

NARRATIVE



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The Elephant Box

A NOVEL EXCERPT

BY RUSSELL WORKING

Share

DURING THE WINTER TOUR of the Pacific (summer in the antipodes!), Oliver Saxe-Coburg—Encyclopedia Boy, freakshow phenom, world's smartest kid, and purported third cousin thrice removed of King George V—could not but be aware of the epidemic of sneak-drinking on the SS *Carnatic*. His father was as great a transgressor as any showman aboard, judging from the fumes he brought wafting into the stateroom late at night, barking his shins and uttering very bad words as he removed his trousers in the dark while faint, rippling ovals of sea light searched him out through the portholes. By day, slyly encouraged by Mother's smile, Ollie drew Dad's ire when he tried to talk him out of drinking. Particularly when he cited the ALCOHOLISM entry in the *Encyclopedia Americana*. *There is no doubt, it held, that physiologically alcohol is always a poison* (vol. I, p. 348). Still, Dad and his Cossack and roughrider pals were not in the same league—nobody was—as July the elephant, who'd degenerated into a lush since the Famous Eberhard & Morrison Consolidated Railroad Show, Jungle Oddities, and Congress of Nations had sailed from Seattle in November 1917.



FIRST PLACE WINNER

Even as tugboats boiled the green water and shards of log bark in Elliott Bay, and nudged the 46,328-ton *Carnatic* out from the pier, Major Eberhard called a meeting to warn performers, freaks, canvasmen, blacksmiths, scenery men, drivers, bally broads, and seamstresses alike that he would continue to enforce the usual rules of sobriety at sea. He was a mustached, owlishly eyebrowed Spanish War veteran, and he had clawed out a market against the Ringlings, Hagenbeck-Wallace, Sells-Floto, and other competitors through showmanship and logistical brilliance. He expected the same standards of conduct from his employees, he made clear. The clowns in particular were used to a stiff pick-me-up in the morning (impossible to police); some of the high-wire broads from countries where ladies had mustaches could throw down vodka like stevedores. Well, cry me a river! They'd signed binding contracts when they joined the circus, had they not, and he, as owner of and (he flattered himself to think) father to the company, would hold them to their word. If he caught wind of any tippling in the onboard lounges and billiards rooms, any roistering in the fleshpots of the East or the fish-reeking saloons of Vladivostok, then it'd be sayonara, Charlie.

"Out you'll go on your ear, on your own for the passage home," the major said.

Like its rival Ringling, Eberhard & Morrison was known as a "Sunday school outfit" in which drinking and profanity were forbidden. (Good luck with that, but still.) Ollie knew the stories about the major. Eberhard had foresworn the fruits of Bacchus ever since 1891, when, egged on by a handsome lady contortionist, he was mauled after drunkenly climbing into a cage to kiss a sleeping elephant seal on the cheek. He still bore scars on his face, arms, and neck. Eberhard & Morrison's performances

incorporated a pantomime temperance lecture and inebriated clown skits to illuminate the perils of John Barleycorn.

But Captain Specksynder, a gray-bearded, straw-topped Nantucketer with a sun-ravaged face, laughed off Major Eberhard's pleas to declare the *Carnatic* a dry ship, and at sea he outranked the millionaire circus impresario. Anyone who wished to partake of the white demon found a ready black market of the hard stuff, wine too, to say nothing of sake and, after calls in Vladivostok, Dalian, and Hong Kong, Russian strong beer and a Chinese version of India pale ale, if you could stomach the stuff. Besides, no way would Specksynder give up his nightly bottle (or two!) of claret. He was tickled by the very notion of teetotalism—this much was evident even to eleven-year-old Ollie. The captain made this clear every evening at his table in the Egyptian-revival first-class dining salon, with its gilded mirrors and mahogany paneling and paintings of naked Greek ladies with urns on their shoulders, the chandelier crystals oscillating with the motion of the waves to remind everyone which way was down, even as the soup in their bowls tilted this way and that. Every night after the blessing, he raised a carafe over Major Eberhard's goblet. "Interest you in a drop of Dutch courage, sir?" When the circus owner clamped his hand over his glass, the captain, never tiring of his little joke, would declare, "Ho, but of course! Forgive me, Eberhard. You don't partake."

The captain had issued Major and Mrs. Eberhard a standing invitation to dine at his roundtable, along with the Australian-born Saxe-Coburgs. (Their real last name was Quade and their royal connections were but publicity bunkum, yet they impressed Yanks who could not distinguish an Aussie accent from that of a Brit.) On any given night the table's revolving cast might also

include Signor Liberati of the Big Top Military Orchestra, the Ando-san hand-balancing family, sundry trapeze artists and bally broads, and the Big Joe Walkenshaws. Big Joe, a Negro acrobatic clown who was married to a white seamstress, could lift a horse, and Ollie's pal Little Joe could stand on his father's head and juggle knives and cannonballs. Dr. Vyacheslav Kapusta, the Russian hypnotist and freakshow master of ceremonies, was often present; so were the only freaks Specksynder permitted in the first-class dining room: the Hindoo midget comedians, Mr. and Mrs. Soopromani. The captain made an exception for them because they were so adorable and bantered so wittily in those dear little accents.

No offense, but freaks made Jephthah Specksynder ill, he said, and he banished the lot of them to the second-class dining hall. Larry Loose's face hung to his navel and dragged in his dinner platter! Pasqual Piñon the Two-Headed Mexican had to spoon-feed Prince Randian the limbless Caterpillar Man! Dimples McThin, the World's Most Beautiful Fat Lady, ate half her weight in a sitting, and broke a chair one day when she sat down! Meanwhile, her husband, Rusty, a sixty-pound contortionist whom Little Joe had dubbed "Skeletus," spent the dinner hour chasing six lima beans and a walnut around his plate with his dessert fork, making the bon vivant skipper feel guilty about his normal and healthy appetite. Mehmood Mumtaz, at eight feet six, simply could not crowd his legs under the table, plus he possessed a hideous countenance, like that of a giant in a fairy tale. Ollie's pal Renato the Three-Legged Boy ("that horrid little spider kid," in Specksynder's view) was simply too pathetic to look at. And as for that furry-faced Belgian Oddity—who cared that he was a published poet in his Hun-ravished homeland, that he spoke four

languages in addition to his own Flemish and French? Shouldn't he be quartered in the menagerie? He couldn't even sit properly; his hind legs bent the wrong way, like a dog's! As a mental oddity, Ollie too performed in the freakshow (also known as "the kid show"), but his presence never bothered the captain, perhaps because the captain was fond of staring at Mother. He had a whole arsenal of toasts to the ladies, which he always delivered while looking at her. "O woman! lovely woman! nature made thee / To temper man; we had been brutes without thee."

Ollie could see that Specksynder was in love with Mother, an equestrian beauty who pursed her lips in ways that palpitated men's hearts, as though they thought she was whistling or blowing kisses at them. Jet-haired and green-eyed, she was part Aboriginal and was often billed as an aristocrat of various exotic nationalities, such as Georgian or Rumanian, though she was but a country girl from Wattle Flat, NSW (pop. 250). The captain mooned at her as waiters in white coats delivered courses identified by menu cards that Ollie committed to memory at a glance. *Filets de sole à la Normande*, *Bouchées à l'Impératrice*, roast beef, hot and cold fowls, *Quiche en fromage*, *Meringues à la Chantilly*. No matter what was served, Specksynder always had his steward bring Ollie whatever he requested, which meant either hot dogs or corn dogs. Or sloppy joes, for variety.

Dad had his own share of fans among the gentler sex, who marveled at his strength and agility supporting Mother as they performed bareback handstands, gymnastics, and waltzes atop Ozymandias and Raconteuse, long-maned white geldings that galloped side by side on the cinder track of the hippodrome that encircled Eberhard & Morrison's three rings. His manly good looks were marred by a port-wine birthmark around one eye; this

he masked in whiteface when performing. Also, he had gone prematurely bald, but his noble forehead, short-cropped hair, and waxed Kaiserish mustache made this feature seem distinguished. One thing for sure: he was not going to wear a wig, as an elderly Bill Cody had done when he and the Saxe-Coburgs were with Sells-Floto. One day Buffalo Bill galloped into the center ring for a creaky reenactment of his *mano a mano* against the Cheyenne warrior Yellow Hair back in '76 ("First scalp for Custer!"), and when he doffed his hat, his long-locked wig came off with it. Dad wore a derby, crammed down to his eyebrows so it wouldn't blow off.

Lonely bachelors sent flowers and heart-shaped boxes of candy to Mother. Ladies, their hearts aflutter at the sight of Dad in his tights, sent him love notes, and sometimes ribboned locks of their hair.

One night as they passed through the Soya-Kaiko Strait south of Sakhalin on the way to Otaru, Japan (pop. 91,023), to take his mind off the adult melodramas Ollie decided to—well, maybe it would be called sneak-reading. Ever since he had recovered from his head trauma when July the elephant threw him at the barn wall, he had possessed the ability to remember every word he read, as if his eyes photographed the pages. And these pages became his obsession. He could not pass up a book or newspaper forgotten on a dining room table or in a chaise lounge in a solarium without grabbing it. Today he had brought a tome of navigational charts to the table and opened it on his lap, out of view, memorizing verso and recto as quickly as he could turn the leaves. Checking his reflection in a mirror—a dark-haired, squinty, frowning shrimp peering over the table—he was sure the captain and the Eberhards could not see his book from where they sat.

But Mother, beside him, snapped her fingers and said, “Ollie! Give it up, mate. For heaven’s sake, you’ll go blind in this light. Listen to the conversation; you might learn something. Or how about you enlighten us with an interesting fact from the encyclopedia?” She was the ideal publicity agent, always ready to promote him to any audience.

“Like what?” Ollie slid the book to her, plowing up the tablecloth and her silverware. She placed the book under the napkin on her lap.

“Is there anything about Helen of Troy?” Captain Specksynder offered, his fingers on Mother’s naked wrist.

Dad reached across Ollie and took her hand away from the captain, his other fist clenched in his lap. Ollie saw that Big Joe and Little Joe were observing the minidrama as well. At thirteen, two years Ollie’s senior, Little Joe had inherited the physique of his father, a joey, or acrobatic clown, who could (along with the strongmen Dierckx Brothers) support with his legs a bridge the elephants walked across single file, each holding the tail that waggled ahead. But Little Joe’s olive skin was closer in hue to that of his white mother, a former gymnast now employed in wardrobes, and his hair, though as frizzy as his dad’s, was sandy like his mother’s. Big Joe and Little Joe watched Ollie and his father. Little Joe’s eyes seemed to ask, *Well? And what are you going to do about the moron?* Meaning Specksynder.

What was Ollie supposed to do? He was just a kid.

“You know Helen of Troy, don’t you?” Specksynder persisted, darting his faded blue eyes briefly at Ollie.

Ollie’s face warmed. “Faust’s concubine?”

“No, he means the Greek lady from Homer,” Mother said. She too blushed fetchingly.

“Boy is right,” Dr. Kapusta interceded Slavically. “Troy’s Helen is in Goethe. Tell us about *Faust*, Ollie.”

So Ollie related, feeling the warmth in his face descending all the way to his toes, that Mephistopheles procured Helen of Troy for Faust as a concubine, and for a brief but rapturous time she lived as his wife until their son, Euphorion, perished Icarus-like in consequence of his irresistible impulse—

“Enough.” Dad shot a dire glance at Specksynder, who was ignoring Ollie and ogling Mother. “Cor blimey, just once for the love of God can we discuss something other than encyclopedia trivia?”

Ollie noticed Little Joe frowning, as if Ollie had let him down. He avoided his friend’s gaze for the rest of the meal.

In the silence that ensued, cutlery clinked on their plates, and Dad reached for his glass. He seemed to remember it contained only cherry cordial, sniffed it as if detecting poison. Specksynder never offered Dad wine, not that the circus man would have accepted in the major’s presence, but back in their cabin he added this to his nightly recital of Specksynder’s affronts.

“Oh, darling,” Mother said, “don’t take everything personally. He’s just a friendly bloke.”

“Friendly! Ha! Oh, indeed, I reckon he bloody well is. A girl in every port. Who knows what kind of diseases—”

“Frank! The boy. Besides, how the blazes can you insinuate—?”

“I wasn’t insinuating a thing.”

Elsewhere on the *Carnatic*, Dad found grog aplenty. Ollie heard about it from the clowns and Wild West cowboys and even limbless Prince Randian, whose fellow freaks kept bringing a chalice to his lips like priests offering Christ’s blood. Barrels of vodka were unloaded in Vladivostok, whiskey in Nagasaki, rum in

the Philippines, Tooheys in Sydney, all for the medicinal purpose of pacifying July the elephant. But gallons and gallons of it slid down the gullets of thirsty sailors and circus men alike. At night, when Dad thumped into the salon and thence to the master bedroom of their first-class suite, Ollie heard Mother say, “Just where have you been?”

“Poker with the cowboys.”

“Poker, my eye! I can smell you from here.” Ollie could hear tears in her voice. “Disgusting.”

“Shhh! The boy.”

“Get out!”

His dark form groped its way to the settee through the rippling jellyfishes of sea light through the portholes. There he curled up and began snoring. July trumpeted below.

The thing was, was that July the “Two-Story Elephant” was getting claustrophobic, shackled in a dank hold like the criminally insane, with nine of his proboscidean brethren. Week upon week, the bull men prodded the elephants off the boat into the smutted sunlight of one slum-barnacled port-of-call after another for a run of shows lasting a day or two, and they, the “Magnificent Mastodons,” would balance on giant red balls or stand on their heads (they could!) or box the clowns with a glove on the end of their trunks, all to the hilarity of peanut-throwing foreigners shouting what might well be very bad words from the blue seats. Every so often July trumpeted despairingly in the hold for an hour or two. You could hear him all the way up on the bridge.

When July was upset he riled up the rest of the menagerie, turning the *Carnatic* into a madhouse ark. Bishop Stillingfleet, the encyclopedia said, held that the insuperable difficulties of Genesis VI–VIII are obviated if one assumes that the deluge did not extend

beyond the region of the earth then inhabited, and that only the animals of that region were provided for in the ark (*Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. II, p. 255)—this Ollie knew. Which meant that Eberhard & Morrison probably exceeded Noah's feat by cramming wildlife and horses alike from the remotest corners of the earth into its holds, every one of them lowing and howling whenever July started up.

One afternoon in the Java Sea, after a blessed silence lasting more than twenty hours, July's tyrannosaur bellows exploded belowdecks. Ollie, Little Joe, and Renato decided to call on the menagerie. In contrast to the undersized Encyclopedia Boy, Little Joe was the biggest and strongest of "the Three Musketeers," as Ollie had dubbed himself and his friends. Little Joe was as prideful as Dumas's D'Artagnan, and he enjoyed physically dominating boys of any age. The razorbacks and canvasmen had called him "Boss" since he was barely out of diapers.

Possessing a nickname of his own, Little Joe had evidently decided it was his duty to assign monikers to everyone who interested him, artists and workmen alike. As the circus played up the Saxe-Coburgs' ersatz aristocratic origins, he dubbed Ollie "Fauntleroy" or just plain "Faunt" (but never D'Artagnan, as Ollie kept meekly suggesting). Renato the Three-Legged Boy became "Tripod," shortened to "Tripe" or "Tri." Renato was a slight Filipino who didn't know his own age—somewhere between Ollie's and Little Joe's, he reckoned. Eberhard & Morrison's East Asia agent had bought him from a beggar woman panhandling outside the cathedral in Cebu. The boys got on well as long as Little Joe remained unchallenged. He would nudge his friends, insisting that they endorse whatever he said ("Right, Tri?"), challenging them to pull-up and arm-wrestling contests that they then lost by forfeit,

and kneading their biceps and demanding that they join him lifting weights with the joeys and gymnasts. (Ollie and Renato never did.)

Yet he seemed awed by Ollie's intellect. Frequently, after a silence in which he furrowed his brows and thought very hard, he posed a question just so he could marvel at his buddy's seeming omniscience. Over their years of crisscrossing the States, Little Joe had seemed inspired by Frank Saxe-Coburg's defense of his wife against her male fans. Little Joe often scrapped with towner and rube children ("lot lice," they were called) who swarmed the circus grounds, sneaked under the canvas, and found opportunities to taunt and bully his freak pals, Renato and Ollie. He had a hook like Boilermaker Jeffries and bloodied the noses of much bigger kids.

"Hit back, and they'll respect you," he told Ollie and Renato. But they found it easier to flee to the back lot, where the ushers and property men wielded knotted ropes and backhanded slaps against the bullies.

The day July resumed his trumpeting, south of Singapore on the Java Sea, the Three Musketeers headed along endless passageways and through hatches with wheels in the middle and grab handles that Ollie said were called "dogs." ("Grrrr, woof-woof!" said Renato.) They clanged down, down, down sub-ladders and through innumerable doors and along corridors, turning right and left, retracing their steps when they got lost, deep into the grumbling bowels of the leviathan. Ollie and Renato followed Little Joe into a bolted, steel-ribbed hold the size of a big-city cinema, where Russian tigers and Amazonian birds and Mongolian camels with malleable muzzles resided in pee-yellowed cages and corrals painted red, white, and blue.

July's roaring set off the entire animal population of the ark. His elephant concubines trumpeted, big cats caterwauled, hippos bellowed, jackals cackled, alligators grunted, a Russian albino deer clacked its horns against the inner hull, seasick Malaysian sun bears moaned, greyhound-riding monkey-jockeys shrieked and ook-ook-ooked and threw orange peels and mango pits and their own poop at anyone who ventured among the cages. A kookaburra died of fright in its cage. Irene the cigar-smoking orangutan could only be silenced with the cheroots and cigs the sailors gaily supplied her. Chimps in their bare-bottomed wolfman suits swung about their barred cell with gangly athleticism, flashing mouths full of horsy teeth and shrieking at July as if to say shut up, for the love of Sweet Baby Jesus. The hippo roared, her gullet open so wide Ollie thought she might swallow herself inside-out.

The boys also detected thundering hooves from the livery a level below. Aboard ship, Eberhard & Morrison's four hundred equines (zebras included) were not crammed together in cattle cars as they were on a train, like pickles in a jar, unable to move; rather, they roamed free and developed sea legs on the eighteen inches of dirt the boss hostler and his crew had laid out on the ballast. When the menagerie above them went nuts, the horses whinnied and stampeded this way and that, Clydesdales and Shires and the flashy geldings that could dance, gaily caparisoned in costly trappings, the most intricate maneuvers at the crack of a whip.

The menagerie was so ripe from filthy pelts and animal barf and meat-eater poop and tinkled-upon straw, the boys resorted to mouth-breathing.

"Stinks down here," Little Joe gagged.

"Down on the poop deck," Ollie said. He broke wind with his lips, and his friends answered in kind.

“QUIET, DUMMIES!” Little Joe shouted at the animals.

“QUIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIET!” bellowed Renato.

The circus had brought only ten elephants on its Pacific tour, the remaining thirty tuskers wintering at the circus headquarters of French Lick, Ind. (pop. 1,803). The unlucky voyagers were shackled to the deck, in a quadrant littered with flyblown straw. Hay bales and an assortment of barrels and crates were strapped and netted in place along the walls, mostly props, harnesses, and feed. And here stood July, a luxurious Ottoman *surroundingly accompanied by all the solaces and endearments of the harem* (Melville, b. New York, 1 Aug 1819; d. 28 Sept 1891). His ladies were all Indian charmers, he an African bull (*Loxodon africanus*), billed as “the Biggest Brute that Breathes.” At thirteen feet from top to toenails, he stood taller than the late Jumbo, and, at twenty-five thousand pounds, weighed more. On his back was a pelt of reddish hair, and the matching fur on his head resembled a clown’s toupee. His tusks had been sawn off at six feet and capped in brass to keep the ivory from splitting. The behemoth’s full name was George Washington Theodore Roosevelt July Fourth, so christened because he arrived from London on Independence Day 1903, and Major Eberhard had fought in Cuba with then future president Roosevelt.

His favorite wife was Pinky, a black-eyed beauty (*Elephas asiaticus*), tuskless and diminutive at eight feet tall and eight thousand pounds. Unlike her African cousins, she possessed only one ele-finger at the end of her trunk. There was a hole in one of her dainty ears, a scar from a show in Laramie, Wyo. (pop. about 6,000), where one of the mahouts had snagged her with a bull hook to stop her after she panicked and charged the stands when an overexcited towner discharged his six-shooter through the

canvas top. July loved to intertwine his trunk with hers; sometimes when she touched July, Ollie had the feeling she was tickling her Brobdingnagian Beast, and they smiled like happy dogs.

“Say, boys, lend me a hand, will ya?” Happy Jack Souder, the superintendent of elephants, waved them over. Gray-haired and pimply-faced, grouchy-nice to children. Wearing a turtleneck in a failed attempt to cover a sagging tattoo on his turtle throat. “Help me find July’s harmonica. The lummoX dropped it somewhere. Just don’t touch them, don’t agitate them, and they’ll leave you alone.”

For months after his head injury, Ollie had been terrified of July. But he had gradually courted the elephant’s friendship, bringing him bananas, carrots, and a sixteen-foot stalk of sugarcane from a burnt-over field next to a showground in Louisiana. The boys scattered to search the hay that the mahout and his assistants had dumped in front of each elephant, though the seasick brutes were eating very little. As Ollie crawled about beside July’s shackled, columnar legs, he noticed the elephant’s freckled, gray willie, a yard in length, angling down to the deck plating. Ollie was embarrassed for July. The elephants’ trunks, scratchy gray pythons with pink patches near the opening, reached down to finger the boys’ heads as they felt about in the straw. Ollie offered his hand to July’s sniffing snoot. *Indeed*, the encyclopedia held, *so great is the tactile sense of this singularly flexible proboscis that it has been likened to a hand* (vol. X, p. 221). The trunk exhaled a whiff like Dad’s breath when he came in at night after drinking.

July went back to issuing his tyrannosaur bellows.

Ollie shouted over the noise, “Jereckon Major Eberhard’s going to be cross if he hears July’s been tippling, Mr. Souder?”

A finger to the lips. “Don’t tell the old man,” Happy Jack said. “Our little secret. Besides, technically, July ain’t drinking; he’s eating. We feed him buckets of stale dinner rolls soaked in whiskey when he gets unruly. No more sinful than a bread pudding. Puts him to sleep if we can get enough of it in his belly. That’s why he was out all day yesterday. He had a snootful, must’ve downed a full barrel of good old Roosky rotgut.” He flung a gesture toward the barrels cargo-netted to the wall.

Ollie stepped in a hot plop of something the size of a cafeteria pan of scrambled eggs. He screamed, “EWWWW, I stepped in poop,” to the riotous amusement of his friends. But even as more imitation farting noises ensued, his left hand felt the harmonica in the straw.

“Found it!”

“So what you waiting for?” Happy Jack said. “Give it to him.”

Ollie dragged his foot around, wiping it off in the straw, then showed the harmonica to the eye on the side of July’s head. The elephant stopped trumpeting and sniffed the boy over. Pinched the harmonica in his nose-fingers. Held it aloft. *The trunk is also its owner’s chief weapon of offense and defense, the encyclopedia said, for with it he can catch and crush a man with ease or hurl aside the tiger* (vol. X, p. 221). The brute took in Ollie with a sad, wise eye that seemed to be looking out of a knothole in an oak tree. He stroked and coiled his trunk around Ollie’s fact-stuffed head as if to say, *Fine lad, swell kid, good little friend*. With his sleeve Ollie wiped the elephant snot from his ear.

“He likes me.”

“Careful, don’t let him throw you,” Renato said.

“We’re pals now, right, July?”

Ollie’s ele-friend extended the harmonica beyond the brass tips of his tusks and, expanding and contracting the bellows of his lungs, issued a tuneful dirge. As he played, a hush fell over the menagerie—elephant concubines, royal tigers, clownish monkeys, sleepy koalas, the alligator rabble. The music brought to mind the songs of the captive Israelites.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?

And what about in a strange sea? How indeed shall a bully big elephant sing the LORD’s song on the highlands of the Java Sea?

THE LAST MORNING in Sydney (*pop.* 648,746; *glass, pottery, wagons, boots and shoes, stoves, hardware, tobacco, etc.*; vol. XXVI, p. 156), as the circus folk were settling into their cabins and the crew preparing to weigh anchor in Darling Harbor, Dad decided to dash to the store for pipe cleaners. He did not want to run out on the way to New Zealand. “But the commissary sells them,” Mother protested. “Cheaper at the tobacconist’s,” he replied. “You can see the place from the deck. Back in two shakes.” Two hours later, as the smokestacks spouted visible heat and two tugs came bullying in, Mother and Ollie paced the promenade, scanning the waterfront for Dad. Amid the bustling of

longshoremen and queuing of passengers boarding a Suez packet, they saw a boy in a blue uniform and French policeman's cap cycle onto the wharf. He dropped his bike and dashed up the gangway of the *Carnatic*. Something told Mother they should return to their suite. "Come on!" she said.

The uniformed boy brought them a telegram from Dad that read DORTHEA DECIDED TO STAY STOP GOOD LUCK STOP TELL BOY STOP CHEERS FRANK.

That forenoon the *Carnatic* sailed without him.

Dad's betrayal plunged Ollie and Mother into despond. They no longer dined with Captain Specksynder, and when he sent meals to their rooms, Ollie left the tray untouched outside the door. Hot dogs and corn dogs tasted like sawdust. Sloppy joes gagged him as if they were monkey poop on a bun. The only thing he could consume was cherry cordial. His stomach hurt, and he was sleeping ten hours a day, though he endured long sleepless periods at night. Dad's abandonment of the family was all the more bewildering in that Ollie had been too diverted by Captain Specksynder's flirtations with Mother to notice anything amiss with his father. Drinking, yes, but why had he run off?

Ollie stopped scrambling up and down the ladders and playing tag on deck with Little Joe and Renato. When they dropped by, Dortha let them know through the cracked door that Ollie wasn't well. He heard Little Joe say, "But it's no fun without him." *Aye, no one to boss around but Renato*, Ollie thought bitterly. He lay on his bunk in his stateroom, skimming the encyclopedia in his mind for punishments meted out to those guilty of betrayal. Or did Father have a reason he couldn't divulge? Might he have been drafted on a secret mission for the Entente Powers, the ANZACs? A secret mission that required a master of Roman riding who also

could waltz on a horse? Where else could they find such a man besides Dad?

Still. *TELL BOY*, Ollie thought, as if he were any old telegram boy or joey-clown boy or three-legged boy, not his father's own son.

Ollie and his mother were so isolated, it was days before they heard the rumor that Miss Capocci, a striking bally broad who had decorated the wall over her bunk with publicity snaps of Dad, also had not rejoined the ship after their last performance in Sydney.

"I knew it," Mother said, blood on her teeth as she nibbled the dry skin around her fingernails. "I knew it. I knew it. I knew it."

ONE NIGHT on the Tasman Sea, the noise of the animals awoke Ollie, and he hastily pulled on his trousers and shoes without socks. Mother had knocked herself out with barbiturates provided by Dr. Kapusta, and Ollie was able to slip down to the menagerie. The air of the hold was dense with a blinding, cough-inducing white fog, dimming the swinging lights overhead. It smelled like bread. Ollie tasted it on his lips. Wheat flour. Could a baker have dumped a great bag of flour in a vent? Enormous fans blew it like a detective's fingerprint powder, and it was settling on cages and cargo and sprinkling his shoulders. It was as if the Boche had bombed a flour mill. The rhino was powdered white, as were the camels, the llamas, the monkeys and apes, the ibex, the great cats, the koalas and the Kodiak (who now resembled his polar cousin of the north), and Big Joe Walkenshaw's kangaroo sparring partner.

The closer Ollie got to the elephants, the denser the cloud and the whiter the animals. The tuskers' wrinkly hides were talcumed like an old lady's face, masking the creases. The menagerie men,

sailors too, were sweeping the deck and brushing off cages and gathering the shattered pieces of flour barrels. Had the barrels broken free in the rise and fall of the waves? The men heaped the whitened hay to toss overboard. Superintendent of animals Happy Jack Souder, his bull men, and even Major Eberhard, who never came down here, were arguing about what to do next. Flour was sifting onto everyone's hats and shoulders.

Happy Jack brandished a giant set of pliers under July's white-lashed eye—the tool with which he extracted bad teeth.

“You!” he said. “Bad boy! Bad, bad, bad! You want me to pull one out?”

Colossal July, Biggest Brute that Breathes and Emperor of the Jungle, cowered before the puny human clacking the implement before his eye. His harem cried out in horror. July trumpeted and cringed as far away as his chains would allow. Pasty tears ran down the crosshatching of his old-lady cheeks. Happy Jack always said an elephant's tears do not signify emotion, but the encyclopedia did not seem to support this. *See ANIMAL INTELLIGENCE. Consult Aristotle, “Historia Animalium” (trans. by Thompson); Darwin, “Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals” (London 1872); Loeb, “Comparative Physiology of the Brain and Comparative Psychology,” (New York 1900); Lubbock, “On the Senses Instincts and Intelligence of Animals” (London 1888); “Ants, Bees and Wasps” (ib. 1892) . . . (vol. I, 701).*

“I ought to yank every tooth out of your head!” Souder said.

“NO!” Ollie cried, and the grownups looked at him.

“Ollie, what are you doing here?” Major Eberhard said. “Go back to bed!”

The boy moved a few steps away but did not leave. The grownups immediately forgot him.

To Happy Jack the major said, “I’m not in favor of pulling teeth.”

“Just one. Terrifies him more than anything I know. We can’t let him get away with this; he’ll be ungovernable.”

The major coughed, a fist to his mouth. “Scaring isn’t the point. It’s prevention. I don’t want this ever happening again.”

As he hung back, but within earshot, Ollie learned what had happened. When Happy Jack left his post for the night, July stretched his chains to the limit, chafing his ankles raw, and tore away the rope netting from several flour barrels stowed nearby, evidently mistaking them for the whiskey from which his tipples were poured in five-gallon buckets. The barrels rolled about on the deck, bowling over Pinky’s son Baby Boo. Enraged, July and his ladies trampled the offending engines to kindling. Hearing a disturbance, Mr. Souder returned to a Siberian whiteout. July and his herd were cheerfully taking dust baths, flinging flour in the air with gusto. Elephants, fine; they could be hosed off and scrubbed down with long-handled brushes, but the keepers dared not wash most of the menagerie off lest their powder coating congeal in a pastry dough. Nor could one comb flour from the pelts of beasts of prey unless one wished to be eaten.

Eberhard noticed Ollie. “I thought I told you to leave.”

Happy Jack clacked the pliers at the boy. “Maybe we ought to take one of Little Lord Fauntleroy’s teeth.”

Ollie had not realized that Mr. Souder knew his hated nickname. He fled upstairs to the stateroom.

Next morning the noise from the menagerie, set off by July’s trumpeting, was more terrible than anything he had heard the

entire voyage. Mother lay in her room, a pillow over her head. Ollie dressed and dashed down to the hold.

In July's place stood a giant crate encased in steel bars. A trunk—*July's!*—extended from a breathing slot across the front of the box, like the neck of a geoduck clam on a beach. To Ollie, the box appeared as large as a villager's hut, but to an elephant it was a coffin. July could not even turn around. His tusks prevented him from extending more than half of his thirteen-foot trunk from the box. Also, the carpenters had placed the slot too low; July could see nothing but woodgrain. He kept reaching to find Pinky, his favorite lady. She too sought him with her trunk, as did the rest of the herd, but the box faced the other way, and they were too far away to touch.

Ollie reckoned July must feel like David Balfour of Shaws in *Kidnapped* (R. L. Stevenson, b. 8 Howard place, Edinburgh, 13 Nov 1850; d. Vailima, island of Upolu, Samoa, 3 Dec. 1894). *I came to myself in darkness, in great pain, bound hand and foot, and deafened by many unfamiliar noises. There sounded in my ears a roaring of water as of a huge mill-dam, the thrashing of heavy sprays, the thundering of the sails, and the shrill cries of seamen.*

"Serves him right," said Happy Jack from behind, as if answering Ollie's thoughts. "Learn him a lesson. He behaves, we let him back out. Simple as that."

Ollie stared at him.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," the mahout said. "I don't like it, either. He'll shape up eventually. By the way, you didn't think I was going to pull July's tooth last night, did you? I was just giving him a scare."

"How'd you get him into the box?"

“Let’s just say he loves his bread pudding. He’s no fool, though. The poor devil knew he wouldn’t get back out if he went in, and he held off for two hours. But in the end he trundled on in like a rummy hurrying into a saloon at opening time. You know, if he don’t get the ol’ wahoo juice, he starts shaking like a leaf. DTs.”

Dipsomania is a form of mental disturbance in which the patient is subject to attacks of irresistible craving for liquor, though in the intervals he may be quite rational and alcoholic beverages may even be repugnant to him (vol. I, p. 349).

The trouble was, was the carpenters had bollocksed the job, Happy Jack said. July, the largest elephant in captivity, was thirteen feet from toe to withers, true, and the boys had accounted for that. What they’d forgotten was that his toupeed head rose even higher. Now he had to bow his head the whole way, causing a sore neck and shoulders. Or he could lie down, as Snoots the World’s Last Giraffe did in her train car, so she wouldn’t run muzzle-first into a rock face when they entered a tunnel. July fought against his box, and pushed upward like captive Sampson. The top board broke free, exposing the box’s nails like the teeth of a Venus flytrap (*Dionæa muscipula*). But the steel bars held.

From that day forth, July’s trumpeting ceased only when he blacked out. He even went on a music strike. “Hand him the harmonica, and he throws it in your face,” Happy Jack told Ollie. When the rest of the herd disembarked for the shows in Wellington and Christchurch, July stayed in solitary confinement. Happy Jack said he wouldn’t be released until they ended the trip in San Diego, weeks from now. Day after day, as the *Carnatic* steamed toward Eberhard & Morrison’s next billing in Concepción, Chile, and the ship rose and fell on the waves, rose and fell, July’s lamentations reverberated through the *Carnatic*.

Three evenings out of Christchurch, Mother was still holed up in the cabin suite, staring out a porthole at the scintillating southern seas. She had thinned in the week since they had left Sydney. Ollie lay on his bed, attending to the bellowing belowdecks. He lost himself in the wasp nest of his mind. Poor July, how soon would they get to San Diego? Surely they had crossed the international date line. *Twenty-four hours would have passed, but to the traveler the sun would have been shining perpendicularly as at noon all the time, and the question arises when or at what point did the traveler change from noon of one day to noon of the next?* (vol. XV, p. 253). Just like with Phileas Fogg. Told he had gained a day, he jumped into a cab, which then ran over two dogs and overturned five carriages on the way to the Reform Club. Why did Mr. Fogg let his coachman kill dogs and hurt people? Why did Major Eberhard and Mr. Souder have to keep July boxed up all the way to California? Wouldn't a few days' punishment be enough?

It was nowhere near bedtime, but Mother sighed and retreated to her room—hers and Dad's—to change into her pajamas. (Circus women never wore nightgowns, accustomed as they were to crawling on and off bunks in crowded trains.) She shut the door, forgetting even to remind Ollie to go to bed at nine. The portholes turned pink and gold, then purple, then became mirrors in which Ollie could see a sad boy, too meager a human being for even a father to love, sitting up on his bed, tormented by the books in his mind. Maybe Ollie had lost weight too. His eyes in the mirror looked sunken, his cheeks bony.

The trumpeting resounded belowdecks. Why didn't Happy Jack give him more whiskey?

Ollie's mind was drawn to the encyclopedia entry on elephants, the better-known species of which, *Evelephas maximus*, was

native to India. Bearing the Oriental warrior and wielding weapons in battle. The other, *Loxodon africanus* (like July), was found in the forests of Africa. As the trumpeting sounded, and his bed rose and fell with the rise and fall of the sea, Ollie envisioned July gripping a scimitar and slashing off the heads of enemies wearing Prussian helmets with a spike on top, men whose blood ran like Captain Specksynder's wine. *Bronze clarions awake, and faintly bruit, / Where long ago a giant battle was* (Keats, b. London, 29 or 31 Oct. 1795; d. Rome, 23 Feb. 1821). Why didn't they use elephants in war nowadays? If you gave them armor and put a bloke on top with a machinegun . . . Maybe Dad would suggest it, if he'd joined the Entente Powers on his secret mission.

The sight of even a dead tiger was enough to excite most elephants into a transport of fury, trampling the striped pelt of its foe into a bloody fur carpet. . . . Consult Anderson, "The Lion and the Elephant" (London 1873); Hornaday, "Two Years in the Jungle" (New York 1885); and Kipling, J. L., "Beast and Man in India" (London 1891) (vol. X, p. 221).

Late that night, plagued by the hornet nest of words in his head, Ollie got up and returned to the sweltering hold. Back beyond the grunting lions and hee-hawing hyenas and flour-crusts Kodiak, past the chimps who were throwing their sloppy joe poop toward the elephants, July's crate rocked violently in its battens. The shackled concubines, Baby Boo as well, ululated for their Grand Turk.

From within, the brute's trunk extended like a stepped-on worm. July's gray skin was black with blood from beating this way and that against the edges of his window. Cherry cordial streaked the wood beneath the opening.

"Fauntleroy!" Happy Jack Souder called, wobbling toward him.

Ollie thought the bull man would kick him out, but he patted him on the head. “You’re all right, kid,” he said. “I don’t care what they say about your being a shrimp and a know-it-all.”

He seemed to need someone to talk to, to explain that the fiasco with flour barrels wasn’t his fault. Trouble was, was that more and more whiskey was required to knock out the mad elephant. The sailors complained that at this rate, Major Eberhard would get his wish, and they would be running a dry ship by the time they reached Concepción. Besides, even when July did snooze, he woke up hungover and even more ill-tempered than before.

“Keep this up, and he’s going to drink himself to death.”

Ollie remembered a line from the encyclopedia: *Once tamed, except in cases where they become “bad,” and have to be shot like mad dogs, elephants often are so gentle that children may be trusted to play with them* (vol. X, p. 221).

Was July bad, then, was he mad?

“It’s just temporary insanity,” Happy Jack said. “He’ll be better when we get him back on dry land. He’s always been a good boy. Except in thunderstorms, then it’s Katy, bar the door. But that’s normal for elephants.”

Next evening, as Ollie lay on his back reading the encyclopedia in his mind, he wrapped a pillow around his head, but it did little to muffle the noise of the captive Israelites and their mad chorus below. It did, however, allow him to pretend he couldn’t hear Mother, who sat sewing buttons on his jacket nearby. “How are you doing, angel?” she said. Sometimes, as she needled the fabric, she forgot to pull it through and stared out the window again.

Thinking of July’s madness, Ollie mulled the CAUSES OF INSANITY. Alcohol had always been a prominent factor. Syphilis also was a primary cause. Opium and its derivatives. *Insanity*

might also be due to mental causes such as fear, joy, anger, grief, or anxiety (vol. XV, p. 153). The derangement of King George III, eldest son of Frederick Prince of Wales by the Princess Augusta of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha . . . A soft noise kept on nearby until his mind returned from the distant place where it had sojourned, and he saw that Mother was crying. She was sucking her finger. She had pricked it on a needle. It was unlike her to go to pieces over a trifle. He'd seen her fail to execute a backflip on a horse and nearly break her neck when landing, yet she got up, patting the dust from her tights, and remounted her steed.

"Are you all right, Mother?" Ollie moved over beside her and brought his chin down to her shoulder.

"I'm fine." She stroked his head. "It's that poor animal. He's driving me mad. I've half a mind to shoot him meself if he don't stop. Oh, what do you reckon your father is up to tonight?"

"Shoot him? No!" Ollie said.

"I'm not serious, mate. If I had a gun I'd use it on meself."

"No, you wouldn't. Please don't say that." Ollie stood up and went to the door. "I'm going to go check on him."

"Are you loco?" Mother said. "Absolutely not. I forbid it."

Ollie waited until the barbiturates took effect and Mother wandered off to bed, faltering into the doorframe on her way. He grabbed three bananas from a fruit basket Captain Specksynder had sent and cat-footed from the liquid dark of the room into the dry, hurting light of the corridor. He clanged down the ladders and crossed through bulkhead hatches to attain the menagerie deck. He found himself entering the steel-ribbed hold via a door at the top of a stairway. Below, the menagerie was astir due to the derangement of their Mad King. In the airless January heat, Ollie gagged on the whiff of lingering flour and poop and flea-bitten fur.

“The poop deck,” he whispered.

Ollie crept up to the elephant box and offered his palm to the window. The Brobdingnagian Beast fell silent. The singularly flexible proboscis, gray-freckled and double-barreled, snuffled the boy’s skin. Didn’t they say elephants never forgot? Surely July remembered all the nice things Ollie had done for him. July’s trunk-fingers tickled Ollie’s face and neck. Whenever the elephant exhaled, that big old nose huffed out a snootful of whiskey fumes and a sourness of the liver, like Dad’s breath when he came home from drinking with the Cossacks and cowboys.

Ollie stroked the hairy trunk and offered a banana. July pinched the fruit in his fingertips. The banana was withdrawn through the slot. Ollie saw a flash of yellow and pink as the fruit disappeared into the chinless mouth that opened up in the dark. The proboscis reemerged and touched Ollie’s cheek.

Ollie stroked the rough skin, its old-lady talcum faded except in the whitish cracks.

“Poor, poor boy. Wish I could let you go.”

“Huff,” July breathed. An African bull’s trunk could lift seven hundred pounds, and with it he could catch and crush a man with ease, but it curled gently around Ollie, a scratchy python seeking solace. The rest of the menagerie settled down as it sank into their muddled skulls that their drunken emperor had quieted.

Stroking the wounded trunk, letting it coil about him, Ollie found he had bloodied his hands and pajama blouse. *And let us bathe our hands in Caesar’s blood* (Shakespeare, b. Stratford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, in April 1564; d. there 23 April 1616). He was going to catch it from Mother, for sure. The trunk reemerged. Ollie petted the barklike skin. He wished he could look the elephant in the eye.

“Talk about madness, I can’t get rid of the pages in my head,” he told July. “Drives me batty. They keep coming at me, names and dates and histories and facts and, and, and—stuff. It’s your fault. Next time you want to throw a kid at the wall, maybe you ought to think about that.”

An elephant cannot apologize, but the gentleness of the sandpaper trunk, snaking around Ollie’s skin and stroking him with its ticklish fingertips, suggested remorse, like Dad’s face when Ollie rebuked him for drinking.

So the boy talked to the mad elephant. In case July didn’t understand, Ollie said, they were on this thing called a ship, the merry SS *Carnatic*, sailing on the Pacific Ocean. The ocean was like a big old lake only way, way gianter. The Pacific was the greatest of the world’s oceans, at sixty-three million square miles. They were sailing over the waves, just like a train drives on tracks. That’s what gave it this seasicky feeling.

“Huff.” The trunk sounded like a man growling in a cardboard tube.

Ollie noticed the harmonica on the deck in front of the box, perhaps placed there by Happy Jack so July could reach it. He offered it to the bull. The fingertips of July’s nose, bristly and soft, were so cute when they took harmonicas from the hands of kids! For the first time since he’d entered the elephant box, July breathed his song, the tune coming in and going out of his lungs. *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.* Ollie could hear the snoring of a lion nearby as the exhausted menagerie was lulled to sleep.

“And by the way,” Ollie said, “sorry to be the one to tell you, but you’re not the Biggest Brute that Breathes. If you ever met a

whale, you'd see. Which you won't, because elephants don't just go floating around in the deep blue sea like whales."

Ollie spread his arms to demonstrate cetacean amplitude, and the trunkertips ran over his body and tickled his arms and chest, hand to hand.

"Whales look like fish," Ollie said, "but their tails are horizontal, not vertical. They breathe air, just like you and me. The sulphur-bottom or blue whale is the largest of cetaceans. Measuring up to eighty-eight feet long, he isn't surpassed in size by any animal ever living, even in earlier geological times. Schools of whales and their schoolmaster bulls are probably swimming right under the ship at this moment. Bet they can hear you when you cry. They feel sorry for you."

The trunk brushed Ollie's face. "Fuff," grunted the elephant.

Ollie told July other things about the sea. There were creatures an elephant couldn't even imagine, like seahorses and starfishes, only they weren't really horses, stars, or fishes. Stars—real stars—were those twinkly things that he, July, saw in the sky when he got up before dawn to raise the tents. And the giant squid! So great was its strength it could drag down a boat, and men in the water have escaped with difficulty. In Jules Verne the men battled them with axes, devilfish eight meters in length. *The squid's fearsome beak was wide open over Ned Land. The poor man was about to be cut in half.* Ollie could recite *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, if July was interested. Another thing was sharks, like the basking shark (*Hinus maximus*), attaining a length of thirty-two—

"OLLIE, GET BACK!" came a shout and he jumped like a kangaroo. Major Eberhard. Who'd had come down to check on the property he had acquired at a cost of \$100,000 from the London Zoo.

“He won’t hurt anybody, Major. He’s nice.”

“Great day in the morning, lad, didn’t you hear he nearly crushed a sailor?”

“Are you going to shoot him, sir?”

“Heck, no, son, why would I do that? He’s a gold mine.” The trunk tensed. Its fingertips dropped the harmonica and the muscular python lunged for Major Eberhard. He leaped out of the way. “You see? Shoot! I came running when he fell silent. Thought he was dead. Now, what are you doing down here? Why aren’t you reading that encyclopedia? March right back up there and get to work.”

“I already read the whole thing. Besides, it’s nighttime.”

“Then get to bed.”

As Ollie left July began trumpeting. The rest of the menagerie joined in.

Two nights later, as Ollie tossed in bed, wondering what Dad was doing, he realized he was not hearing the animals and had not been for a while, only the thrum of the engine and creak of the hull and cry of the gulls. He got up and entered his family stateroom’s salon. Mother’s door was open, and he sensed her stirring in the dark.

“Mummy, are you awake?” he called.

“Ollie, go to sleep.”

“I think he’s dead,” Ollie said.

“Who!? Dad?” Her dark form shot up in bed.

“No! July. He’s been quiet for a long time.”

“Oyyyy,” Mother groaned. She switched on the electric light, got up from the queen-size bed, and put on one of Dad’s shirts over her pajamas. She joined Ollie in the salon and opened the door to

listen in the blinding hall. Ollie followed. The engine rumbled, the ship rolling with the waves. The animals were silent.

Someone was singing in a foreign tongue. Dr. Kapusta, who bunked across the hall, lurched around the corner from who knew where and marched like a marionette to his cabin door, smelling like the out-breathings from July's trunk, like Dad after a card game.

"Eerily silent, eh?" he said. "Kicked bucket, didn't he? And I say: good riddance."

And as it would turn out, he was right. That morning, 30 January 1918, the entire company crowded the upper levels to witness the offloading of a *Loxodon africanus*. It was one of those white-sky summer days that deceive you into thinking it is overcast, but everyone would end up sunburned. A giant eraser had rubbed out the horizon, leaving just a blurring of gray from sea-dark to sky-white. The tones fluctuated with the rise and fall of the waves.

The carpenters had built a special derrick to winch the elephant box up to the main deck. The job required sixteen men—bull men and sailors alike—sweating in the antipodal heat and exposing naked-lady tattoos on their hairy backs and tugging on ropes and shouting very bad words. They cut through the padlocks and strapping and opened hinges and disassembled the steel cage. With axes and crow bars they broke apart July's teakwood coffin to reveal an elephant on his knees, face down, bottom up, like a Mohammedan in prayer. Ollie wanted to scratch July's shaggy toupee. Meaty gashes had opened up all over his poor, bloody trunk.

The matter of which the body is composed does not perish on the death of an organized being; it undergoes various changes

which are known by the names of decay and putrefaction, and which are the preparation for its becoming subservient to new forms of life (vol. VII, p. 223).

Major Eberhard had ordered the men to skin the carcass and stuff the mighty beast for display; they could barrel the meat and feed it to the bears and great cats until it went bad, at which point, yes, the remains of July would be slopped overboard for the sharks. But Captain Specksynder overruled him. He'd be damned if he'd turn the *Carnatic* into a slaughterhouse like a Jap whaler, and at sea Major Eberhard had nowhere to appeal. All he retained of his \$100,000 investment were the remaining six feet of the elephant's tusks. These, two carpenters rapidly and efficiently sawed from the face of the dead bull and lugged to the Eberhards' stateroom. Bobby Zheng, a pigtailed Chinese knife thrower, swept up the ivory dust and pinched it into a handkerchief, for what Oriental purposes nobody knew.

Ollie joined his mother, the Walkenshaws, and his fellow freaks, several of whom patted him sympathetically on the head and shoulders. Everyone knew about Dad. Larry Loose, Lolly the Six-Breasted Girl, Prince Randian the Caterpillar Man, Pasqual Piñon the Two-Headed Mexican. The Egyptian giant Mehmood Mumtaz was carrying the Soopromanis on his shoulders so they would not miss anything. The Belgian Oddity conversed in Latin with Andosan and Little All-Right. Even Dimples McThin stood there on her columnar legs, steadying herself against the rail, having arrived top deck with the help of the same derrick and winches that brought up the elephant. She dabbed her eyes with a dainty handkerchief, grieving the death of a fellow over-large creature.

From somewhere above—Ollie could not see where they were—Signor Liberati's Big Top Military Orchestra struck up Bach's

“Komm, süßer Tod.”

Little Joe elbowed Ollie and darted his eyes to indicate—oh, no!—Captain Specksynder was worming his way through the crowd toward Mother. “ ’Scuse me . . . If you don’t mind . . . Make way for the captain.” Big Joe too was shooting venomous looks at the skipper. The freaks grumbled as he pushed them out of the way. Blocked unwittingly by the Belgian Oddity, Specksynder said, “Step aside, fuzzy.” The Belgian Oddity replied in a foreign tongue, and the Immigrant Dwarves chuckled. Crowding up beside Mother, the skipper placed his palm on the small of her back. She jumped! And tried to wriggle away, but the crowd was as tightly packed as horses on a train.

“We miss you at supper,” he breathed in her ear. “But if you’d rather eat privately, you can join me in my cabin.”

A feeling like molten lead drained through Ollie’s bowels. If only Dad were here.

“Please don’t.” Mother caught Specksynder’s hand by the thumb and tried to move it away, but he held on, trapping the hand behind her back.

“I know it can’t be easy in your . . . situation. But these things happen for a reason. You deserve better than that rogue. Always thought so, a looker like you. Helen of Troy, heh! Six-thirty, shall we say?”

“I’m afraid not, Captain, thank you.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Oliver’s welcome too of course, although, honestly, mightn’t he prefer just to stay in his cabin and read? I can send—was it corn dogs he likes? A whole bottle of cordial too—what do you say, Oliver?”

The Walkenshaws were watching Ollie, he noticed—both father and son. Little Joe bugged his eyes at Ollie as if to ask, *So, what*

are you going to do?

Well, precisely this. Ollie grabbed Specksynder by the hairy wrist and peeled his fingers away from Mother's hand.

"Ho ho!" the old seadog chuckled. "A little cavalier we got here. Defending milady's honor. You've a most interesting boy, Mrs. Saxe-Coburg. I do adore intelligent children."

Noticing the Soopromanis riding high aboard Mehmood Mumtaz's shoulders, he allowed, "Freaks too, Mr. and Mrs. Soopromani. Absolutely, in their time and place. I've always said it's the quality of the freaks that makes the circus. Just not on a full stomach, thank you very much."

"You got chutzpah, mate," Mother said, and the eyes of all the freaks around her lighted up.

"This word I am unacquainted with."

"Cheek."

"Moxy, do you mean? I'm often told as much. Why, once on a New York to Liverpool run in '15, the Boche hunting in wolfpacks, I—"

"I mean how dare you bring up my husband? It's you who's the rogue, sir."

Ollie blurted out, "My father's on a secret mission for the war, and he's going to teach you a lesson when he catches up with us in San Diego."

These retorts, as well as an explosion of laughter and jeers from the freaks, directed not at Ollie, as he first cringingly thought, but at the captain himself ("The boy's right!" "Leave her alone, you chuff!"), by all appearances surprised Specksynder, who seemed not to have realized they were eavesdropping on his agreeable blandishments, the little pinheads. Besides, Ollie's breathless certainty, and the endorsement of the freaks, left the impression

they might possess intelligence about the whereabouts of this Frank Saxe-Coburg fella that Specksynder didn't. Ollie seized upon the captain's hesitation and squeezed himself between Mother and her tormenter.

Specksynder distastefully surveyed the misshapen rabble pressing in—their grotesque grins, their floppy and furry faces, their leprous skin and lizard tails and double heads. He said a bad word for a human organ that excretes poop, plural, and shoved through the crowd toward the bridge. Serpentina the Snake Girl sidled up and gave Mother a one-armed hug, head on her shoulder, but Mother stood blindly staring at the dead elephant.

"He's not," she said. "Not a rogue."

Misunderstanding, Serpentina said, "Sure he is. Or was. All that trumpeting?"

Somehow the sailors got their ropes and cargo net around July's colossal corpse. The men bared their heads, bull men and trapeze artists and clowns indistinguishable in their street clothes from regular old deckhands or factory workers; canvasmen and Wild West cowboys and Indians, high-ladder stuntmen and Moroccan swordsmen; Ubangi King Neard and his platter-lipped wives, naked in the heat. The rest of the women stood respectfully, hand on bosom. Now the orchestra was playing Handel's "Dead March."

Major Eberhard was fuming over the loss of his prize investment and clearly in no mood to lead a funeral, but it was unavoidable.

"Ollie, I left my Good Book in the stateroom," he told the wind. "What's that part about a time to do such-and-such and a time to do the opposite?"

Ollie puzzled, then remembered Ecclesiastes 3:1-9: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the

heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.” He went on reciting all the times there were, to kill and to heal, to weep and to laugh, to cast stones and to gather stones together, to embrace and to refrain from embracing (the image came to Ollie’s mind of Captain Specksynder crowding in on Mother); “. . . a time . . . a time,” Ollie stammered for a moment, and then his showman’s discipline kicked in and he was able to go on: to rend and to sew, to keep silence and to speak, to love and to hate, etc., etc. And what profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth?

“That’s enough, thank you, Ollie,” Major Eberhard cut in. “Well, that last bit’s rather Red for my tastes. I’ve always said hard work doth indeed profit a man. ‘Go to the ant, thou sluggard.’ Were he with us still, I think the late, great July would concur, elephants being the hardest-working of all animals, canvas-raising and extracting bandwagons from ditches and all. Anywho, today we learn that the Good Lord hath also ordained a time for elephants to be born, and a time to return them to the sea from whence they came. Amen, and for God’s sake, just get rid of the thing, already. I can’t stand it, a hundred thousand smackers.”

Papists crossed themselves. The sailors swung the dead elephant out over the racing waves. A hinder leg hooked the railing and tore off a forty-foot section of it. A rope snapped, and July fell into the drink with a cannonball splash, soaking the crowd. Ollie tasted salt, blinked it from his eyes. To muted cheers the great mammal sank. Disconcertingly, he boiled back up to the surface. The carcass bobbed and quivered as shark fins sliced this way and that, nudging it, and cherry cordial leaked into the sea. While they were at it, the menagerie crew dumped overboard several baskets of penguins, dead from the heat. (They would

replenish the supply with Galápagos penguins in Ecuador.) July's carcass slid up a lacy wave, crested the top, and disappeared down the far side, only to appear again riding up the face of another wave as the steamship chugged away. The *Carnatic* left July behind in the acute salient of froth stirred up by her propellers, but he remained in sight for a long time, for Ollie, Little Joe, and Renato the Three-Legged boy climbed high on a mast to watch the dead giant. Presently, a frenzy of seagulls and frigate birds could be seen over the diminishing gray raft of the behemoth.

"Do elephants go to heaven?" Renato said.

In the Middle Ages and later, the animal soul became a bone of contention, and men sought heatedly to prove or to disprove its existence (vol. I, p. 699).

"Of course," Ollie said. "He's as smart as you and me."

Little Joe did not contest this. "Think they'll peck out his eyes?" he wondered as the mast swayed back and forth, high over the sea, then the deck, then the sea.

Involuntarily the boys rubbed their eyes as if to establish that they were still in their sockets. "His face is underwater," Ollie said. "I wonder if he's watching the whales and devilfish."


"Ollie, he's dead," Little Joe said.

Ollie punched the older boy on the arm. This astonished Ollie as much as his friend.

"You think I don't know what DEATH is?" Ollie said. "A state opposed to life; the cessation of it.' They go away forever, and you never see them again. Leave me alone. You too, Renato. Get out of here."

To Ollie's surprise, his friends did not take umbrage but patted him on the back as they clung to the mast with him, watching July

rise into view and disappear again, only to reemerge ever more
distantly.

Twenty minutes later, even the circling and diving seabirds were
gone. 

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