

OVER THE KAVERI.

A TRUE INCIDENT.

By MRS. AUSTIN-DOBSON.

In the month of October, 1881, a party of travellers, consisting of an English officer, Major S—, and his wife, a brother and sister, who may be recognised as Mr. and Miss B—, and one other gentleman, prepared to act as, and who indeed was, the "doctor" of the company, set out on an expedition in the beautiful neighbourhood of the Falls of the Kaveri—or Cauvery, as the river is sometimes called—in the Madras Presidency of India.

The ladies were mounted on an elephant, over whose huge back, in default of the more comfortable howdah, rude mattresses had been bound by strong cords. These the riders determinately gripped to secure a steady seat behind the mahout, or driver, who, with native ease, had thrown himself over the elephant's neck, his hawkuss, a kind of dagger with a hook at the side, in due proximity to the tender feelings of the noble beast—its ears and head.

At the side of this mother-elephant, whose age none of the natives, reckoning by monsoons, could determine, marched her calf, quite a small elephant, said to be at least forty years old.

In the rear walked the gentlemen and native attendants, taking advantage of the path cleared by the elephants, that with their gaily painted trunks would break off the branches of trees overlapping their course, or root up the many lovely shrubs and creepers which intercepted their footsteps.

It was the first time that one of the ladies, at least, had ridden an elephant, and the unique slow rocking movement, ending in the noiseless but by no means motionless thud of the giant foot as it reached the ground, was to her rather alarming; but as the lovely scenery by degrees engrossed her attention, she forgot her fear of the exalted position in appreciation of the better view it afforded of the country through which they were passing.

A gorgeous sight indeed are the Falls of the Kaveri. Six or seven cascades, the highest of them about 180 feet high, can be seen from one point of view, dashing over their rocky beds, amidst grassy knolls, valleys with their thick garment of the graceful caladium, plumbago, and other of our hothouse plants; surrounded by exquisite natural ferneries and forest trees from which the little weavers' nests hang, and in which the chattering jays and many-coloured parrots, with here and there a group of monkeys, enjoy a livelong summer holiday. A fit haunt, this, for wild bees, of which the traveller may do well to beware, avoiding the foot of the rocks where the bees have made their nests, and where perhaps more than one explorer has run the risk of sharing the fate of a gentleman who, attacked by the bees, must have been stung to death had not a lady, with presence of mind, covered him with her shawl.

Not so many miles from this spot—though perhaps two days' journey in bullock carts—is the splendid mausoleum of Tippoo Sahib, who lived in his, as he thought, impregnable palace at Seringapatam, guarded by two tigers, a terror to all about him, till the Duke of Wellington, then Sir Arthur Wellesley, stormed the fort and took it, upon which Tippoo was killed.

In dry weather much sand drifts from the bed of the Kaveri, and blows in the direction of the native village of Talkud, where thirty temples are believed to be sand buried. The top of one was, at the time of this adventure, to be seen, and another, still uncovered, would, the natives affirmed, have quite disappeared in about thirty years.

In and out among these villages, temples,

slopes, and precipices flows the Kaveri, now and then dashing over the rocks which form the waterfalls, now and then branching off and forming small islands.

Of these, the island of Sivasamundram is of some importance to travellers. To its owner, both the title of Jagirdar and the land were given upon the condition of his providing a bungalow for travellers.

Owing to its circuitous course, the Kaveri has to be crossed in several places by travellers who would save themselves the many hours or even days of travel which would be occupied in following its course.

Major S— and his party had already made the passage several times, before they had engaged the elephants, by means of a pontoon made of "dug-outs"—tree trunks scooped out, like Robinson Crusoe's. Into or on to this pontoon the ox-wagons (discarded since the elephants had been hired) had been placed and safely landed on the opposite side.

But at Sivasamundram there was a bridge broad enough to carry the elephants, so that no delay would now prevent the travellers' advance; and as the elephants approached the river they were naturally driven towards the bridge in question.

When, however, the mother-elephant came near the bridge, to the astonishment of all present she stood still, and throwing up her trunk trumpeted loudly.

The first surprise over, the driver goaded the poor beast with no merciful hand.

But in vain. Not a step further would she advance to the bridge, and in response to further use of the hawkuss came another bellowing more hideous than the first.

"There is some secret of which we know nothing," remarked Major S—, "and of which the rascally driver knows well enough. I'm pretty sure the natives are all in league; they told me the elephant would not go over the bridge."

"The elephant, probably by instinct or by gift of scent, has an objection to the bridge," said the doctor; and the discussion might have lasted longer had not the ladies, growing alarmed, called upon the gentlemen to relieve their fears.

"It is impossible to unravel the mystery," said Major S—; "I'm pretty sure these natives know more than they choose to tell. I will see what bribing them will do, and they shall pay for it afterwards. Keep your seats: there is nothing to alarm you."

Major S— put his hand in his pocket and produced some tempting backsheesh. But his intention had been anticipated. The natives had understood the major's remarks.

For a moment they took counsel together. Then one of them grasped the cord hanging from the "baby-elephant's" neck. Using the same means as applied to the mother, they compelled the smaller elephant to advance towards the bridge.

No sooner had he put his foot between its walls than the mother, again trumpeting with a force that vibrated through the air, strode forward towards the bank of the river, and, feeling the way very carefully with her trunk, stepped into the water.

In horror-struck suspense the ladies cried out for help impossible to render.

"Hold on!" shouted Major S—; "the river is shallow, and the elephant may only have to wade."

And if not, and she should fail to swim, would it be possible for the gentlemen to swim out to rescue the ladies? But the river was running with almost the swiftness of rapids; to stem the current would be impossible.

In their inability to render assistance, the gentlemen stood on the shore while the elephant waded deeper into the stream.

Above her knee, up to her neck, rose the water, and as she threw up her trunk and the ladies' feet touched the water, it was apparent that the elephant was swimming!

Would she be able to overcome the force of the tide? Arrived in the middle of the river, was the animal wavering? A few moments of suspense which, to the ladies, in their perilous position, seemed an age, and the elephant had overcome the swiftness of the tide, and was making steadily, though slowly, for the shore.

Having raised her huge and dripping form from the rippling waves her movements had caused, she clambered, in majestic fashion, up the opposite bank.

Almost too thankful to find words of reproof, the major turned to the driver for an explanation, and was assured that the elephant would not go over the bridge because her instinct told her it was not strong enough to bear her weight. The knowledge that her calf was being led over the bridge to the other side of the river, rather than any coercion on the part of the mahout, had possibly induced the elephant to cross the river with so short a warning. The supposition that the bridge would not have borne the weight of the elephant's huge form was corroborated by the facts afterwards ascertained, and it is to be hoped that on a route traversed by elephants a bridge secure enough to bear so stately an animal has superseded that which she so strongly suspected of want of stability.

Having dismounted by means of a chair placed at the side of the elephant's calf, that acted as a stepping-stone to its mother, the travellers sat down to their picnic-tiffin, with grateful hearts to God, who had given instinct to an animal and safety to His people.

In a volume of the "Library of Entertaining Knowledge," entitled "Quadrupeds," the fact that an elephant will walk over a *vibrating* bridge when nothing will induce him to set foot on a *tottering* bridge, is noticed, and an interesting passage on the elephant's mode of swimming may be quoted from pp. 63 and 64. "The power of crossing rivers must be essential to the existence of the elephant in a state of nature; for the quantity of food which a herd of elephants consume renders it necessary that they should be constantly moving from place to place. The elephant crosses a stream in two ways. If the bed of the river is hard, and the water not of too great a depth, he fords it. It is a matter of indifference to him whether his body be completely immersed in the water; for as long as he can bring the tip of his trunk to the surface, so as to breathe the external air, he is safe. But the elephant will require to cross the largest rivers as well as the smallest brooks, in his search for food; and it may even be requisite for him to pass such mighty waters as the Ganges and the Niger. The elephant swims deep—so deep that the end of his trunk only is out of the water. With this instrument for breathing, he trusts himself fearlessly to his native rivers. In a state of captivity, he is somewhat more cautious; although a well-trained elephant will readily swim, or wade with his driver on his back. This situation is, however, sometimes one of danger to the rider; for the animal, regardless of the mahout . . . will sink his body greatly below the surface, having this faculty of breathing through the end of his trunk; and then the frightened driver has no resource but to stand upon his back."