

ELEPHANTS AS LABORERS

By W. G. FitzGerald

THE elephant is a grand laborer. He seldom or never "strikes," belongs to no unions, requires no wages, and can do the labor of twelve or twenty men—all in return for his maintenance, which, however, is a pretty big item. Of course all elephants, even those in shows, do work of various kinds, such as hauling wagons and so on; but it is in the East that one sees these monsters regularly employed.

There are yet living in India a great number of wild elephants which are, however, strictly preserved by the Government, which finds it profitable to use the huge beasts in hauling guns, building tanks, and also on famine works and fortifications. When vacancies occur in the ranks of these strange workers, word is sent to the Department of Woods and Forests that more "recruits" are wanted, and forthwith an immense elephant trap is set up. This consists of a great, staked enclosure whose walls are made of solid tree-trunks planted close together, and having a wide-spread, funnel-shaped opening. On a day appointed the whole region is alive with beaters carrying guns, gongs and fire-works, and sooner or later a herd of trumpeting and startled monsters find themselves within the preserve's wedge-shaped walls, and then they have no other alternative than to rush into the corral.

When they find themselves trapped, the elephants are of course furious, and attack the palisades with their trunks and tusks. After a day or two they quiet down somewhat, and then a vast quantity of hay and green stuff is fed to them. Next comes the process of their breaking-in or taming. This is done by means of tame working-elephants, selected for their sagacity and intelligence. These carefully trained animals, without any *mahouts*, or drivers, on their backs, walk in stately procession to the corral among their wilder brethren, and deliberately proceed to talk to them and argue with them, and point out that after all their lot will be much better than it has been, and as to work—why, they will never be taxed beyond their pretty large capacities.

For some days the unhappy prisoners refuse to listen to reason; but gradually better counsels prevail, and at length the prisoners come forth one by one, each of them carefully roped in between two tame, working elephants. It is a fact that if the prisoner on these occasions does not behave himself, after repeated "warnings" from his brother guardians, they apply severe "persuasion" to him through the medium of their tusks. Thereafter the beasts grow more docile, and within a week or two from the time of the entrapping of the herd the wild elephants are at work with their neighbors.

But to see elephants employed precisely as though they were human laborers, one has to go into the great teak forests of Burmah, and into the sawmills and yards of Rangoon and Maulmain. Burmah teak, as is well known, is a wood as valuable as Honduras mahogany; and in both Upper and Lower Burmah

big log, drives his tusks into the ground at the side of it, curls over his trunk, brings one end of the log onto these tusks, and lifts the end slowly. Meanwhile, his mate has placed a stone or a block of wood underneath the log, and this done one elephant goes to each end, and with a little screech of satisfaction curls his trunk easily around the swaying ends, and then the pair of them march off with the log to the stack. Here again almost human intelligence is used, for the foremost elephant marches up and rests one end of the log on the wood stack and then retires, while the "foreman" at the other end of the long log drives it home with great satisfaction—nor will he rest easy if even a few inches of it sticks out.

Can you imagine the scene? All day long, hundreds upon hundreds of elephants, tuskers and otherwise, big and little, are hurrying backward and forward, all bent upon doing their conscientious best to get the work done. There is no playing, and no wasting of time; and the celerity and proficiency with which the shifting and carrying and stacking are done has to be seen to be realized.

One amusing thing is that when the luncheon bell rings at midday, and again at three or four o'clock in the afternoon, everyone of the hundreds of elephants will drop his log where he stands, and run off trumpeting and screaming with delight like a small boy just released from school.

In many cases these elephants have no attendant at all; but the greater number of them have a *mahout* to prevent fights over sharing the work. The animals get much attached to their drivers when they are kind to them, but when it is otherwise a tragedy is likely to happen. It is notorious that the elephant has a long memory.

Apropos of this, here is a story from the elephant laborers of Rangoon:

A surly little man from a village high up on the Irawadi some years ago applied for work to a big sawmill in the Burmese Capital. It was an establishment belonging to a Liverpool house, and one of the superintendents engaged the man as *mahout* to a huge elephant employed in dragging rough teak trees through the forest. Unfortunately for himself, this man was systematically unkind to the elephant, and was always goading him with the steel spike which these men carry. Many times did his big mount try to destroy him, and at last after a specially determined attempt the superintendent discharged the man.

He first drifted into the Punjab district; and it was five or six years before he found himself again in Burmah, this time re-employed as an elephant driver in Maulmain. On the first day that his elephant was assigned to him, and on the first trip, the man noticed that at the sound of his voice the animal threw out his ears in a threatening manner. Nothing further happened, however, until the animal had carried his *mahout* well into the jungly forest, and then without a moment's warning, up and backward curled

One of them, the "foreman," goes to one end of the

Carrying Stone From the Quarry



Where the Monsters Are Derricks

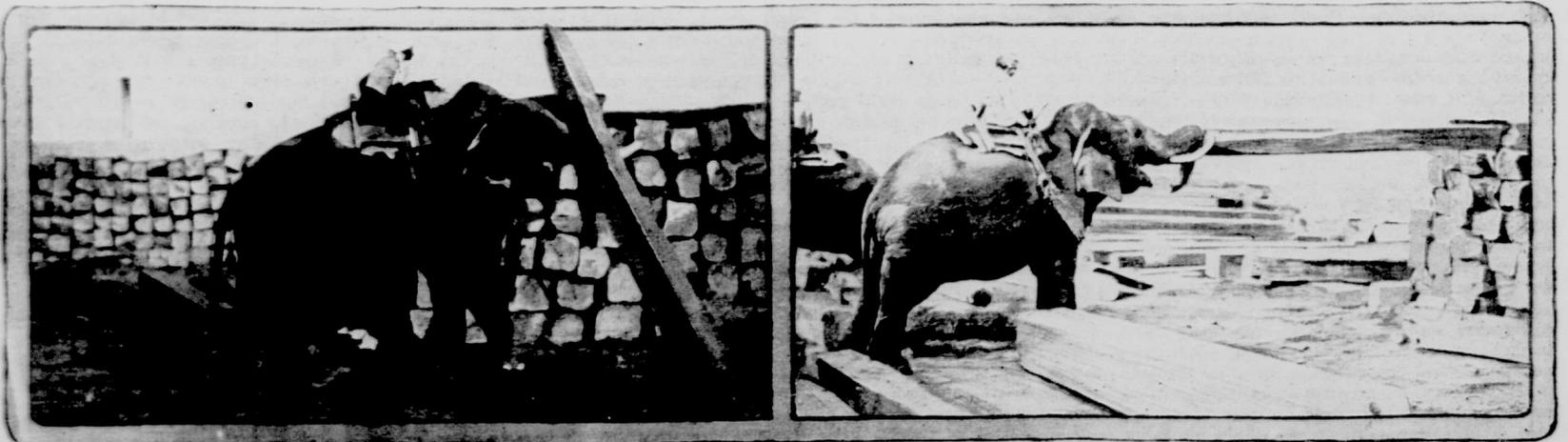
Piling Timber From the Teak Forests of Burmah

there are almost illimitable forests, great tracts of which are leased out to private corporations by the government of India. These companies find it much cheaper to employ elephants as laborers between the forests and the sawmills than to lay down even the cheapest of portable railways. The system of work is something like this:

Expert men fell the trees much as they do in our own forests of the Northwest, and then trim off the branches. No sooner is this done than along comes an elephant trailing chains behind him, and with or without a Hindoo, Burmese or Siamese *mahout* on his back or head. If all that is known of the intelligence of these working elephants was printed, it would be incredible; and yet anyone who has to do with these huge creatures will tell you that they act and deduce and reason precisely as human beings do.

Chains are fastened around the prostrate log, and the elephant begins to drag it through the forest for many miles to the sawmill. Here the logs are squared by machinery, and other elephant laborers stack these logs for their reception on board ship.

Now observe a couple of elephant laborers handling one of these squared teak logs. It lies on the ground. One of them, the "foreman," goes to one end of the



Working as Sawmill Laborers