



Painted for Outrigger by Marc Lucas.

THE TRACKER IN PERIL.

A CEYLON TRACKER.

By P. Fitzroy Dixon.



ONE of the best known trackers in my day in Ceylon was a Moor-man of the name of Ali Mahomed. The Moormen are of mixed descent (probably originally from Arabia), but many generations of residence in India and Ceylon have developed the present race. They are all of fine physique, tall and muscular, and are for the most part traders. They combine

shrewdness with enterprise, and are invariably prosperous. Some of them are keen sportsmen, and with the knowledge gained during their trips to the interior, know better than most people where to look for game.

Before the present laws were passed for the protection of game there were many trackers who devoted themselves to catching and taming elephants, and Ali Mahomed was one of them. He supplemented great skill with an intrepidity born of Mohammedan fatalism. "Allah Akhbar!" he would say, "God is great, and in His hands is my fate. Nought that I can do can avert it." So he carried out whatsoever his sagacity prompted him to do, regardless of risk, and great was his success.

The mode employed by the elephant catchers was extremely simple, though it required great judgment and nerve. It consisted merely in getting close enough to an animal to noose his legs and then tie them to a tree.

Ali Mahomed was king of the elephant catchers, and when he could be induced to talk of his exploits he would say: "It is true; never yet did I mark an elephant in a herd but I captured it." Still, though Ali captured an immense number of elephants, he did not always come off unscathed, as the following incident will show.

He discovered a herd one afternoon, and the next morning, accompanied by his eighteen year old son Hassan, he set out to rope a beast about two-thirds grown; for a young animal is more easily handled and tamed. Their outfit consisted of four ropes made out of twisted deer hide, each having a carefully prepared running noose. These ropes were very strong and elastic, and well adapted to resist an immense strain.

About noon Ali and his son found the herd, after tracking them for many miles, and carefully observing the wind, crept up from leeward, until within hearing of the elephants. The heat was intense and the herd was resting in the shelter of a clump of big trees. Except the occasional snapping of a dead stick under the ponderous weight of some slowly-moving beast, or the swish of a leafy branch with which one would lazily brush off a fly, there was nothing to indicate the presence of the game.

Ali, after divesting himself of all clothing, excepting a scrap of cloth, which every native wears, went on alone, leaving Hassan in charge of the ropes. Presently through the undergrowth a swinging trunk warned him that he was near the herd. Careful observation disclosed the proportions of a full grown animal, so he quietly shifted his ground until, after two or three attempts, he finally selected one young enough to suit his purpose. Carefully noting the exact location he returned for the ropes. He took two of them and carefully coiled them over his left arm, and Hassan followed with the rest. Progress with the ropes was slow and laborious, and when at length the gray form of the elephant became visible, Ali signed to Hassan to stop and crept forward alone.

The delicacy of this proceeding may well be imagined when it is remembered how keenly endowed the elephant is with the senses of hearing and smell. Intense care in moving will prevent noise, but it is difficult to imagine how the trackers keep the elephant from scenting them, even though the wind were favorable. It is possible

that they use the juice of the strongly scented lemon grass which grows around, or some other herb, to overcome the human odor.

With the two ropes ready, Ali approached the elephant from behind, for it was its hind legs he was attempting to secure. When about twenty feet off he made the end of one of the ropes fast to a tree, and then, inch by inch, covered the intervening distance. At last, after much painful effort, he lay at full length almost touching the animal, the two nooses lying open, one behind each pillar-like leg. Giving a last glance to see that the rope he had fastened was clear, he took the noose and pushed it forward until it touched one foot. To get it on the leg the elephant must by some means be induced to raise his foot. With a long thorn Ali gently pricked the other leg, just as a fly might sting it, for the *pachydermata*, in spite of their thick hides, are very sensitive to the bites of insects. Slowly the foot he was endeavoring to secure rose and rubbed the spot he had pricked. As it left the ground the noose was slipped open beneath it, so as to encircle it when replaced. Then after a moment's pause, with steady, unflinching hand the noose was raised and lightly drawn. When the elephant felt the contact of the rope he at once, with the other foot, attempted to shove it off down to the ground. This action allowed Ali to slip the second noose into place. After another pause both nooses were raised and still with gentle touch drawn tight, one on each leg. The elephant at once moved forward, but before it could feel the check of the tree to which it was attached, Ali had glided away and had taken a turn round another trunk with the second rope and made it fast. Nor was he a moment too soon, for, suspecting danger, the elephant dashed forward with a mighty rush. When it reached the end of its tether its hind legs were pulled from under and it was thrown to the ground.

With a terrific scream of rage it was on its feet again in an instant, throwing itself forward with a force that would have snapped anything but ropes such as these. Under the mighty strain they stretched like fiddle strings, but, with a

sudden contraction that jerked away the hind legs, brought the huge body down once more.

At the first sound of alarm the whole forest seemed alive with elephants rushing to and fro, while shrill trumpeting arose on all sides. Ali had at once made for the spot where he had left Hassan (who had meanwhile climbed a tree), and just as he reached it a great gray mass burst through the underbrush, and an elephant, followed by the whole herd, dashed by, knocking him over and breaking one of the bones of his left forearm. Instinctively crouching against the butt of the tree, he escaped being trodden on, and aided by, Hassan, who let down one of the ropes, succeeded in reaching a secure position in the branches.

For some time the herd kept running about in a state of great excitement, unable to understand the cause of their companion's detention and struggles, but finally, after circling around the spot several times, departed.

Injured though he was, Ali would not leave his prize until he had made it secure, and presently descended with Hassan to where it lay, exhausted.

At the sight of the men the elephant renewed its struggles, but finding them to be of no avail, ceased, standing upright, and keeping a watchful eye on its captors.

It now became necessary to fasten the forelegs. This feat required no slight skill and dexterity, and Ali most unwillingly deputed it to his son. Finally, after many unsuccessful efforts, the elephant trod within the noose Hassan threw in front of it, and after two or three attempts were foiled by the animal's trunk, the rope was tied to a tree. Lastly the other foot was similarly fastened.

The captive was now held by four ropes, all dragging different ways, and so tightened as to render it absolutely helpless, and so they left it, returning for the time to the village.

The subsequent taming of the elephant was comparatively simple. It was deprived of food and water for several days, during which it became accustomed to the sight of the men who watched it, until at length it would take food from the hands of its guardians.

Lastly, with the assistance of a trained elephant, it was taken to the coast.

As may be imagined, Ali Mahomed's occupation made him of immense value as a tracker, and many were the souvenirs he received from the successful sportsmen he guided. But woe betide the man who was unable to bring down his game when Ali had led him up to it, for having done his part he could not be got to condone a failure on the sportsman's side.

Trincomalee, in bygone days, was justly renowned as a sporting locality, and many were the expeditions undertaken by the European residents and the officers of the navy who arrived there with their ships. Amongst the resident civilians was Keane, a gallant sportsman and unerring shot, and when he undertook a trip it was pretty sure to be successful. His bungalow showed evidence of his skill, and great was the admiration expressed from time to time by his many nautical visitors, and fervent their prayers that their efforts might be similarly rewarded. Keane had spent most of his life in the jungle, and certainly his collection of trophies was remarkable. There were heads of all the varieties of deer found in Ceylon; on the floors were leopard and bear skins, whilst the skulls of alligators and boars grinned through their tusks from the corners of the veranda. Several very fine pairs of elephant tusks stood here and there, and an enormous skull in the garden served to illustrate the proper and only way of stopping a charging elephant.

Keane and Ali Mahomed generally worked together. Indeed, Ali could rarely be persuaded to go out with any one else, and if he had any particularly good sport in prospect it was always to Keane that he went with the news.

One day Ali returned from a journey he had taken to an unfrequented part of the country, where the Mahavelliganga discharges into the sea. In the cool of the evening he strolled over to make his salaam to Keane, who was contemplating a trip with some friends.

"It is well," said Ali to Keane, "for I have good news. There is a herd of elephants in the Wanné, near where the stream called the Val'ar joins the big river. They are led by one which I

have seen and which carries tusks that none in your collection here can equal. Moreover," he added, "the villagers tell me that there is a family of leopards there, which are carrying off sheep and goats. Possibly we may get them, too."

These tidings were translated to two naval men who sat by, and arrangements were made to start the following evening. Two days later saw the party encamped on the banks of the Val'ar. Ali and his son Hassan started off on a reconnaissance, whilst Keane and his companions got the camp into shape. About sunset Ali brought good news. He had seen plenty of tracks and had followed a large herd of elephants to a dense jungle about five miles off. The party were well on their way by sunrise, marching in Indian file behind Ali, who carried Keane's spare gun. They moved silently, stopping occasionally to let Ali go ahead a little way when there was any doubt about the route.

They were on a great, alluvial flat, covered with dense jungle. Here and there in the branches overhead were masses of driftwood and rubbish, lodged there by some previous flood. Occasionally they crossed a sinuous creek of still, black-looking water, in which great lizards, mottled, green and black and yellow, slowly swam.

All around was gloom and damp. Vines and interlacing creepers formed such a tangle that Ali had to draw his heavy knife and cut out a road.

After a couple of hours of this work they found the jungle getting lighter, and at length emerged from it into the sunshine. In one respect, however, they were not much better off, for they were in heavy, coarse grass, growing as high as their heads, and so tangled about the roots that walking was almost impossible.

At length they came upon a track where some big animals had passed. Ali examined the spoor and announced that a band of elephants had passed since dawn, and then taking the bearings of the sun and the course they had been following, declared it must be the herd he had tracked the previous night.

Traveling was now a good deal easier, for the elephants had walked in single file and had trodden down a fairly good path. In time the grass

grew thinner, an occasional tree appeared, and Ali stopped and pointed silently to some fresh droppings. Breaking it up and placing his naked foot upon it, he said: "It is warm, they are not an hour ahead of us."

This meant, of course, that unless the animals were traveling fast they might be found at any moment, and preparations were made accordingly. The tracks now led over marshy ground and showed where the animals had stopped to feed at a clump of wild yams, which had been torn up for the large, mealy tubers. The elephants had separated here and it was doubtful, for a moment, whether they were not close at hand; but a brief examination showed that they had again got together and resumed their course, evidently making for a certain locality.

From a slight eminence the party saw ahead of them the termination of the grassy plain, and clumps of forest, which rose in parts as dense as a wall.

Ali now indicated to Keane that he thought they were close to the herd, and as they halted, there came a shrill trumpeting from the dense jungle ahead. The leader of the herd had called his followers together.

Ali looked grave, for this meant a change in the plans of the elephants, and it was possible that their suspicions were aroused, in which case they might run ten miles without a stop, into a country where they could not be followed.

So far the wind had been favorable, the animals traveling up wind. The party decided to follow the tracks until close enough to commence operations, then separate, Brown and Keane, with Ali, taking one side of the herd, Harvey and Hassan the other.

The question of the tusker's presence was settled when Ali, who had been gazing intently at the edge of the jungle, sank noiselessly on his face, an example which the rest at once followed. Though they were concealed in the grass they could nevertheless see well enough, and presently perceived what it was the tracker's keen eye had discovered. The majestic proportions of a huge elephant slowly emerged from the leafy mass, bearing magnificent tusks, which flashed brightly in the

sunshine. The animal stood looking around and scenting the gale, then turned and disappeared.

"Ah," said Ali, "the sultan returns to his harem; they intend to remain there during the heat of the day."

After waiting a few minutes to get into readiness for action at any moment, the little party started again.

Ali led the way into the jungle at the point where the tusker had been seen. He slowly followed up the tracks, keeping a sharp lookout. Progress was comparatively easy, as once clear of the thorny scrub, which is generally found on the edge of a jungle, the undergrowth was composed of thin, straight poles with but little foliage. A carpet of leaves deadened the footfalls, so that, by avoiding treading on dead sticks, they had nothing to fear.

The tusker had gone straight back to the herd and had then led towards a suitable place for a siesta.

Motioning to his companions to keep still, Ali went on alone, and after a short absence returned, whispering to Keane that the herd was in some bamboo undergrowth into which it would be difficult to follow them.

After a brief, whispered conference, Harvey and Hassan took to the left and the others followed up the tracks. These were the only two points from which they could approach up wind.

It fell to Harvey to open the engagement. Bearing in mind all the instructions given him by his experienced host, he moved cautiously, watching for the first sign of the enemy. As usual with the inexperienced, when he did sight the elephant he could not distinctly make out the motionless form through a network of twigs and trailing bamboo. Hassan pulled his sleeve, pointing at something some ten yards away. Suddenly a flapping ear caught his eye and in an instant the entire animal was visible. Anxious not to spoil his chance he waited for a minute, shifting his ground slightly so as to secure an opening free of intervening branches, when the elephant turned its head sufficiently to expose its temple. Taking a quick aim he fired, and jumping clear of the smoke, saw that the animal was still on its feet. Running in front of it he pointed straight at the depression in the

forehead, the fatal spot, and gave it the second barrel. Down sank the elephant, stone dead.

Overjoyed at his success, Harvey's first impulse was to jump forward and examine his prize, but a sudden exclamation from Hassan made him realize the danger of his position.

As the two shots rang out the jungle was filled with the crashing of the startled herd, and Harvey bethought himself of reaching a place of safety until he could reload. Just then something came rushing toward them. Hassan heard it and, shouting a warning, ran for the nearest tree, up which he sprang like a monkey. A thick creeper hung within reach and, knowing he could not follow the lad quickly enough, Harvey dropped his rifle and, thanks to his nautical training, reached a place of safety on a stout branch. Scarcely was he seated when the tusker dashed into view in a state of the wildest excitement. Seeing its dead companion it paused, passed its trunk over it, touching the wounds on the head, then with its tusks attempted to raise the body.

Harvey would have given much for his rifle at the moment, but he had no time to think about it, for the tusker seemed suddenly to realize that its follower was dead, threw up its trunk and, getting wind of the two men, rushed at them with a scream. It reared against the base of the tree trying to reach them, and then tried to shake them down, twining its trunk round the tree and exerting all its mighty strength. For a moment the tree, thick as it was, trembled under the attack, but the animal gave up the attempt and rushed off.

At the sound of the first shot the rest of the party stopped short and heard the scream of the tusker as it attacked Harvey's tree. Then they heard it retreat and cross their rear, where it evidently got their wind as it struck their trail, and they realized that they were being hunted.

They were in the trailing bamboo scrub, one of the worst jungles to get through, for its long, trailing shoots, not much thicker than a lead pencil, run in all directions.

"We must get out of this tangle," said Keane, and they hurried along the

track that they had been following, until they stood where the herd had been when disturbed. They had not long to wait. Keane had only time to tell Brown to take the first shot, when the elephant charged them. Owing to the dense growth it was not visible until right on them, when suddenly the great head appeared. Unfortunately the trunk was outstretched, as it was following them by scent, and Brown, failing to cover the fatal spot on the forehead, fired to one side of it. The elephant was stunned for a moment, then charged again, and Brown in jumping aside caught his foot and fell against Keane, preventing him from firing. For a moment their lives were in jeopardy, but Ali saved them. The plucky tracker uttered a diabolical yell, and at the imminent risk of being caught and dashed to death rushed forward. Putting Keane's spare rifle against the tusker's head he fired both barrels. The effect was to turn the elephant and he crashed out of sight.

Somewhat startled at the narrow escape, they decided to get out of the bamboo jungle as quickly as possible. Going back on their tracks they met Harvey, much elated at his success and flourishing the tail of his prize. After making a detour Ali soon struck the tusker's trail, and they followed it for some distance. Presently he announced that the animal was walking slowly, evidently feeling the effect of the shots, and would probably be close at hand. He was right, for emerging shortly afterward into a little glade they found it standing facing them. They had scarcely got into line when with a shrill trumpet it charged them with its trunk doubled up in front. When about forty feet off it dropped its trunk and lowered its head, but as it did so *crack--ack!* the three rifles rang out, and it fell, shot through the brain, the impetus of its charge carrying it almost to their feet.

It was a huge brute with splendid tusks; finer, as Ali had said, than anything in Keane's veranda. These were to go to Brown, who had drawn first blood.

The following day was devoted to extracting the ivory from the two elephants, for, although the one shot by

Harvey had no tusks, it possessed short tusches, which would serve as mementoes of the trip.

Some animals had been dining off one of the elephants, and Ali said that the "sign" had been made by leopards, very probably the family they had heard of. Leaving Hassan to superintend the operation of dentistry, which they did not much regret, for decomposition had already set in, the three sportsmen set off with Ali to follow up the leopards' trail. Here was a test of the tracker's skill, for the soft foot of a cat does not leave much spoor. Making a wide circuit, Ali picked up the first traces on some soft ground, and then, with his head low, went steadily on. Sometimes, on entering a patch of grass, he would gaze far ahead and detect signs quite invisible to his white companions. In the jungle a leaf turned back or a bent twig would attract his eye, and now and again the clear imprint of a round foot would prove the correctness of his course. Mile after mile was thus traversed, though fortunately in a homeward direction, and at length they reached the banks of the river, which was bordered with reedy jungle. They were now, evidently, getting close to the lair of the leopards and proceeded with great caution. All at once they came upon a narrow strip of sand running into the jungle, which rose on either side like a wall, at the end of which was a vast accumulation of drift-wood and debris. From beside it appeared a beautiful, spotted beast, which halted for a moment, then silently vanished in the cover. Quick as was its disappearance Keane managed to get a shot at it, and presently a dismal wail arose, which showed that his bullet had not missed its mark.

The leopards, as their tracks showed, had evidently been lying on the warm sand, resting themselves after their meal, and, hearing the men approaching, had moved for cover at once.

Following up the wounded animal, they soon discovered by the blood that it had been hard hit, but in spite of this it managed to reach a clump of wild sugarcane, a mile or more away, where they could hear it growling and snarling. The canes were too green to burn, and there was nothing left for them but to

walk the cat down, so surrounding the clump, they proceeded to do this. Risky work it was, too, not only on account of the wounded beast, but from the danger of a stray bullet.

Brown was the first to get near the leopard, and seeing a movement in the canes fired, with the effect of sending it bounding towards Keane, who broke its spine, killing it on the spot.

The first bullet had broken its foreleg, but, with cat-like agility, it had almost succeeded in escaping.

Ali skillfully removed the skin, after which all hands returned to camp.

The following morning Ali and Hassan set out to track the leopards, while Keane had the skin carefully stretched and rubbed with wood ashes, as a temporary preservative.

About dusk Ali and Hassan returned with good news. The leopards had traveled seven or eight miles, to their stronghold, a great heap of broken stones and boulders at the end of a ridge, partially overgrown with grass and jungle. By Ali's advice they were left alone for some days, during which the sportsmen occupied themselves elsewhere, bagging sambur, spotted deer, and a couple more elephants.

One night there was a great uproar in the village. Owing to the presence of the hunting party, several of the cattle had been allowed to remain at large instead of being driven into the corral. About midnight the village pariahs set up a tremendous barking, and the frightened villagers knew too well what was taking place. At dawn they sallied forth and found the remains of a couple of cows.

The natives demanded full vengeance, and glad was Ali when he heard the news: "Sabash!" he said. "It is well! The cats have fed and will be at home."

The hunt began at daybreak, with Ali leading, and after hours of toil through jungle and marsh the party reached a bit of park-like country. "From yonder clump of trees," said the tracker, "we shall see the leopards' hold."

On reaching the spot he had indicated they sat down to rest for a while; then Keane and Ali went forward to view the ground. They had just reached the edge of the jungle, having passed right through the clump, when an ex-

clamation from the tracker caused Keane to look up. About a quarter-mile away the ground rose to a low ridge, which terminated abruptly in a mass of great boulders, piled one on top of another, all overgrown with tangled jungle. Midway, in a hollow, was a muddy patch, once a pool, but where now only a little water lingered in the deep tracks of elephant and buffalo, and basking in the sunshine lay the leopards, and as they caught sight of the hunters they disappeared into the long grass, evidently making for their lair.

Blaming themselves for their stupidity, Ali and Keane returned to lead the party to the attack. They reached the foot of the slope and then separated, Keane taking the middle, and Harvey and Browne each one side, and in this order they steadily advanced, climbing rocks, peering round boulders, and leaving no hiding place unsearched. One leopard showed and was brought down, but its mate took refuge in a sort of cave, formed by great, heaped up boulders, but open at both ends. The men tried every plan they could think of to dislodge the cat, but without success. At last it was apparent that their only hope was to attack it in the cave. The two sailors were eager for the adventure and could scarcely be deterred from rushing headlong in, but finally they agreed to let Keane undertake the dangerous mission, accompanied by the tracker with a torch, whilst they guarded each an entrance. A torch was prepared of the branches of some wild palms, and in they started. The entrance of the cave was low, but they passed it safely, fully expecting to see a pair of gleaming eyes glaring at them through the darkness. To their sur-

prise they could find no sign of the leopard. They were beginning to think that it had made its escape by some other exit, when all of a sudden Keane was dashed to the ground by the animal, which seized his shoulder and held him down with irresistible force. It had been lying concealed in a niche above the entrance.

As soon as Ali saw what had occurred he dashed the torch in the leopard's face and, drawing his hunting knife, stabbed it behind the shoulder. The animal released Keane and attacked Ali, throwing him down and mauling him. At the sound of the tumult, the shouts of Ali and the snarling of the leopard, Browne and Harvey rushed in, but in the darkness could not make out what was going on. At this moment Keane recovered sufficiently from the shock to pick up the torch, and swinging it round brought it into a blaze. Then the rifles rang out again, and the leopard, already grievously wounded in a dozen places by the tracker, fell over dead.

Upon getting into the sunlight it was found that Keane had escaped with comparatively few scratches, the leather strap of his ammunition bag having saved him, but Ali was severely, though not dangerously, clawed and bitten.

"Inshallah!" exclaimed the plucky Mohammedan, gazing at his wounds, "it is not thus I am fated to die." Refusing his companions' assistance, he sent Hassan into the jungle for certain herbs, and, after washing his wounds with plain water, bound them up with the simple remedies of his forefathers, and thanks to the naturally cool temperament of his race, which carries a native through what would be fatal to a white man, he speedily recovered.

