

A Hike to the Thadagam Hills.

BY KRISHNA.

A rumour came floating to several of us that an elephant was being trapped in a place about 20 miles from the College. The rumour became a Fact. The spirit of adventure and curiosity was aroused.

With all eagerness and buoyant spirit, we started on our two wheelers at 7 A. M. to the hills to see the elephant. Ere we had covered 3 or 4 miles the receding mountains towering on high covered with vegetation seemed to stop and wait our approach while fields in front disappeared after we reached the village at the foot of the range. Look at Nature's handiwork, the sloping walls of the hills approaching and receding quite naked, suddenly becoming perpendicular like the huge compound wall surrounding the "Eternal City". The encircling atmosphere filled our hearts with romance and the greatest admiration for Nature's handiwork. As for fun, we had them in heaps, as on our way one by one skid on the sandy strips. For a mile or two the road was sandy. It is true we started in quest of the captured wild elephant but not one of us knew the real spot; on our way we were making enquiries as to the distance and the locality. We plodded our way without a murmur; we reached a traveller's bungalow at the foot of the hills where we left our bicycles and we started on our climb at 2-15 A. M. sharp and imagine our surprise when we had to get over steep, tortuous rocky paths strewn with all sorts and sizes of stones which gave us a slippery footing. Up the steep we went and we covered nearly 3 or 4 miles in this manner. All of us were breathing hard and the footpath in certain shades covered with dead leaves yielded to our feet and it was of course more welcome to us. From thence our narrow path ran through closely wooded forests and through leafytunnels through which the sun beams sneaked into or through paths that led through cool leafy bowers through which the sunlight played and lightened the dark undergrowth. On we plodded an 5 more miles we covered. Everyone of us was

impatient to see the elephant and our wish seemed to be eluding us. On our way we came across a winding brook which ran in and out through the undergrowth over a bed of pebbles, transparent and pure, we halted and took a refreshing drink and began our march with more pep and energy. The march had already begun telling on us as it was past midday and our stomachs were pinching and by unanimous consent we got a biscuit a piece to munch. We munched that biscuit and it appeared more delicious than it would have been ordinarily. Since our milk supply for the coffee was of the required quantity we had to make a shift by taking only half an ounce of milk each to keep our tongues from sticking on to our plates. Then the truth, how the Arctic and Northpole explorers and other adventurers must have felt when their ration was getting diminished while they were struggling in unknown region far from human habitation and also how they must have faced the exigencies and gone with a slice of bread for a full meal came home to us. At about 12.30 we heard the thud of the axes. We construed it to be some woodcutter and we did not know the exact place, since even our guide had lost his way. As we advanced, nearer to our right the thud came and we pressed through the foliage with delight to see the trap and our place of destination a couple of yards ahead. One of the party Mr. N to whose uncle the elephant belonged by capture was recognised by the foreman of the ranch and he gave us a cordial welcome. We halted and unpacked the eatables, made an equal distribution of them and took a cup of coffee to wash it down.

The place is about 9 miles to the west of Thadagam. The place of capture on the hills is about 3000 feet from the foot and the land belongs to one Mannarkot Muppan Nayar who owns 2,25000 acres of forest areas. The contractor Mr. Ramanatha Ayyar who captured the elephant pays Rs. 300 to Muppan Nayar as lease for each elephant caught and for capture and training and the expenses would come to about Rs. 1000. The preliminary expenses amount to Rs. 1500 and the elephant may fetch 3 to 5 thousand Rupees to Mr. Ayyar. The trap was laid near Vellaikulam village.

Then we made an inspection tour round the ranch and came to learn the method adopted in trapping the elephant. The trappers first of all pick out the most frequented spots of the elephants and start laying the trap. It is simple and ingenious and consists in cleaning the bushes for some distance in one of the likely spots and a pit is dug out 14 feet square with a depth of 20 feet and the width narrows to 13 feet at the bottom. The pit is then covered with bamboo poles and over which loose soil is dumped and beaten down and some grass is raised to make it resemble the surroundings. The unsuspecting elephant on its way to the brook steps over the trap and down goes the monarch of the forest and realizes too late the folly of having taken a wrong step. One can clearly hear the roar it must have made and imagine the vain efforts which its comrades must have made to lift him out of the pit. The man on the look-out telegraphs the news to the foreman of the ranch who the next day arrives and builds a hut of *kusa* grass and encamps near the spot. His men start building a wooden cage at ground level from one of the sides of the mouth of the trap. The tame elephants help in dragging logs of wood which are used in building a cage 15 feet high with barely moving space for the elephant. These logs are notched into one another horizontally like a fence and made strong with a flooring of wooden beams. By this time the wild fellow is slowly made to behave more gently and respond to the orders given from the pit's mouth. At first for a space of two or three days the liberty loving elephant puts on a hunger strike but hunger has its way and it submits to the gentle treatment from its captors. It is the necessity of the flesh that turns a free roaming lord of the forest to a helpless captive in the hands of men.

The elephant was a buxom maiden of sixteen summers, perhaps with many a suitors vying for her hand. She is now no more her free self and who knows, she may be destined to carry the Howdah of a Maharajah or spend her life hauling timbers in the wood and alas no more a free forester. And the truth that even elephants turn traitors to their own kind is seen by the great help the tamed one, renders in the subjugation of his wild sister or brother and

making it feel contented with the new life. Yes! It is true the wild one puts up a game fight for its "complete independence" but since it was to fight against the masterly brain of man it is brought to subjection in the end.

The elephant after 10 or 15 days is slowly raised from the pit to the ground level by throwing in leafy branches into the pit, which serves also as fodder and it is raised to the ground level only after the cage or barricade with only one entrance facing the pit is prepared. The professional knoter passes a rope round the head of the elephant from above and the animal is noosed; the level is rapidly raised and the noosed rope is pulled by hundred or more coolies while the old tuskers stand near the entrance of the cage and goad the new fellow in.

The elephant is now caged in and the training process begins. After several days the elephant is shifted from there to another place by the tuskers where it is shoved in the company of a herd of tame ones; and the taming takes 4 to 6 months. Then no other animal can beat the obedient, strong intelligent worker and its indefatigable energy.

In the Kheddha in Musore, the initial stage of capture differs very much as it is an organised one. Strong big stockades of timber are built; Four hundred to five hundred beaters are engaged and drive them by beating drums and making a huge uproar on the three sides. The side leading to the road of the stockade being left open, the gathering herd make a run into the stockade. The catch of the gate is let go and the herd finds itself trapped. After they are calmed down two tuskers are sent in and these take out the nearest elephant and force him outside to a picket where it is tied by chains to trees to get used to captivity. Ten to one the tuskers will have a hard time and are also trained to fight if need be. They are yoked to a wild elephant and taken to drink water and made to work when sufficiently broken.

Coming to the end of our day's hike, we had a hearty meal though simple prepared by one of us and then all of us had a short ride on one of the tuskers. Oh! what lot of fun it is to ride on a moving mountain of flesh! We started

from the camp at 3. 45 P.M. after thanking our host and bursting forth into a "Hip, hip, hurrah" for the newly captured elephant and the successful trappers. All of us got ourselves provided with bamboo sticks from the abundance of the bamboo clumps near by. They were of great help to us in our descent as they gave us a firmer foothold and something to lean upon, especially when descending the rocky footpath. Some of us with great expectation looked out for hyenas and panthers but were disappointed. We reached the foot at 6 P. M. and at the travelers bungalow took our lunch of biscuit and cold water and started pedalling. We reached the hostel at 8 P. M. sharp after a ride of two hours in the dark as we had overlooked to provide ourselves with lamps and had to shift with only one lamp. It was the opinion of the bikers that they had a glorious time of it and I lay a wager that the taste of the pudding is in the eating of it and so did the bikers.
