

The Earliest Rock-Climb.¹

BY

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Now that the annexation by Alpinists of the Himālayas has well set in it may specially interest your readers to learn that a *traversée* in that region constitutes what may safely be considered as the most ancient record of rock-climbing in existence.

Many of them will know of the great treasury of Indian folk-lore entitled the "Jātaka, or Birth Stories of the Buddha," and of how these old tales, to the number of about six hundred or more, were adapted by the Buddhists to lend point and attractiveness to their doctrines, especially to that of Karma, the general Indian tenet of effective action working through countless rebirths. As a Buddhist compilation the "Jātaka" may be said, from internal evidence, to date approximately from the age of Alexander the Great or that of his immediate successors. But the stories themselves are far and indefinitely older. One-half of them, translated from the Pāli by four or five scholars, has been published by the Cambridge University Press. At the present rate of publication the story I am referring to will not appear in English garb for another three or four years.

It is named the "Chaddanta Jātaka, or Six-Tusk Birth Story," and tells of a mighty herd of mythical elephants believed to dwell in the Himālayas in the midst of

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luxurious vegetation. The future Buddha is born as their leader—a majestic white elephant, six-tusked. One of his two queen elephants grows jealous at the apparently greater devotion of her lord to the other queen, and vows to avenge herself on him in her next birth. Re-born as a king's daughter, she becomes the consort of the King of Benares, and then has reminiscence of her vow. Affecting to be seized by the craving of a woman with child, she tells her husband she must get the tusks of the Chaddanta elephant king or die, and so induces him to muster a host of hunters beneath her window. From these she selects a brawny Hercules named Soṇuttara, and gives him full instructions how he is to discover this wondrous creature, overcoming his fears by the promise of the tithes from five villages. How he accomplishes the journey I translate, condensing somewhat, from the original, as follows:—

“And when he had heard her Soṇuttara consented, saying, ‘Very good, lady; I will kill the elephant and fetch you his tusks.’ Then she, well pleased, paid him 1,000 (kahâpanas), and bade him go home and get ready to start in seven days’ time. Then she sent for a smith, and gave him this order: ‘Good sir, We want an axe, an adze, a mattock, a spade, a mallet, a billhook for chopping down canes and brushwood, a sickle, a metal staff and stanchions, and a grappling iron. Make all these quickly and bring them.’ Next she commanded a leather-worker, saying, ‘Good sir, it is your business to make Us a leather sack capable of containing a kumbha. We want also a leather rope, straps, gloves, and shoes, and a leather umbrella. Make all these quickly and bring them.’ And both of them did so. And she had provisions prepared, and all other requisites for his journey—fire-drills, and so on. And when she had stowed everything into the leather sack, both the tools and the provisions—namely, a bag of barley meal, and so forth—the whole weighed a kumbha (about 1 cwt.).

“Soṇuttara, after making his own preparations, went

on the seventh day and waited on the queen. And she said, 'All that you will require on your journey has been got ready. Take this knapsack.' And he, being as strong as an elephant, lifted it up as if it were a bag of sweets, and fixing it on his loins left his hands free. She bestowed a maintenance fund on his children, informed the king, and dismissed him. Saluting the king and queen, the hunter descended from the palace, mounted a chariot, and, with a great escort, departed from the city. Passing through towns and villages, he came to the frontier, and there turned back the country folk, and entered the forest, escorted by the border folk. When he had reached the end of human pathways he turned back the border folk and went on alone. For thirty yojanas (= $30 \times 7\frac{1}{4}$ miles) he penetrated through seventeen sorts of jungle, reaping and chopping a path, felling trees, and digging out roots. In a bamboo jungle he fashioned a ladder, mounted a bamboo cluster, and swung himself along above from stem to stem. In a marsh jungle he took two planks and laid them down one after the other as he went; and to cross a watery jungle he made a canoe. Finally he came to the foot of a mountain precipice.

"Here he tied his grappling iron to his rope, and, throwing it aloft, hooked the rock with it, and climbed up. He then drove his brazen staff, shod with diamond, into the rock, and into the cleft hammered a stanchion. Getting on to this, he hauled up his grappling iron, and again hooked it aloft. (Going up and driving in the second stanchion), the rope hanging down, he descended by it, and making fast the lower stanchion to the rope, he, clutching the latter in his left hand, and taking his mallet in the right, struck at the rope till the stanchion was extracted. Then he climbed up again. On this wise he ascended to the summit, and traversing descended by similar methods. Hammering in a stanchion at the top of the first ridge, he wound his rope on to it, and, fastening his knapsack on to the rope, and sitting in the

knapsack, he went down, unwinding the rope like a spider paying out its web. Some say that he caught the wind as well with his umbrella, descending like a bird.

“Thence he proceeded to cross six more mountain ranges, the last and greatest being the glorious peak Suvannapassa (= Côte d’Or). Finally from the Fairies’ Rock he looked down on the base of the mountains, and saw afar the great banyan grove with its thousands of pillared stems, in colour like a cloud. This was the haunt of the mythical elephants, whose white leader he, in ignoble fashion (literally, not in Aryan form), had come to slay.”

The plucky climber succeeds in his quest, and in a most unsportsmanlike fashion shoots, with poisoned arrows, the monarch he has entrapped in a pit. The suffering elephant converses magnanimously with his slayer, and by his insight discerns the identity and motive of the vindictive instigatrix. He himself with his trunk takes the hunter’s saw and saws off his tusks, dying thereupon with serenity. By the power of his virtue he causes the hunter to return in seven days, the journey out and the chase having occupied seven years. But the tokens of the great dead awake remorseful memories in the queen, and she dies of a broken heart.

It is clear that our hunter is not climbing on any very elevated *niveau*. There is no allusion to snow or ice. The ascents were apparently conceived to have been effected in some region abounding in gorges or small dolomitic ranges. As a pure piece of rock work they seemed to me not so bad, especially when the amount of ironmongery the man carried is borne in mind—worthy to rank him next to Alice’s White Knight. But there must have been a goodly number of “stanchions” expended on those descents, unless there was such an Oriental profusion of that leather rope as would have put to the blush the yards exacted by Dolomites and

the Aiguille de Géant. Anyway he seems to have managed the unwinding less like a spider than an Alpinist, since he is not said on descending to make it a *corde fixe*. I do not gather that he wore putties, but the leather shoes—without nails—suggest a kind of moccasin as effective on the rock as *passi di gatto*. The resort to a parachute seems almost prophetic of new departures in Alpinism!