

# Shooting an Elephant

by

George Orwell (1936)



In 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, and in an aimless, petty way anti-European feeling was very bitter.

As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a Burman **tripped me up** on the football field and the referee (another Burman) 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 shouted 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 got out of it the better. Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. I hated the job I was doing because I saw the dirty work of **Empire** at close quarters. But 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.

## A small incident

Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang me. 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 got on to a pony and started out. I took my rifle, an old 44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant, but I thought the noise might scare him. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings.

The elephant had been chained up but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its owner, had set out in pursuit, but

had taken the wrong direction.

He was now twelve hours' journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and turned over fruit-stalls and a rubbish van

The Burmese police were waiting for me and we began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone. As usual, we failed to get any definite information. 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.

### A Man's Dead Body

I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, scandalized cry of "Go away, child! Go away this instant!" and an old woman with a switch in her hand came round the corner of a hut, violently shooing away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues and exclaiming.

I came round the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, almost naked, and he could not have been

dead many minutes.

The people said that the elephant caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and he was lying on his belly in the soft mud, with his arms crucified and his 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.)

I sent someone to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle. He came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges.

### A Bit of Fun

Meanwhile some Burmans had arrived. They told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward people came 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; 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. At the bottom, the elephant was standing eight yards from the road. Ignoring the crowd's approach, he continued tearing up bunches of grass and stuffing them into his mouth.

I halted on the road. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant – and at that distance, peacefully eating, he looked no more dangerous than a cow.

### **I did not 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, 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 had to shoot the

elephant after all. The people expected it of me; 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, seemingly the leading actor of the piece. But in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the crowd behind me.

I had got to shoot the elephant. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and do 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. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to.

### **The only alternative**

I had got to act quickly and 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 behaviour. 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 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. If the elephant charged and I missed him ...

If anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And 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. The crowd gave a deep, low, happy sigh. They were going to have their bit of fun after all.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick – but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body altered. He looked suddenly immensely old.

At last, after what seemed a long time – it might have been five seconds – he fell to his knees. 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.

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 strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that shook the ground.

## Dying slowly

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



His mouth was wide open – I could see far down into his 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. The thick blood came out of him like red velvet, but still he did not die. He was dying, very slowly and in great agony. The great beast lay there, **powerless** to move and yet powerless to 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.

Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The older men said I was right. The younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a Burman. And afterwards I often wondered whether anyone understood that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.

***Autumn, 1936***

## Glossary

**bazaar** - market

**corpses** - dead bodies

**distress** - to be very upset

**Empire** - area of the world ruled by Britain

**footsteps** - sound of someone walking

**hollow** - empty, unfilled, futile

**jeer** - call out disrespectful, insulting way

**powerless** - unable to change anything

**ravaging** - causing destruction

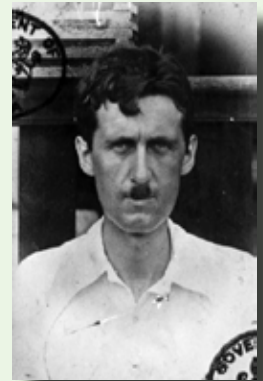
**sneer** - look of disrespect

**trigger** - mechanism to fire gun /explosive

**trip up** - to use foot to make someone fall

## About *Shooting an Elephant*

Orwell (then Eric Blair) went to Burma as a young man. For five years (1922-27) he was a member of the British Imperial Police. He grew to reject many aspects of the British Empire ('the oppressors') but also disliked the local forces opposed to it. References to 'yellow sneering faces'



*Shooting an Elephant* is one of the most controversial essays in modern English literature. There is some doubt as to whether Orwell was present at the incident, or whether it happened at all.

Many have also accused Orwell of racism towards the Burmese. But it is fair to say that Orwell is critical of both the British and the local population. Most of all he condemns himself for having killed the elephant 'solely to avoid looking a fool'.

For more discussion of this essay click here

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