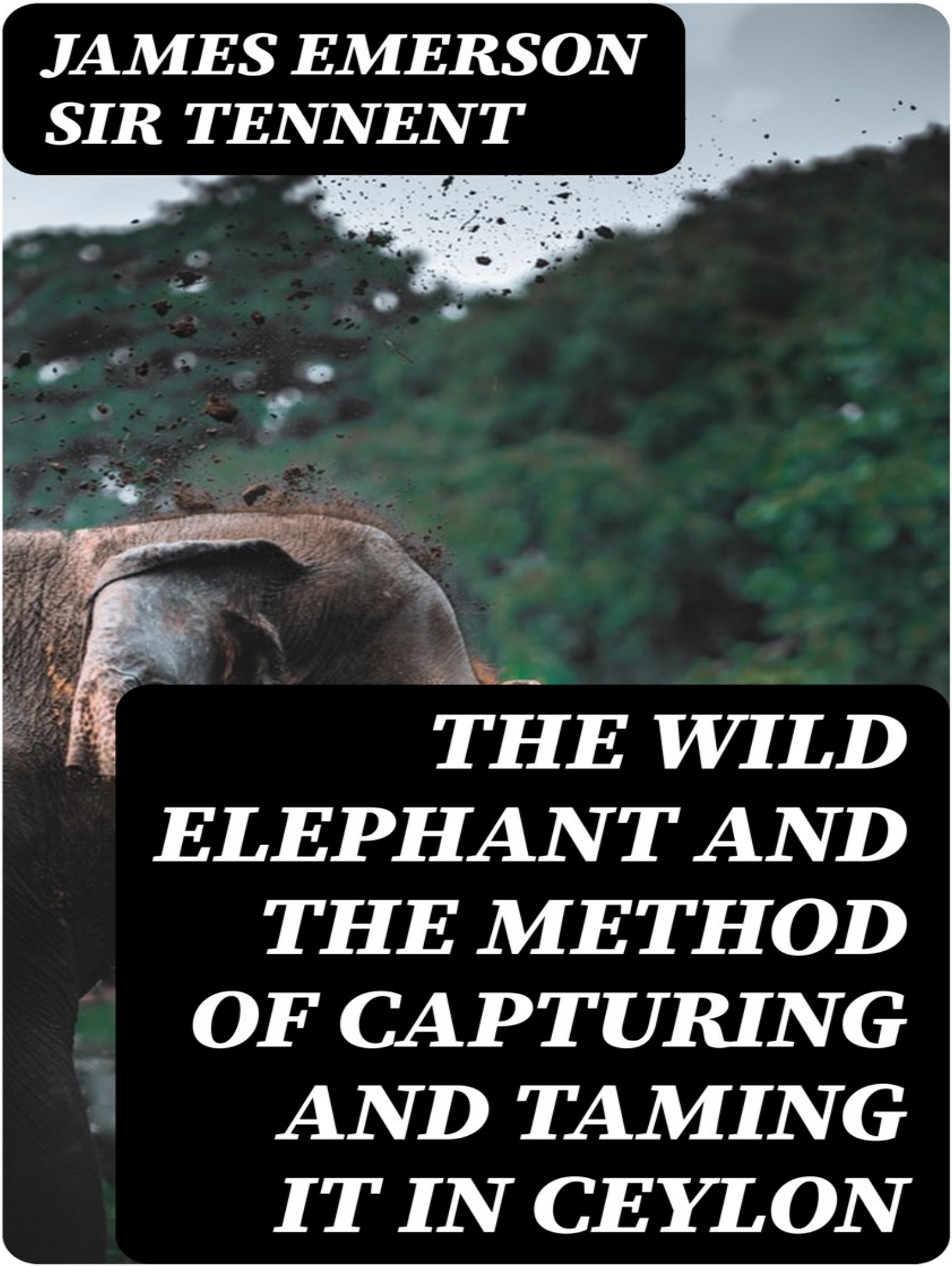
JAMES EMERSON SIR TENNENT



THE WILD ELEPHANT AND THE METHOD OF CAPTURING AND TAMING IT IN CEYLON

James Emerson Sir Tennent

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PREFACE.

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In this volume, the chapters descriptive of the structure and habits of the wild elephant are reprinted for the sixth time from a larger work,1 published originally in 1859. Since the appearance of the First Edition, many corrections and much additional matter have been supplied to me, chiefly from India and Ceylon, and will be found embodied in the following pages.

To one of these in particular I feel bound to direct attention. In the course of a more enlarged essay on the zoology of Ceylon,2 amongst other proofs of a geological origin for that island, distinct from that of the adjacent continent of India, as evidenced by peculiarities in the flora and fauna of each respectively, I had occasion to advert to a discovery which had been recently announced by Temminck in his *Survey of the Dutch possessions in the Indian Archipelago*,3 that the elephant which abounds in Sumatra (although unknown in the adjacent island of Java), and which had theretofore been regarded as identical in species with the Indian one, has been found to possess peculiarities, in which it differs as much from the elephant of India as the latter does from its African congener. On this new species, to which the natives give the name of "*gadjah*," Temminck has conferred the scientific designation of the *Elephas Sumatranus*. The points which entitle it to this distinction he enumerates minutely in the work4 before alluded to, and they have been summarized as follows by Prince Lucien Bonaparte.

“This species is perfectly intermediate between the Indian and African, especially in the shape of the skull, and will certainly put an end to the distinction between *Elephas* and *Loxodon*, with those who admit that anatomical genus; since although the crowns of the teeth of *E. Sumatranus* are more like the Asiatic animal, still the less numerous undulated ribbons of enamel are nearly quite as wide as those forming the lozenges of the African. The number of pairs of false ribs (which alone vary, the true ones being always six) is fourteen, one less than in the *Africanus*, *one* more than in the *Indicus*; and so it is with the dorsal vertebræ, which are twenty in the *Sumatranus* (*twenty-one* and *nineteen* in the others), whilst the new species agrees with *Africanus* in the number of sacral vertebræ (*four*), and with *Indicus* in that of the caudal ones, which are *thirty-four*.”5

Professor Schlegel of Leyden, in a paper lately submitted by him to the Royal Academy of Sciences of Holland, (the substance of which he obligingly communicated to me, through Baron Bentinck the Netherlands Minister at this Court), confirmed the identity of the Ceylon elephant with that found in the Lampongs of Sumatra. The osteological comparison of which Temminck has given the results was, he says, conducted by himself with access to four skeletons of the latter; and the more recent opportunity of comparing a living Sumatran elephant with one from Bengal, served to establish other though minor points of divergence. The Indian species is more robust and powerful; the proboscis longer and more slender; and the extremity, (a point in which the elephant of Sumatra resembles that of Africa,) is

more flattened and provided with coarser and longer hair than that of India.

Professor SCHLEGEL, adverting to the large export of elephants from Ceylon to the Indian continent, which has been carried on from time immemorial, suggests the caution with which naturalists, in investigating this question, should first satisfy themselves whether the elephants they examine are really natives of the mainland, or whether they have been brought to it from the islands. “The extraordinary fact,” he observes in his letter to me, “of the identity thus established between the elephants of Ceylon and Sumatra, and the points in which they are found to differ from that of Bengal, leads to the question whether all the elephants of the Asiatic continent belong to one single species; or whether these vast regions may not produce in some quarter as yet unexplored the one hitherto found only in the two islands referred to? It is highly desirable that naturalists who have the means and opportunity, should exert themselves to discover, whether any traces are to be found of the Ceylon elephant in the Dekkan; or of that of Sumatra in Cochin China or Siam.”

To me the establishment of a fact so conclusively confirmatory of the theory I had ventured to broach, was productive of great satisfaction. But in an essay by DR. FALCONER, since published in the *Natural History Review* for January 1863, “On the Living and Extinct Species of Elephants,” he adduces reasons for questioning the accuracy of these views as to *Elephas Sumatranus*. The idea of a specific distinction between the elephants of India and Ceylon, Dr. Falconer shows to have been propounded as far

back as 1834, by Mr. B. H. Hodgson, the eminent ethnologist and explorer of the zoology of Nepal; Dr. Falconer's own inspection however of the examples of both as preserved in the Museum of Leyden, not only did not lead him to accept the later conclusion of SCHLEGEL and TEMMINCK, but induced him to doubt the correctness of the statements published by the Prince of Canino, both as to the external and the osteological characters of the Indian elephant. As to the former, he declares that the differences between it and the elephant of Ceylon are so trifling, as not to exceed similar peculiarities observable between elephants taken in different regions of continental India, where an experienced mahout will tell at a glance, whether a newly captured animal was taken in the Sal forests of the North-Western Provinces, in Assam, in Silhet, Chittagong, Tipperah, or Cuttack. The osteological distinctions and the odontography, Dr. Falconer contends, are insufficient to sustain the alleged separateness of species. He equally discredits the alleged differences regarding the ribs and dorsal vertebræ, and he concludes that, "on a review of the whole case, the evidence in every aspect appears to him to fail in showing that the elephant of Ceylon and Sumatra is of a species distinct from that of continental India."6 He thinks it right, however, to add, that the subject is one which "should be thoroughly investigated," as the hasty assumption that the elephants of Ceylon and Sumatra belong to distinct species has been put forward to support the conjecture of a geological formation for the island of Ceylon distinct from that of the mainland of India; a proposition to which Dr. Falconer is not prepared to accede.

Having ventured to originate the latter theory, and having sustained it by Schlegel's authority as regards the elephant of Sumatra, I think it is incumbent on me to give becoming prominence to the opposite view entertained by one so eminently entitled to consideration as Dr. Falconer.

In the course of my observations on the structure and functions of the elephant, I have ventured an opinion that an animal of such ponderous and peculiar construction, is formed chiefly for progression by easy and steady paces, and is too weighty and unwieldy to leap, at least to any considerable height or distance. But this opinion I felt bound to advance with reserve, as I had seen in an interesting article in the *Colombo Observer* for March 1866, descriptive of a recent corral, the statement that an infuriated elephant had "fairly leaped a barrier 15 feet high, only carrying away the upper crossbeam with a crash." (See p. 40.) Doubtful of some inaccuracy in the measurements, I took the precaution of writing to Mr. Ferguson, the editor, to solicit further enquiry. Since the following pages have been printed, I have received from that gentleman the correction, which I now subjoin.

"My dear Sir Emerson,—I have just had a letter from Mr. Samuel Jayetileke, the Cutchery Modliar of Kornegalle, in reply to my queries about the height of the fence over which the elephant sprang. The result is the usual one whenever exact measurements are substituted for guess-work: I stated 15 feet as the height of the fence, and this was the information given to me at the time. But the report of Kumbowattewene, the Ratemahat-meya who has since gone to measure the place, is, that where the elephant leaped

over, the height was 12 feet. The exact height of the leap was however only 9 feet; for besides that in his rush he knocked away the top bar, it is found that in the corner at which he escaped, there is a mound formed by a white ant's nest, two and a half feet high, on which he must have climbed to help him over. I trust this information may be in time to prevent my original statement from going forth without modification in your new book. The leap is still a pretty good one.—Yours faithfully, A. M. Ferguson, *Observer Office*, Colombo, December 14, 1866."

J. Emerson Tennent.

Tempo Manor, Enniskillen:
October 1, 1866.

PART I.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS.

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THE

WILD ELEPHANT

CHAPTER I.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS.

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DURING my residence in Ceylon, I had on two occasions opportunities of witnessing the operation on a grand scale, of capturing wild elephants, intended to be trained for the Government service in the establishment of the Civil Engineer and Commissioner of Roads;—and in the course of my frequent journeys through the interior of the island, I succeeded in collecting so many facts relative to the habits of these animals so interesting in a state of nature, as enable me not only to add to the information previously possessed, but to correct some of the fallacies popularly entertained regarding their disposition and instincts. These particulars I am anxious to place on record before proceeding to describe the scenes I allude to, during the progress of the elephant hunts in the district of the Seven Korles, at which I was present in 1846, and again in 1847.

With the exception of the narrow but densely inhabited belt of cultivated land, that extends along the seaborde from Chilaw on the western coast towards Tangalle on the south-east, there is no part of Ceylon in which elephants may not be said to abound; even close to the environs of the most populous localities of the interior. They frequent both the open plains and the deep forests; and their footsteps are to be seen wherever food and shade, vegetation and water,[7] allure them, alike on the summits of the loftiest mountains, and on the borders of the tanks and lowland streams.

From time immemorial the Singhalese have been taught to capture and tame them, and the export of elephants from Ceylon to India has been going on without interruption from the period of the first Punic War.[8] In later times in all forests elephants were the property of the Kandyan crown; and their capture or slaughter without the royal permission was classed amongst grave offences in the criminal code.

In recent years there is reason to believe that their numbers have become considerably reduced. They have entirely disappeared from localities in which they were formerly numerous;[9] smaller herds have been taken in the periodical captures for the public service, and hunters returning from the chase report them to be growing year by year more and more scarce. In consequence of this diminution the natives in some parts of the island have even suspended the ancient practice of keeping watchers and fires by night to scare away elephants from their growing crops.[10] The opening of roads too in the hill districts, and the clearing of the mountain forests of Kandy for the

cultivation of coffee, have forced the animals to retire to the low country, where again they have been followed by large parties of European sportsmen; and the Singhalese themselves, being more freely provided with arms than in former times, have assisted in swelling the annual slaughter.11

Had the motive that incites to the destruction of the elephant in Africa and India prevailed in Ceylon, that is, had the elephants there been provided with tusks, they would long since have been annihilated for the sake of the ivory.12 But it is a curious fact that, whilst in Africa and India both sexes have tusks,13 with some slight disproportion in the size of those of the females; in Ceylon, not one elephant in a hundred is found with tusks, and the few that possess them are exclusively males. Nearly all, however, have those stunted processes called *tushes*, about ten or twelve inches in length and one or two in diameter. These I have observed them to use in loosening earth, stripping off bark, and snapping asunder small branches and climbing plants; and hence tushes are seldom seen without a groove worn into them near their extremities.14

Amongst other surmises more ingenious than sound, the general absence of tusks in the elephant of Ceylon has been associated with the profusion of rivers and streams in the island; whilst it has been thrown out as a possibility that in Africa, where water is comparatively scarce, the animal is equipped with these implements in order to assist it in digging wells in the sand and in raising the juicy roots of the mimosas and succulent plants for the sake of their moisture. In support of this hypothesis, it has been observed, that

whilst the tusks of the Ceylon species, which are never required for such uses, are slender, graceful and curved, seldom exceeding fifty or sixty pounds' weight, those of the African elephant are straight and thick, weighing occasionally 150 pounds, and even 300 pounds.15 But it is manifestly inconsistent with the idea that tusks were given to the elephant to assist in digging for food, to find that the females are less bountifully supplied with them than the males, whilst the necessity for their use extends alike to both sexes. The same consideration serves to demonstrate the fallacy of the conjecture, that the tusks of the elephant were given as weapons of offence, for if such were the case the vast majority of them in Ceylon, males as well as females, would be left helpless in presence of an assailant. But although in their conflicts with one another, those which are provided with tusks may occasionally push clumsily with them at an opponent, it is a misapprehension to imagine that tusks are designed, as has been stated, to serve "in warding off the attacks of the wily tiger and the furious rhinoceros, often securing the victory by one blow which transfixes the assailant to the earth."16

So peaceable and harmless is the life of the elephant, that nature appears to have left it unprovided with any special weapon of offence: the trunk is too delicate an organ to be rudely employed in a conflict with other animals, and although on an emergency it may push or gore with its tusks (to which the French have hastily given the designation of "*défenses*"), their almost vertical position, added to the difficulty of raising its head above the level of the shoulder, is inconsistent with the idea of their being

designed for attack, since it is impossible for the animal to deliver an effectual blow, or to “wield” its tusks as the deer and the buffalo can wield their horns.17 Nor is it easy to conceive under what circumstances an elephant could have a hostile encounter with a rhinoceros or a tiger, since their respective pursuits in a state of nature can in no way conflict.

Towards man the elephant evinces shyness, arising from love of solitude and dislike of intrusion; any alarm exhibited at his appearance may be reasonably traced to the slaughter which has reduced their numbers; and as some evidence of this, it has always been observed in Ceylon that an elephant manifests greater impatience of the presence of a white man than of a native. Were its instincts to carry it further, or were it influenced by any feeling of animosity or malignity, it must be apparent that, as against the prodigious numbers that inhabit the forests of the island, man would wage an unequal contest, and that of the two, one or other must long since have been reduced to a helpless minority.

Official testimony is not wanting in confirmation of this view: in the returns of 108 coroner’s inquests in Ceylon, during five years from 1849 to 1855 inclusive, held in cases of death occasioned by wild animals, 15 are recorded as having been caused by buffaloes, 6 by crocodiles, 2 by boars, 1 by a bear, and 68 by serpents (the great majority of the last class of sufferers being women and children, who had been bitten during the night), and 16 by elephants. Little more than three fatal accidents occurring annually on the average of five years, is certainly a very small

proportion in a population estimated at a million and a half, in an island abounding with wild elephants, with which, independently of casual encounters, voluntary conflicts are daily stimulated by the love of sport or the hope of gain. Were the elephants instinctively vicious or even highly irritable in their temperament, the destruction of human life under the circumstances must have been infinitely greater. It must also be taken into account, that some of the accidents recorded may have occurred in the rutting season, when even tame elephants are subject to fits of temporary fury, known in India by the term *must*, in Ceylon *mudda*,—a paroxysm which speedily passes away, but during the fury of which it is dangerous even for the mahout who has charge of them to approach those ordinarily the gentlest and most familiar.

Again, the elephant is said to “entertain an extraordinary dislike to all quadrupeds; that dogs running near it produce annoyance; that it is alarmed if a hare start from her form;” and from Pliny to Buffon every naturalist has asserted its supposed aversion to swine.18 These alleged antipathies are in a great degree, if not altogether, imaginary. The habits of the elephant are essentially harmless, its wants lead to no rivalry with other animals, and the food to which it is most attached flourishes in such luxuriance that abundance of it is obtained without an effort. In the quiet solitudes of Ceylon, elephants may be seen browsing peacefully in the immediate vicinity of other animals, and often in close contact with them. I have seen groups of deer and wild buffaloes reclining in the sandy bed of a river in the dry season, and elephants plucking the branches above and

beside them. They show no impatience in the company of the elk, the bear, and the wild hog; and on the other hand, I have never discovered an instance in which these animals have evinced any apprehension of the elephant. Its natural timidity, however, is such that it becomes alarmed on the appearance in the jungle of any animal with whose form it is not familiar. It is said to be afraid of the horse; but from my own experience, I should say it is the horse that is disquieted at the aspect of the elephant. In the same way, from some unaccountable impulse, the horse has an antipathy to the camel, and evinces extreme impatience, both of the sight and the smell of that animal.19 When enraged, an elephant will not hesitate to charge a rider on horseback; but it is against the man, not against the horse, that his fury is directed; and no instance has been ever known of his wantonly assailing a horse. A horse belonging to the late Major Rogers20 had run away from his groom, and was found some considerable time afterwards grazing quietly with a herd of elephants. In De Bry's splendid collection of travels, however, there is included *The voyage of a certain Englishman to Cambay*; in which the author asserts that at Agra, in the year 1607, he was present at a spectacle given by the viceregent of the great Mogul, in the course of which he saw an elephant destroy two horses, by seizing them in its trunk, and crushing them with his tusks and feet.21 But this display was avowedly an artificial one, and the creature must have been cruelly trained and tutored for the occasion.

Pigs are constantly to be seen feeding about the stables of tame elephants, which manifest no repugnance to them.

As to smaller animals, the elephant undoubtedly evinces uneasiness at the presence of a dog, but this is referable to the same cause as its impatience of a horse, namely, that neither is habitually seen by it in the forest; and it would be idle to suppose that this feeling could amount to hostility against a creature incapable of inflicting on it the slightest injury.22 The truth I apprehend to be that, when they meet, the impudence and impertinences of the dog are offensive to the gravity of the elephant, and incompatible with his love of solitude and noiseless repose. Or, as regards the horse and the dog, may it be assumed as an evidence of the sagacity of the elephant, that the only two animals to which it manifests an antipathy, are the two which it has seen only in the company of its greatest enemy, man? One instance has certainly been attested to me by an eyewitness, in which the trunk of an elephant was seized in the teeth of a Scotch terrier, and such was the alarm of the huge creature that it came at once to its knees. The dog repeated the attack, and on every renewal of it the elephant retreated in terror, holding its trunk above its head, and kicking at the terrier with its fore feet. It would have turned to flight but for the interference of its keeper.

Major Skinner, formerly commissioner of roads in Ceylon, whose official duties in constructing highways involved the necessity of his being in the jungle for months together, always found that, by night or by day, the barking of a dog which accompanied him was sufficient to put a herd of wild elephants to flight. On the whole, therefore, I am of opinion that in a state of nature the elephant lives on terms of amity with every animal in the forest, that it neither regards them

as its foes, nor provokes their hostility by its acts; and that, with the exception of man, its greatest enemy is a fly!

These current statements as to the supposed animosity of the elephant to minor animals originated with Ælian and Pliny, who had probably an opportunity of seeing, what may at any time be observed, that when a captive elephant is picketed beside a post, the domestic animals, goats, sheep, and cattle, will annoy and irritate it by their audacity in making free with its provender; but this is an evidence in itself of the little instinctive dread which such comparatively puny creatures entertain of one so powerful and yet so gentle.

Amongst elephants themselves, jealousy and other causes of irritation frequently occasion contentions between individuals of the same herd; but on such occasions their general habit is to strike with their trunks, and to bear down their opponents with their heads. It is doubtless correct that an elephant, when prostrated by the force and fury of an antagonist of its own species, is often wounded by the downward pressure of the tusks, which in any other position it would be almost impossible to use offensively.[23]

Mr. Mercer, who in 1846 was the principal civil officer of Government at Badulla, sent me a jagged fragment of an elephant's tusk, about five inches in diameter, and weighing between twenty and thirty pounds, which had been brought to him by some natives, who, being attracted by a noise in the jungle, witnessed a combat between a tusker and one without tusks, and saw the latter with his trunk seize one of the tusks of his antagonist and wrench from it the portion in question, which measured two feet in length.

Here the trunk was shown to be the more powerful offensive weapon of the two; but I apprehend that the chief reliance of the elephant for defence is on its ponderous weight, the pressure of its foot being sufficient to crush any minor assailant after being prostrated by means of its trunk. Besides, in using its feet for this purpose, it derives a wonderful facility from the peculiar formation of the knee-joint in the hind leg, which, enabling it to swing the hind feet forward close to the ground, assists it to toss the body alternately from foot to foot, till deprived of life.24

A sportsman who had partially undergone this operation, having been seized by a wounded elephant but escaped from its fury, described to me his sufferings as he was thus flung back and forward between the hind and fore feet of the animal, which ineffectually attempted to trample him at each concussion, and abandoned him without inflicting serious injury.

Knox, in describing the execution of criminals by the state elephants of the former kings of Kandy, says, “they will run their teeth (*tusks*) through the body, and then tear it in pieces and throw it limb from limb;” but a Kandyan chief, who was witness to these scenes, assured me that the elephant never once applied its tusks, but, placing its foot on the prostrate victim, plucked off his limbs in succession by a sudden movement of the trunk. If the tusks were designed to be employed offensively, some alertness would naturally be exhibited in using them; but in numerous instances where sportsmen have fallen into the power of a wounded elephant, they have escaped through the failure of the enraged animal to strike them with its tusks, even when stretched upon the ground.25

But here there arises a further and a very curious enquiry, as to the specific objects in the economy of the elephant, to which its tusks are conducive. Placed as it is in Ceylon, in the midst of the most luxuriant profusion of its favourite food, in close proximity at all times to abundant supplies of water, and with no natural enemies against whom to protect itself, it is difficult to conjecture any probable utility which it can derive from such appendages. Their absence is unaccompanied by any inconvenience to

the individuals in whom they are wanting; and as regards the few who possess them, the only operations in which I am aware of their tusks being employed in relation to the habits of the animal, is to assist in ripping open the stem of the jaggery palms and young palmyras to extract the farinaceous core; and in splitting up the juicy shaft of the plantain. Whilst the tuskless elephant crushes the latter under foot, thereby soiling it and wasting its moisture; the other, by opening it with the point of its tusk, performs the operation with delicacy and apparent ease.

These, however, are trivial and almost accidental advantages: on the other hand, owing to irregularities in their growth, the tusks are sometimes an impediment to the animal in feeding;26 and in more than one instance in the Government studs, tusks which had so grown as to approach and cross one another at the extremities, have had to be relieved by the saw; the contraction of space between them so impeding the free action of the trunk as to prevent the animal from conveying branches to its mouth.27

It is true that in captivity, and after a due course of training, the elephant discovers a new use for its tusks when employed in moving stones and piling timber; so much so that a powerful one will raise and carry on them a log of half a ton weight or more. One evening, whilst riding in the vicinity of Kandy, towards the scene of the massacre of Major Davie’s party in 1803, my horse evinced some excitement at a noise which approached us in the thick jungle, and which consisted of a repetition of the ejaculation *urmph! urmph!* in a hoarse and dissatisfied tone. A turn in

the forest explained the mystery, by bringing me face to face with a tame elephant, unaccompanied by any attendant. He was labouring painfully to carry a heavy beam of timber, which he balanced across his tusks, but the pathway being narrow, he was forced to bend his head to one side to permit the load to pass endways; and the exertion and this inconvenience combined led him to utter the dissatisfied sounds which disturbed the composure of my horse. On seeing us halt, the elephant raised his head, reconnoitred us for a moment, then flung down the timber, and voluntarily forced himself backwards among the brushwood so as to leave a passage, of which he expected us to avail ourselves. My horse hesitated: the elephant observed it, and impatiently thrust himself still deeper into the jungle, repeating his cry of *urmph!* but in a voice evidently meant to encourage us to advance. Still the horse trembled; and anxious to observe the instinct of the two sagacious animals, I laid the rein upon its neck and forbore any interference: again the elephant of his own accord wedged himself further in amongst the trees, and manifested some impatience that we did not pass him. At length the horse moved forward; and when we were fairly past the elephant I looked back and saw the wise creature stoop and take up its unwieldy burthen, trim and balance it on its tusks, and resume its route as before, hoarsely snorting its discontented remonstrance.

Between the African elephant and that of Ceylon, with the exception of the striking peculiarity of the infrequency of tusks in the latter, the distinctions are less apparent to a casual observer than to a scientific naturalist. In the Ceylon