

The Blind Men and the Elephant

American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1816 ~ 1887) based the following poem on a Hindoo fable which was told in India many years ago.

I

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Thought all of them were blind).
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

II

The FIRST approached the Elephant
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side
At once began to bawl:
'God bless me, but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!'

III

The SECOND, feeling of the tusk,
Cried 'Ho! What have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear.'

IV

The THIRD approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
'I see, 'quoth he, 'the Elephant
Is very like a snake!'

V

The FOURTH reached out his eager hand,
And felt about the knee,
'What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain, 'quoth he:
'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!'

VI

The FIFTH, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: 'E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most,
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!'

VII

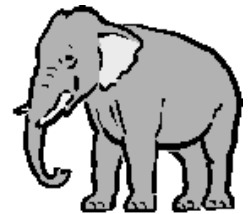
The SIXTH no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
'I see, 'quoth he, 'the Elephant
Is very like a rope!'

VIII

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right
And all were in the wrong.

IX

So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!



The story behind the poem

A number of disciples went to the Buddha and said, "Sir, there are living here in Savatthi many wandering hermits and scholars who indulge in constant dispute, some saying that the world is infinite and eternal and others that it is finite and not eternal, some saying that the soul dies with the body and others that it lives on forever, and so forth. What, Sir, would you say concerning them?"

The Buddha answered, "Once upon a time there was a certain raja who called to his servant and said, 'Come, good fellow, go and gather together in one place all the men of Savatthi who were born blind... and show them an elephant.' 'Very good, sire,' replied the servant, and he did as he was told. He said to the blind men assembled there, 'Here is an elephant,' and to one man he presented the head of the elephant, to another its ears, to another a tusk, to another the trunk, the foot, back, tail, and tuft of the tail, saying to each one that that was the elephant.

"When the blind men had felt the elephant, the raja went to each of them and said to each, 'Well, blind man, have you seen the elephant? Tell me, what sort of thing is an elephant?'

"Thereupon the men who were presented with the head answered, 'Sire, an elephant is like a pot.' And the men who had observed the ear replied, 'An elephant is like a winnowing bas-

ket.' Those who had been presented with a tusk said it was a ploughshare. Those who knew only the trunk said it was a plough; others said the body was a grainery; the foot, a pillar; the back, a mortar; the tail, a pestle, the tuft of the tail, a brush.

"Then they began to quarrel, shouting, 'Yes it is!' 'No, it is not!' 'An elephant is not that!' 'Yes, it's like that!' and so on, till they came to blows over the matter.

"Brethren, the raja was delighted with the scene.

"Just so are these preachers and scholars holding various views blind and unseeing.... In their ignorance they are by nature quarrelsome, wrangling, and disputatious, each maintaining reality is thus and thus."

Then the Exalted One rendered this meaning by uttering this verse of uplift,

O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim
For preacher and monk the honored name!
For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.
Such folk see only one side of a thing.

Jainism and Buddhism. Udana 68-69:
Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant

The Inter-War Years (1918 ~ 1939)

The Decline of the Empire

Part I



Background

England often declared it had an empire "on which the sun never sets". But the sun was setting on the horizon, for the Empire was beginning to disintegrate.

England's possessions abroad grew rapidly during the 18th and 19th centuries, despite having lost the United States. India was one of the first large continents to be added in the 18th century. A "rush" for the African continent took place during the end of the 19th century and it was divided up among European powers.

The wish to create overseas empires was basically irrational; the territories had little value and often proved to be more of a nuisance than their worth. European nationalist rivalry and political expediences at home prompted the decisions to build empires.

The English never truly 'colonized' or settled

these countries. They chose to simply govern and trade. The colonial system of government was merely to move great numbers of British administrators of all levels to the annexed territory. The locals weren't allowed to take part in the government of their own countries. In time this system changed, but it was on the Indian sub-continent that it was most securely established - and hated by the local people.

English vocabulary received a great number of words during the colonial period. The words 'pajamas', 'candy', 'shampoo', 'bandanna', 'thug', 'loot', 'veranda', 'punch' (the drink), 'cot' (baby's bed), 'bungalow' (single storied house), and 'jungle' (thick tropical forest) come from India.

The ability of the British of never displaying emotion, known as the 'stiff upper lip' possibly comes from this period as well, for to display emotion in front of 'natives' would weaken their 'respect'.

The Voice of Conscience

George Orwell (1903 ~ 1950)



George Orwell
Archive Photos

George Orwell is the pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair, the British writer whose brilliant reporting and political conscience fashioned an impassioned picture of his life and times. Born in Motihari, India, Orwell was educated in England at Eton College and served with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma from 1922 to 1927, after which he returned to England. In poor health, and dreaming of becoming a writer, he lived for several years in poverty, first in Paris and finally in London.

As an essayist and novelist Orwell wrote about conflicting political ideologies and frequently criticized the Establishment. He only became well known after publishing *Animal Farm* and '1984' in the late 40's. His novels were effective instruments of social criticism and protest.

Orwell's simple style and precise expression is an exquisite example of the use of the English Language. He often makes use of ironic satire and above all is unerringly honest in stating his opinions. *Shooting an Elephant* is a short story which is considered a model of expository prose. He wrote it after he returned from Burma and it is probably one of the most realistic and honest views of Imperialism to have ever been written.

'SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT'

In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people - the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts¹, to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the

referee² looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all, There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.

All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at

that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up³ my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically - and secretly, of course - I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the gray, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos - all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know that the British Empire is dying: still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj⁴ as an unbreakable tyranny, with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism - the real motives for which despotic governments act. Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang me up on the phone and said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I please come and do something about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got onto a pony and started out. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone must⁵. It had been chained up, as tame elephants always are when their attack of "must" is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van, and when the driver jumped out and took

to his heels, had turned the van over.

The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant had been seen. We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone, and as usual, failed to get any definitive information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. I rounded a hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back, and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man, I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle, I had already sent back the pony, not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it smelt the elephant.

The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges, and meanwhile some Burmans had arrived and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward, practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides, they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant - I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary - and

it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels. The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them, and stuffing them into his mouth.

I had halted on the road. As soon as I saw the elephant, I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant - it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery - and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. I thought then and I think now that his attack of "must" was already passing off; in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout⁶ came back and caught him. Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him. I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home.

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes - faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd - seemingly the leading actor of the piece, but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib⁷. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the "natives", and so in every cri-

sis he has got to do what the "natives" expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing - no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing. he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behavior. If he charged I could shoot, if he took no notice of me it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steamroller. But even then I was not thinking particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful yellow faces behind. For at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. A white man mustn't be frightened in front of "natives", and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do. There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road

to get a better aim.

When I pulled the trigger, I did not hear the bang or feel the kick - one never does when a shot goes home - but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralyzed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time - it might have been five seconds, I dare say - he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in failing he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upwards like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skywards like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.

I got up. The Burmans were already racing past me across the mud. It was obvious that the ele-

phant would never rise again, but he was not dead. He was breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps, his great mound of a side painfully rising and failing. His mouth was wide open - I could see far down into caverns of pale pink throat. I waited a long time for him to die, but his breathing did not weaken. Finally I fired my two remaining shots into the spot where I thought his heart must be. The thick blood welled out of him like red velvet, but still he did not die.

In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away. I heard later that it took him half an hour to die. Burmans were bringing dahs⁸ and baskets even before I left, and I was told they had stripped his body almost to the bones by the afternoon.

Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing. Beside, legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right; the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.

DISCUSSION

1. Why did Orwell shoot the elephant if he didn't want to do so?
2. What reactions to the shooting were expressed by different people?
3. What does Orwell think of the Empire?
4. What did Orwell have in mind in writing about the incident?
5. What flaws does the British officer admit in himself?
6. How does this short story reflect the times and society in which it was written?



¹ courage

² another Burman

³ to chuck - to throw, chuck up - to bring to an end

⁴ rule, sovereignty

⁵ dangerous frenzy to which some animals are occasionally subject

⁶ elephant driver

⁷ native title for European gentlemen

⁸ bowls