COMMERCE

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When first captured it had been secured by a thick double rope round its neck, the ends of which were made fast to the khoonkies on each side, and in this manner it had been led between them for three days, during which time its constant efforts to escape had been punished by its companions.

The day after it was brought in it was released from its warders, and placed in a huge bail, similar to those used for bailing up cows. The bail was made very strongly ; two upright posts, as thick as a man's body, were firmly sunk several feet in the ground, about twelve feet apart, and to these were attached two cross bars. The top one being double permitted the insertion of two other moveable upright bars as thick as a man's thigh, while the lower cross-bar resting on the ground, was pierced with holes about eighteen inches apart, forming sockets into which the moveable uprights fitted. The moveable uprights having been so fixed in the bottom bar as to admit the elephant's head between them, were brought together until the animal's neck was fixed in a kind of vice, and then secured to the double cross-bar by means of bolts ; in this manner the huge animal was securely held in durance vile.

Twice every day it was led out for exercise and water between two khoonkies, and in less than a week a mahout rode on its neck during these excursions. In this manner it was soon tamed, every display of anger on its part being visited by a sound castigation from its tame companions, a treatment which soon wore out the wild elephant's vindictiveness, and reduced it to complete

control, so that in less than a month it could be driven about alone by its keeper.

Elephants in Assam are a source of great profit to many who live by catching them, and several hundreds of these useful creatures are annually purchased by dealers for the Indian market. It is to be regretted that so many die during the first few months of their captivity; but they are sensitive animals, and the loss of liberty seems to break their hearts. Numbers of them, especially full grown ones, pine away, refusing food, and fretting themselves to death.

Much to the credit of the Government the law prohibits the wanton destruction of elephants in Assam, and a severe penalty is imposed on any person who shoots them, while elephant-catching can only be carried on by those who hold a licence from Government. In spite of these stringent measures, however, great numbers are annually destroyed by the hill tribes for the sake of their ivory, and it is to be feared that, unless the sale of that article is prohibited, the wild elephant of Assam will soon become a rarity.

A day or two before the termination of my visit, some villagers reported the presence of a large herd of wild buffaloes in a jheel, a few miles from the plantation, and requested that the Sahibs would attack them, as they were very troublesome among the tame herds.

The petition of the villagers opened to me a pleasing prospect of sport, while to my host, veteran shikary as he is, it conveyed little more than a request to protect his neighbours from an unpleasant enemy, too dangerous

for them to encounter, a duty which, in his position as the Sahib of the district, he is frequently called upon to perform, and, accordingly, gave orders at once to have two khoonkies ready for us next morning.

Rising with the dawn, we equipped ourselves for the chase, and then chatted pleasantly over chota hazara (early breakfast) till the elephants, blowing the flies off themselves at the door, roused us from the fragrant Orange Pekoe and crisp toast; then, taking our rifles and a couple of bottles of cold tea, we mounted the pads, and started for the haunt of the buffaloes.

The morning had broken with thick drizzling rain, just such a morning as the hunter in Assam delights in, for then the denizens of the forest issue forth into the midans,* without fear of the broiling sun, and the myriads of hungry flies, which his fierce heat warms into active life; and then, revelling in the tender grass, the rhinoceros, buffalo, and sambur pass undisturbed hours of repose, until driven by the sun and flies, or perchance, the British shikary, into the depths of the damp dark forest.

Thus, with the weather in our favour, we rode along the bank of the Dehing river, for half a mile or so, our elephants stepping out briskly, as though eager to commence the day's sport, and then struck off into a dense forest of gomari, poma, and banyan trees. Once in the forest, our elephants showed that they were fully up to the business before them, for, changing their rolling eager gait, they stepped cautiously along, making no

* Large patches of short grass free from trees.