# The Elephant Keeper

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# PART ONE

## Sussex, 1773





APRIL 24TH. It was six days ago that Lord Bidborough, accompanied by another gentleman, came to the Elephant House and, after making the usual inquiries about my charge, who was, at that moment, quietly eating hay, asked whether it was true that, as he had heard, I was able to read. I replied that my parents had put in my way various books, which I had sat over, piecing together the letters until they began to make sense; whereupon his Lordship asked me which books, and I mentioned the Bible, 'Pilgrim's Progress', and 'Gulliver's Travels'. This last work, I said, had so fascinated and enthralled me that I had formed the ambition of taking ship and travelling to remote parts of the globe in search of wealth and adventure, an ambition from which my father had dissuaded me, pointing out the dangers that lay in such travel, and recommending me to content myself with my lot. Lord Bidborough listened carefully. 'Your father would appear to have been wise,' he said, smiling. 'Many lives have been squandered in the pursuit of adventure. Your parents could read and write, too?' – 'They could read, my Lord, but scarcely write a word.' – 'But did you learn to write?' I replied that I had been taught to write at the village school, and had mastered the art tolerably well, although I had not written for a long time.

At this the other gentleman, whose name was Dr. Goldsmith, said: 'Lord Bidborough reliably informs me that you are able to

speak Elephant.' I explained, cautiously, that I could communicate with the Elephant by making certain signs and sounds, and that I could also interpret certain signs and sounds made by the Elephant; but none of this was any more than a man might do with his most favoured hounds. Just as a hound would obey if told to beg, or sit, or leave the room, so, in the same fashion I could command the Elephant to kneel down, to sit, to coil up her trunk and to perform other tasks. Dr. Goldsmith here gave a glance to Lord Bidborough, who said, 'Tom, Dr. Goldsmith would be most interested to see a demonstration of this communication at work.' I readily complied, leading the Elephant out of her stable into the yard, where I bid her shake hands with Dr. Goldsmith; that is, to shake his hand with her trunk, which she proceeded to do, to his astonishment. At a word she knelt, very slowly and carefully, as is the way with Elephants, whereupon I made a sign with my hands and she rolled gently on to her side.

Lord Bidborough asked, if this was indeed not a form of language. Dr. Goldsmith answered, that it was certainly remarkable: 'But,' he went on, 'is not the Elephant known as the half-reasoning Animal?' They discussed this for some minutes while the Elephant lay on the floor of the yard, her long-fringed eyes watching me for the signal to rise. From the slight twitches of her trunk I could tell that her patience was being tested, but she remained still and docile.

Presently the two gentlemen walked round her body and inspected her, poking her with their sticks and making further inquiries of her diet and her age. Dr. Goldsmith, who had pulled out a pocket-book and lead pencil, took notes on my answers. He was intrigued, as both ladies and gentlemen always are, with her trunk, which he called her probbossis. Having crouched to touch it, which he did with a certain caution, he asked me to explain its use and purpose. I replied that it had a double purpose: not only was it a breathing tube, like a human nose, in which respect it was highly sensitive, but also that it served as an

arm and a hand, in which respect it was both prodigiously strong, capable of tearing branches off trees and hurling rocks, and highly dextrous, enabling the Elephant to untie knotted ropes or to pick up objects as small as a piece of straw, or a pin, at will. I asked Dr. Goldsmith to put his pencil on the floor; next, having drawn the Elephant to her feet, bid her pick it up and return it to him, which she did very courteously, and with a certain gleam of amusement in her eyes. Lord Bidborough gravely remarked that 'the male of the human species also possesses an organ with a double purpose.'

In order to demonstrate the Elephant's strength, I offered to command her to lift Dr. Goldsmith into the air, as she has often done in the past with his Lordship's acquaintances. Though obviously tempted, Dr. Goldsmith was concerned as to the possible dangers, and asked whether I could assure him that he would be perfectly safe. Was it possible that the beast would hurl him to the ground, or tighten her probbossis like a snake so that he would be unable to breathe? I said that I had no qualms whatever on the matter, and that I would stake my life on his safety; however, if he preferred, I would demonstrate by ordering the Elephant to lift me in his stead. Dr. Goldsmith was on the point of accepting my offer, when Lord Bidborough, with an arch smile, asked him if he was afraid. He seemed somewhat stung by this sally.

'Indeed, my Lord, I am not afraid in the least, but when it comes to my own life I generally exercise some prudence – however, in this instance, I am content to trust myself to your Lordship's guidance. If I should be squeezed to death, my affairs are in order – I am ready to meet my Maker.'

So saying he took off his coat and stood arms extended, one arm holding his stick, the other his pencil and paper, while I gave the Elephant her instructions. Dr. Goldsmith is short in height, with a prominent forehead above a face which is deeply lined, and pitted from the Small Pox; and his expression, as the

Elephant's trunk extended itself, coiled round his waist, gripped, and drew him without apparent effort from the ground, was such that Lord Bidborough laughed heartily. 'Are you much squeezed?' he called. Dr. Goldsmith, some eight feet in the air, ignored his mirth, instead declaring in an affectedly calm voice that the prospect was d—ned excellent, and that he felt as comfortable as if he had been seated in a great chair; indeed, had he been equipped with a spy-glass or a book, he would have been perfectly content to stay in the coils of the Elephant all afternoon. However, when I asked him whether he would care to be set upon the Elephant's back, or to be lowered to the ground, he replied that whenever it was convenient he would be most obliged if he could be replaced on *terra-firma*. The Elephant lowered him to the ground and released him from her grip. Dr. Goldsmith was a trifle flushed, but not excessively so, and as I returned to him his coat, he thanked me very much for an experience that he would never forget.

I rewarded the Elephant's obedience with an apple that I kept in my pocket for such a purpose. Taking it eagerly with the end of her trunk, she swiftly placed it inside the cave of her mouth. Such a reward to an Elephant is as a sweet-meat is to a child.

It was then that Lord Bidborough asked me whether, if he were to supply me with pen, ink and paper, I would be willing to write a History of the Elephant. He said that no one had ever written such a History before, and that an account describing the animal's characteristics, behaviour, habits and intelligence, by someone such as myself, who had intimate knowledge of the creature, would be of immense interest to many important people in London and elsewhere. Dr. Goldsmith agreed, assuring me that I would be doing a service to Mankind to write about such a noble beast. I was much surprized and for a moment, so daunted by the prospect, that I scarcely knew how to reply; at length I said that I feared that I would not have the skill.

'Tom, have no fear,' said Lord Bidborough. 'It need only be a simple account of particulars. In practice, writing is no different from talking – is that not so, Dr. Goldsmith?'

'Indeed, my Lord, writing is like talking; or, indeed, like riding a horse; once one is in the saddle, it is easy enough. A tap of the whip, and away you go. Of course, as there are good and bad riders, so there are good and bad writers, but everyone has the ability to write, provided he believes in his ability.'

Although I had some doubts on the matter, it was clear to me that, his Lordship being my master, I had no choice but to agree to the request, which I did without further demur. He thanked me, and said that he would ask Mr. Bridge to arrange for writing materials to be brought to the Elephant House. Later that day one of the pages duly arrived with three quills, twenty sheets of paper, and a horn of ink.

I can scarcely describe the despair that I went through on the succeeding evening. I soon found a title, *The History of The Elephant. By Thomas Page*, to which I added, *Elephant Keeper to Lord Bidborough, of Easton, Sussex*; however, after this, I could not think how to proceed. Half-formed sentences drifted like down through my mind; when I reached out, they slid away. Why, I thought, do I have to write this history? Can anything written by a simple servant, the son of a groom, the keeper of an Elephant, be of interest to learned gentlemen in London? At one point, I remember, I had been gazing at the word *Elephant* for several minutes when the letters seemed to dissolve before my eyes, so that they became, not members of an alphabet, but lines and shapes without any meaning. Swimming in the candlelight, they seemed to make themselves into a single animal, a long, flattish beast with an E for a head and a t for a tail.

At length, remembering Lord Bidborough's 'a simple account of particulars', I succeeded in writing a first sentence: *The Elephant is, without Dispute, the largest Creature in the World*: yet, before the ink had dried, I became filled with doubt.

For (I thought), the Elephant is not the largest Creature in the world: there are creatures in the sea, whales and the Leviathan (which some people say is a kind of whale), which are far larger than Elephants. Thus I crossed out my first sentence, and instead wrote: *The Elephant is, without Dispute, the largest Creature in the entire terrestrial World*, which, on further reflection, I changed to: *There can be no Dispute that the Elephant is the largest and most stupendous Creature in the entire terrestrial World*. Then I found myself wondering whether even this was true. Who knows what the world contains? Who knows what may be disputed? I saw the gentlemen in London, shaking their heads and murmuring in disagreement. Crossing out again, I wrote: *It is generally believed that the Elephant is the largest and most stupendous Creature in the entire terrestrial World. When at its full Growth, it measures as much as sixteen Feet high, or higher.* Again, much doubt, but in desperation I plunged on: *While Nature has been generous to the Elephant in affording her such a great Size, it may be said that She has been careless as to Form: for the Elephant is commonly considered a most ugly Animal.* Here I checked, and re-wrote: *is commonly considered a most unwieldy Animal. Its most extraordinary Feature is the long Prottuberance which extends from its Nose, which is known as its Trunk*. I now crossed out *Trunk* and wrote *Probbossis*, which I thought would please Dr. Goldsmith and all the other learned gentlemen, but the word looked so odd that I resolved to have nothing to do with it and returned to *Trunk*. But a further doubt had struck me, as to whether I had been entirely accurate: for, it may be argued, the Trunk of the Elephant does not extend from, but is, its nose. Is a trunk any more than a very long and remarkable snout? However, I continued: *Its Ears are broad while its Skin is generally grey. It is said to be the most sagacious of Creatures and is known as the half-reasoning Animal. The Character of the Elephant is generally peaceful, yet they are renowned for their Bravery and Courage and will do battle with Lions and Tygers, if provoked.*

The pain which it cost me to produce these feeble sentences was enormous, and later in the night, I woke, and lay in the darkness, thinking to myself, Lord Bidborough expects me to write this History, therefore I must write it, for Lord Bidborough is my master: yet I know nothing of Elephants in the wild, in the Indies and the Cape. There are many stories about Elephants, some of which I heard from Mr. Coad, but I do not know whether they are true. I do not know whether it is true that, as Elephants grow older, their skins harden until they cannot be pierced by a sword, or whether it is true that Elephants have their own kings, who are attended by troops of servant Elephants, or whether it is true that Elephants worship the moon. I do not even know for certain that Elephants fight with lions and tygers. How can I write outside my knowledge, except by a kind of guess-work, and what value is that? Besides (I went on, arguing with myself), whatever his Lordship says, writing is different to speaking; people do not write as they speak. In speech, they *use* ordinary, common words, the words which flow as easily out of their minds as water out of a spring, whereas, when they write, they *employ* a different vocabulary. In speech, a man *sees* an Elephant, but, once he has taken a pen into his hand, he *observes* it, or *regards* it. He does not *meet* an Elephant, but *encounters* it, and instead of *trying* to mount the same Elephant he *attempts*, or *strives*, or *endeavours*, to climb on its back. There is an entirely different language for writing, of which I am largely ignorant. I cannot write the History, I am incapable.

When I next met, that is, when I next *encountered* Lord Bidborough, I begged him to excuse me from the task. He read the page which I had written (to my shame, it was covered not only with crossings-out, but also with numerous runs and blotches).

'Why, Tom,' he said with a smile, 'is she so very unwieldy? Is it that the Trunk is unwieldy, or the entire Creature?'

I stammered a reply: 'My Lord, I do not think that she is unwieldy, however … I had originally written "ugly". Would "ugly" be better?'

'Ugly? Tom, the Elephant is surely what Nature intended her to be. To me, she is a remarkable Beauty.'

'To me also, my Lord. But, if I write that she is beautiful …' I stopped, confused.

Lord Bidborough looked at me in his kindly way. 'Tom, forgive me – though I can see that you have laboured hard over this – it is not what I intended. I do not wish you to write a History of Elephants in general, but of this particular Elephant. I wish you to write a History of your Life together, in which you begin by relating how you first met the Elephant, and proceed from there. And if it is your opinion that she is beautiful, why, then, you should say so.'

'Yes, my Lord,' I said.

Again I stopped, unable to express the full extent of my reservations, except in my burning face.

'You know, Tom, so long as what you write is accurate and free from Invention – so long as it is faithful to the Truth – you cannot go far wrong,' he told me.

'Yes, my Lord.'

Having returned me the page, which I took very unwillingly, he went on: 'By the by, Tom, though this is a small matter – with respect to style, there is no great need to employ capital letters quite so freely as you have done. In the past, I know, it was thought correct to lavish them on every possible occasion; but the fashion has changed, as fashions do.'

'I will not use them at all, my Lord.'

'No, no,' said he, smiling, 'you should use them for proper names, and at the beginning of sentences, and also, perhaps, if you wish to shew the importance of some thing or other – then they are valuable, and indeed necessary. For the rest, they may be left aside. But it is a small matter, scarcely worth mentioning.'

'May I use a capital for the Elephant, my Lord?'

'Why – if you wish. After all, she is the subject of the History, is she not, and therefore very important. However, perhaps I should not have mentioned it. The simple Truth should be your aim, Tom. Fix yourself on that, and you will have no great difficulty.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

I find that I have therefore agreed again to try again, that is to strive, to attempt, to endeavour again (*endeavour*, I think, being the largest and most imposing word, I am resolved to stick with *endeavour* as much as possible), though my doubts remain: for I have no skill in the art of composition, and I fear that, even if I succeed in writing the History, it will be a dull affair, since I am no Gulliver and have no adventures to fill up the pages.