

Shooting an Elephant - George Orwell

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 guts 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 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 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 up 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 grey, cowed faces of

term convicts, the scarred buttocks of those 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 Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of prostrate peoples; 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 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 be useful in terrorem. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told

me about the elephant's doings. It was not, of
 80 course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which
 had gone "must." 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. Its mahout, the only
 85 person who could manage it when it was in that
 state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the
 wrong direction and was now twelve hours'
 journey away, and in the morning the elephant
 had suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese
 90 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
 95 the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had
 turned the van over and inflicted violences upon
 it.

The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian
 100 constables were waiting for me in the quarter
 where the elephant had been seen. It was a very
 poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo
 huts, thatched with palmleaf, winding all over a
 steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy,
 105 stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We
 began questioning the people as to where the
 elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get
 any definite information. That is invariably the
 case in the East; a story always sounds clear
 110 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
 115 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. There was a
 loud, scandalized cry of "Go away, child! Go

away this instant!" and an old woman with a
 120 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; evidently there
 was something that the children ought not to
 125 have seen. I rounded the 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
 130 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
 135 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,
 140 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
 145 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.

150 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
 155 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
 160 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
 165 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
 170 my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people
 jostling at my heels. At the bottom, when you
 got away from the huts, there was a metalled
 road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy
 fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed
 175 but soggy from the first rains and dotted with
 coarse grass. 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,
 180 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
 185 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,
 190 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 mahout came
 195 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.

200 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
 205 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,
 210 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
 215 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
 220 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
 225 in this moment that when the white man turns
 tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys.
 He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the
 conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is
 the condition of his rule that he shall spend
 230 his life in trying to impress the "natives," and
 so in every crisis 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
 235 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

240 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.

245 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
250 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
255 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
260 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.

265 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
270 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
275 elephant charged and I missed him, I should have
about as much chance as a toad under a steam-
roller. But even then I was not thinking
particularly of my own skin, only of the

280 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
285 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
290 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 grew very
295 still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people
who see the theatre curtain go up at last,
breathed from innumerable throats. They were
going to have their bit of fun after all. The
rifle was a beautiful German thing with cross-
300 hair sights. I did not then know that in
shooting an elephant one would shoot to cut an
imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole.
I ought, therefore, as the elephant was sideways
on, to have aimed straight at his ear-hole,
305 actually I aimed several inches in front of
this, thinking the brain would be further
forward.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the
310 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
315 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

frighfful impact of the bullet had paralysed him
 320 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
 325 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
 330 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 falling he seemed for a moment
 to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath
 335 him he seemed to tower upward 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 seemed to shake the ground
 340 even where I lay.

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
 345 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 caverns of pale
 pink throat. I waited a long time for him to
 350 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. His body did not even jerk when the
 355 shots hit him, the tortured breathing continued
 without a pause. He was dying, very slowly and
 in great agony, but in some world remote from me
 where not even a bullet could damage him

further. I felt that I had got to put an end to
 360 that dreadful noise. It seemed dreadful to see
 the great beast lying there, powerless to move
 and yet powerless to die, and not even to be
 able to finish him. I sent back for my small
 rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart
 365 and down his throat. They seemed to make no
 impression. The tortured gasps continued as
 steadily as the ticking of a clock.

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

375 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. Besides, legally I had
 380 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
 385 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
 390 shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether
 any of the others grasped that I had done it
 solely to avoid looking a fool.

Glossary

Burma: Burma is a traditional name of Myanmar, a country in Southeast Asia, on the west coast of the Indochina Peninsula, and was the official name until 1989

Burman: a native or inhabitant of Myanmar; a Burmese
Coolie: offensive way to refer to an unskilled Asian worker, usually of Chinese or Indian descent; a labourer; a porter. Coolies were frequently transported to other countries in the 19th and early 20th centuries as indentured labourers

Dah: a type of long knife used in Burma

Dravidian: a member of any of several aboriginal peoples of India and Sri Lanka thought to have spread in India before the arrival of the white man

Flabbily: resembling something that is soft, easily moved, flaccid

Flogged: to whip, hit really hard someone or something as punishment

Imperialism: a policy where a nation extends its authority by territorial gain or by the establishment of economic and political dominance over other nations

In saecula saeculorum: biblical phrase from the Old Testament, meaning "forever and ever"

In terrorem: latin for 'with fear' 'in horror'

Jeer: to utter sarcastic or mocking comments; to

speak with mockery or derision; to use taunting language

Magazine: part of the gun that holds the cartridges to be fired

Mahout: an person who trains elephants to help and for transportation, and who cares after the animals

Miry: smeared with mud

Must: a time during which male elephants exhibit increased levels of sexual activity and aggressiveness

Paddy field: A flooded field where rice is grown

Perplexing: confusing or puzzling, that confuses

Ploughed: fields prepared for the planting of crops

Ravaging: to cause destruction, to devastate or destroy something

Sagged: when something sinks or bends, usually because of weakness or damage

Sahib: old term of respect for a white European in colonial India

Switch: a slender woody plant stem used as a whip to hit people

Thatched: straw, rushes, or the like, used for making or covering the roofs of buildings, or of stacks of hay or grain