

The Phantom Elephant

The man was moaning in great pain, his leg smashed in three places. The painkiller the nurse was administering seemed to have little effect.

The men cringed at the stern look of the Superintendent of Police. 'Himavat did it, Sahib,' whispered a workman. 'Never safe to anger that mountain.'

Anil Bharadwaj flared his nostrils in anger. 'What the devil do you mean! A mountain does not attack men!'

The men hung their heads and shuffled their feet. They would rather have been a hundred miles away than face the wrath of this young North Indian officer. Who knew what he might do?

Something had to be said. The grey-haired overseer spoke up, but in a tremulous voice. 'True, Sahib, when Himavat gets into a rage, we flee for our lives! It was really Joji's fault, Sahib. He should not have moved that stone, it has always been sacred to Kariamamma.'

Anil had had enough. He hated his posting in that malaria-infested jungle district. He hated the liquidized food of the South. He hated most of all the small, dark, untrustworthy people. He had learnt to order men at a young age in his father's estates. But here, his

commands did not elicit the smart '*Jo Hukum*' he was accustomed to, just a rebellious droop of the head. His job was to drag these surly idiots into the modern world, and by God he would do it if he had to thrash sense into every man-jack of them.

'Nonsense! Nonsense! I will have all of you arrested for attempted murder!' he shouted. 'I'll tell you what happened. You got drunk after work, had a fight, and broke his leg. You will all go to jail! And you – you overseer, I will arrest you for planning a murder!' He breathed noisily through his nostrils, widened like a maddened bull.

The overseer's heart contracted in fear, but he was no coward, he had seen many sahibs before, drunk, angry, and hateful. 'Sahib, my life is at your feet,' he said formally. 'But ask the "Head," ask Munia, Sahib, if Himavat has not wreaked havoc before on us poor folk. This time, Kariamamma, the Goddess of these jungles, told him to teach Joji a lesson. There are ceremonies to be performed before moving sacred stones, everyone knows that.'

The officer turned to his Head Constable in exasperation.

Old Munia clicked his heels smartly. 'These fools mean a rogue tusker in "musht." Joji is from the town, Sir, he does not know the jungle, he was careless.'

Comprehension dawned on Anil, but his nostrils remained flared. ‘Why has the Forest Department not been informed? Why have they not driven away the animal? This road must be completed before the rains, the Chief Minister has ordered!’

Munia clicked his heels again. ‘Wild life experts are already in the jungle, Sir,’ he said briskly, ‘they will tranquilize him and put him in a zoo. He is too much of a nuisance to be released back into the reserved forest beyond the elephant pass.’

The workmen looked agitated. ‘Don’t say such things,’ pleaded one of them. ‘He can never be taken to a zoo! This jungle has been his for thousands of years!’

‘Nonsense! If this dangerous animal cannot be captured, he must be put down,’ said Anil firmly.

The men bent low in fear, and even Joji tried to sit up in alarm, but fell back into his bed with a whimper.

‘For your own safety, Sahib, don’t say such things,’ pleaded the overseer.

Munia smiled in a superior way. ‘These jungle people believe that the – the – Himavat is the ghost of a great elephant that died long ago, but he still haunts this place.’

‘It is his place, Sahib,’ said one of them eagerly. ‘He always comes to guard his tribe, whenever they need him.’

Anil was getting tired of all this nonsense. ‘Enough!’ he said with a flip of his hand. ‘There are no ghosts, of men or of animals. Munia! See that the forest department captures this animal, or kills him!’ He noted with inner satisfaction that the men trembled at that. ‘The work on the road cannot be stopped on any account! Dismissed!’

He left the small, low-roofed village hospital and hurried to his jeep. His driver leapt into the driver’s seat while two constables with rifles climbed in at the back. Munia stood stiffly at attention. Anil looked a query.

‘A small herd of twenty cow elephants and calves are rummaging around here, Sir,’ he said. ‘Electric fencing is needed to defend the village, and then the wild life experts can drive them back over the pass.’

Anil nodded, and signaled his driver to take the narrow bumpy road back to what those fellows thought was civilization. He would tell the junior engineer in charge to link up the fencing to the grid for the moment. They could not go fast on that rutted road, and insects swarmed round his head, the flies annoying him more than the bees.

He visited that neck of the woods a few weeks later to inspect the electric fencing. It was working all right, but he was displeased with the placing of the wooden posts. 'One push by any animal, even a goat, will send the whole thing crashing! Use your head if you have got one!' he shouted in exasperation. 'Dig these posts deeper! Get more posts in between! Do you want me to do everything!'

The men ran around like chicken while his orderly served him tea under the shade of a mango tree. A stool was placed for him to sit down. While he ate his lunch from his tiffin box, the villagers gathered in a dutiful circle around him. After a long silence, while he continued to ignore them, the headman said slowly that their crops were being destroyed every night by the elephant herd. He pointed to a field of trampled stalks. A woman said they would have nothing to eat. What about compensation from the government, asked Anil conversationally. They looked at each other uncertain of what to say.

'If we do get any money, it is very little, Sahib,' said the headman haltingly. 'They take most of it.'

Anil's fingers itched for the butt of his revolver. He knew what the old man meant – corruption, even in this miserable part of India with this miserable bunch that passed for humanity! God! He would gladly 'encounter' every thief with no compunction, but then some mealy-mouthed human-rights son of an activist who didn't know his arse from his elbow would raise a hue and cry! He said nothing grimly, for the tribals were nobody he could talk to.

He decided to stay the night at the village resting in his jeep and refused even the comfort of a thick grey constable's blanket. The elephant herd had to be turned away from the forest village. That could have been easily organized by the Conservator, but all that fat man cared about now at the end of an inglorious career was getting his daughter married as cheaply as possible. A sense of what was due to rank forbade Anil from forming any disparaging thoughts he might have had about the Collector himself. All that was needed in that situation was a shot fired in the air, nothing that could hurt the elephants, and that would scare them off. He would attend to it himself that very night.

Having told his men to find something to eat in the village, and then roll up in their blankets at the back of the jeep, he set off for the edge of the jungle that straggled into the miserable village farms. A plantain clump was inspected and rejected for it could be a nest for some snake or other, but a stout tree nearby was suitable for his stand. He made sure the holster flap of his pistol was not buttoned down, and waited. The night quietened down. After sometime the hurricane lantern in the headman's window ceased to flicker and the village fell dark. Even the wailing of a baby at long last faded away. The jungle itself seemed to have bedded down for the night and was silent, unlike the thick forests he had known as a boy far away to the north. In fact, having been cut down and over grazed the jungle had almost turned into open scrubland, and that was the problem, with few animals and less fodder for any to eat. No wonder the elephants raided the village farms. If he had been a conservationist he would have emptied the place of human habitations, driven the lazy rascals into cities where labour was getting expensive and allowed the

forest to grow back. But his job was law and order and he would maintain them against both two legged and four legged animals.

The dreary night dragged on frustratingly. He sat down on a thick round root and leaned back against the tree trunk. He rarely smoked but this was one occasion when he might have enjoyed one. He resisted the temptation, for nothing drives away animals faster than cigarette smoke. A discreet grunt was heard and out in the distant gloaming he spied a few boars rooting among the destroyed crops, and then, even they left the place. Slowly his head sank down on his breast.

He jerked awake, instantly aware that he was not alone. Huge grey shapes had materialized out of the dark trees, and he saw a lifted trunk waving to assess the situation. He waited tensely for the right moment. Then as the herd moved forward with a little signalling cry, he leapt up shouting and waving his arms. The herd wheeled, with the leading female squealing a loud warning. The young calves were squealing too uncertainly. Shouting and waving, Anil ran towards a short acacia to place himself between the herd and the village. He saw the ditch at the last moment, so swerving he clutched at a thorny branch with one hand, and pulling out his revolver with the other fired a warning shot into the air.

The frightened calves were squealing loudly and turning in circles between their aunties' legs, while the large females bunched up in protection, and the lead female faced him, trumpeting bravely. He pulled off another shot to drive them back, and then holding on to

the branch jacked himself out of the lip of the ditch. A roar of air buffeted his ear, and he turned his head just in time to see the indistinct shape of a huge tusker rushing straight at him! He caught a glimpse of a fiery red eye, and then the elephant dealt such a terrific blow to the acacia that he was literally blown back into the ditch. Half stunned, he heard the herd stampeding towards the forest, and as he crawled out of the ditch shaken but unhurt he caught a last glimpse of the herd as it disappeared into the black jungle, the blue back of the tusker shepherding them out of harm's way.

Lights were being lit all round the village, and the men were running out shouting and waving lathis. His own men were already round him, their rifles at the ready. He waved them all away without saying a word, and slowly lit a cigarette. He had earned a smoke.

The stool was brought out again, a blanket draped over it, and a hot cup of tea put miraculously into his hand. To speak would be to show how much he had been shaken, so he stoically said nothing but dragged on his cigarette, threw away the stub and then sipped the hot sweet tea. In the excitement all deference to his status seemed to have been forgotten, and there was a clamour of talk all round him, but for once he made no objection.

Then, after he was sure he had regained full control of himself, he got back to the jeep with his men, and they spent the hour or so before dawn driving in great circles through the forest roads to see which path the elephants had taken, but they could pick up no spoor. When dawn had finally broken, he went back in leisurely style to the village to

give a few last orders for their safety and inspected the scene of the previous night's skirmish. Keen trackers counted the footprints of twenty-one animals, females and calves included. Even he could spot quite a few distinct sets in the crushed fields. Then very casually he walked back to the acacia tree. The marks of his mad scramble were clearly visible in the soft red earth of the ditch, but the grass under the short tree showed no imprint of any foot, not even that of a squirrel. He examined the bark of the tree which had been almost torn out of its roots by the tusker, but its surface was unmarked. He would have to ask an expert botanist for an opinion. Anil was a rationalist, refusing to let his mind be swayed by a chance experience. Professor Bhattacharjee at St. Xavier's while congratulating him on his entering the service had told him that his real task was not policing but bringing rationality to the benighted.

The experience remained as a disturbing memory, and nothing that he could read up in the evening after the day's duty was done could throw any light on his inquiry. His policeman's instinct told him a mystery was there to be solved and that he had all the clues, but he could not piece them together. He finally brushed aside his thoughts with a sigh and bent his powerful mind to ensure the safety of the Chief Minister during his forthcoming visit to open the new road to general traffic. He immersed himself in formal duties. He accompanied the Collector on an inspection of the jail, and spent two days himself in the police lines to see that modern sanitary conditions were maintained. He harangued the families on what was due to their children. Brushing aside the half-hearted thanks of the womenfolk there, he returned to his bungalow to finish a tiresome confidential report to the Inspector General Intelligence on possible anti-national

activities in his area. A wireless message lay on his desk. It was from the faithful Munia, informing him that due to the continuing drought a much larger herd of elephants had entered back through the pass, threatening the tribal villages, and that he awaited instructions.

Anil felt strangely relieved. He had to get back to the village of that extraordinary experience. He sent back a message that he would take charge personally, and spent two days tidying up his deskwork. Finally as he set off in his jeep, even the drought that had occasioned the elephant herd's return seemed to be ending. The sky was overcast and the air heavy and humid. Even the drive into the wind could not cool him down. His plan was simple. A two-tonner followed him with a posse of constables. He would spread them out in a semi-circle like the beaters of a jungle hunt of long ago, and they would fire into the air to frighten the animals safely back to their own forest reserve. The rains, if they came in plenty, would give the herd enough to eat in the jungle beyond the elephant pass.

The villagers were relieved but not overjoyed. They would have to meet the demands of the policemen while they were stationed there, and though he deprecated the practice, he could do nothing about it at that time without vitiating their discipline. In any case they were there only to help the tribal villagers and if there was some payback it was but natural. As long as it did not involve coercing any woman, he would look the other way.

The elephants had already done some damage, but the electric fence he had erected had held them back. So far, so good. But the land was as dry as a bone, and they had been trying to make their way to the slender rivulet behind the village. During the first day and night of preparation they saw nothing, perhaps because of all the noise they made. A charpoy was tied to the branches of a small cassia, somewhat like a *machan*, and that was Anil's bed for the night. Constables in rotation stood guard underneath.

As happens so often in jungles the air was full of expectation the next night. The tribal villagers were almost sure that the elephants would attack that night. Anil felt their excitement in his bones and ordered that the electric wire should be checked for faults, and any loose poles strengthened. Then they waited. As night fell, the constables took up their posts, the villagers bunched together beside their huts, and Anil sat on his charpoy with the reliable Munia directly below him. Even the forest seemed to sense their tense unease. There were rustles no one could interpret, and once spotted deer broke into the fields as if threatened from behind and then vanished again. The hours dragged on and everyone gradually became listless or drowsy, the constables standing with eyes closed at their posts. Suddenly, the dark trees parted, and the full herd emerged, trumpeting recklessly, and made straight for the electric fence!

There was pandemonium. Amidst confused shouted instructions torches were lit and electric lights switched on. A few constables fired into the air from far off, and the large herd wheeling this way and that barged into the fence, squealed in anger and fear, and wheeled about again, but still carefully managing not to trample on the little calves

panicking between their legs. No one could see clearly what exactly was happening. The herd had almost run back to the cover of the trees when the skies burst open and a sharp shower drenched the men in seconds, driving straight into their blurring eyes. With a sharp white crackle the grid failed, and all the electric lights went out in an instant leaving them in wet, pitch darkness. Then the elephant herd wheeled round once again and charged the fence, this time smashing the posts like matchsticks.

‘Sir, they are turning towards the village!’ shouted Munia above the deafening thunder.

As lightning laced and forked across the sky, Anil saw in horror that the elephants had indeed turned in their path and were charging towards the hapless village.

‘Bring down the leader!’ he shouted to a policeman near him. ‘Kill her! That could stop the charge!’

Even as the marksman took aim between flickers of uncertain light, a bolt of lightning crashed down inches behind them. Jumping with the shock, they saw a huge black cloud streaked with lightning descend from the hills to the west and drive straight towards them with incredible speed. In seconds the roiling cloud had touched the tree tops at the fringe of the forest, and then through it burst a blue-black elephant with red fiery eyes. Anil ducked instinctively as its feet flew over his head and then he saw the huge beast galloping like an express train straight at the stampeding herd! Arched lightning showed the herd turning in front of that charge, its squeals indistinct in the monsoonal barrage of

thunder. As split-second light and darkness alternated, they saw the herd running towards the safety of the pass, the great flying tusker at their back. Anil had one last glimpse of a great head raised, a long trunk trumpeting, and then that vision seemed to fade, and even the tail held straight out turned into mist and was gone.

Thunder and lighting ceased all of a sudden, and they only heard the roar of a drenching torrential rain.

They were taken into the headman's pathetic little hut to keep dry if possible. Anil sat on the stool, torches were lit, and somehow hot tea was produced. If people spoke at all it was in hushed whispers. Anil was very tired and he must have slept till a grey dawn broke over the soggy ground. No one had disturbed him, and he was glad of that. An inspection of the fallen fence was carried out later in the morning, and he gave instructions as in a dream for its repair.

The villagers gathered round the jeep to thank him, and to touch his feet. He nodded absently to them, without saying a word. And then as he was getting into the jeep, Munia was there beside him, stiffly at attention.

'What is it, Munia?' asked Anil in a dazed voice.

'Sir, the Kariamamma temple is nearby. We should do a puja.'

‘Yes, yes, let us do that,’ said Anil.

‘Will you break the first coconut, Sir?’ asked the headman tentatively.

‘Yes, yes, lead the way,’ said Anil.

The End