

Pinelands Writers' Circle
September 2013 Assignment
The classic 3-word story
Mahout, Hovel, Parcel
2 000 words
Mike Job

First Impressions

She was at her most dangerous. Out of her element, without a clear avenue of escape, the stench of sprawling humanity enveloped her, hampering her senses. The curs that she had stalked had long ago bolted, in a chorus of terrified yelps and barks, back to the doubtful sanctuary of their congested, noisome yards. And under the dim, flickering streetlights of this overcrowded human stronghold, she was alone.

Spotted death was a-prowl in suburbs too new to have been named and where two worlds had met. Survival was the order of the day and of all the competitors, she was best equipped. Fading into any available shadow, she merged, soundless, with the meagre cover offered by a collection of crude structures beside a great river and was still, only her mood betrayed by the occasional irritable lashing of a black-banded tail tip

Ranjit Singh had the makings of success. He rose earlier than most, prepared himself for the day ahead and was about his business by the time others had stirred themselves. In any fair contest, he deserved what he strived for. Already, from his profits, he had bought a sturdy bicycle to carry and display his wares. Silently, but for the hiss of tyres on gravel, it bore him away from his hovel towards the sleeping market-place at the Anwhar burning ghats.

Grief and procedure held the bereaved captive in their homes until first light and Ranjit busied himself setting up his stand at the first access point on the banks of the wide, slow moving Ganges. His speciality was garlands, some of real flowers and others of cheap crepe paper. Even death comes in price ranges. He hummed as he shook out his wares, arranging them in pleasing combinations of colour and length, discarding a damaged petal here and there or reshaping a crushed paper bloom.

The stand consisted of roughly sawn packing case material and was greatly improved by being hidden from sight under its burden of colour. Singh stood back to admire today's display, then squatted down to observe it from a different angle. An angle that brought him, in the quavering first light of day, face to face with a vision from hell.

Four stalls away, the leopardess had flattened herself against the ground, emerald eyes huge and round and as terrible as the fangs bared silently in their halo of

whiskers. There was a long moment in which they regarded each other and then, almost without rising, she turned and glided away among the legs of the stalls.

Not that Ranjit Singh saw this, for in contrast, he had risen as vertically as the rockets fired at more festive sites along the river, and when he landed, raced screaming from the market-place, passing the early morning washer-women and bathers making their way to the water's edge for their various purposes. Puzzled, they watched him streak past, looked at each other, shrugged and continued on their way, none the wiser for all his garbled warnings.

So it was that a toddler, tottering and unattended, wandered into harm's way and was not missed until its distraught mother presumed that it had fallen into the crowded river and raised the alarm. The police constable who took her sobbing and disjointed report in careful, copperplate longhand, looked at the teeming horde of humanity washing, drinking, splashing and bathing in the same polluted shallows and moved back a few paces to avoid any deposits on his gleaming boots.

He had another matter to deal with. Neighbours had reported a man barricaded in his hut, allegedly unintelligible and hysterical. It sounded more interesting than yet another of the endlessly missing children that found their wailing, snot-encrusted way back to the bosom of their respective clans, never to be heard of again.

When the constable had calmed Ranjit Singh sufficiently to understand him, he looked grave. There was now a real possibility that the station had a serious problem to deal with. For a number of reasons, there were no firearms at the station, mostly because nobody had been trained in their use.

Concentrating on recording Ranjit Singh's emotional report, the constable failed to notice Lakshmi, approaching in that silent, sponge-footed way that postal elephants have, until she inserted a questing, hopeful trunk tip into his drill khaki shorts pocket in search of sweetmeats, and he wheeled, irritated. She withdrew with a moist, disappointed sigh and uttered an apologetic toot that left a skein of mucous across his immaculate uniform.

"Get this stupid animal away from me!" the constable snarled at the diminutive figure astride her massive neck. "Can't you see I am on Government business?"

"Humblest apologies, Constable, but you are on the route prescribed in the Postal Manual for the conveyance of postal articles to their destinations in the hills - and elsewhere." And here the mahout looked smug, "And I have a parcel for the British Residence. So I am also on Government business!"

His curiosity piqued, the constable asked "A parcel? What is it?"

"Ah, this is a matter between the Postal Services and the recipient, yes. Not for general knowledge. Oh no, no!" The mahout said nothing of the numerous holes in

the brown paper made by curious fingers on the parcel's journey thus far. "But I can tell you that it is for the replacement district officer."

"Well you can tell the new district officer that down here on the plains we are dealing with a leopard - recently come in from the forest - while they are having their parties and entertaining their women up there, isn't it?"

With a smile that he hoped was both mysterious and dismissive, the mahout drummed his heels in the sensitive area behind Lakshmi's great ears and they resumed their stately way.

Archie Parkington was indeed new to the Colonial Service and felt it. The Residence was comfortable and the servants numerous and obsequious, though baffled by his Eton accent. But today, there seemed to be any number of strangers treating The Residence like a hotel. Planters, importers, engineers and businessmen, together with unidentified officials and local hangers-on, seemingly in search of a free drink or the endless relays of tea being served. He eased the collar from his sun-burned neck and studied the people in the cane chairs scattered down the long, slatted veranda. It was as though they were waiting for something.

He was still looking at them when it arrived in the huge, wrinkled form of Lakshmi, who padded soundlessly onto the front lawn and stopped, trunk testing the air for the treats that usually greeted her. At the mahout's first shrill call, Parkington spun about and took an involuntary step backwards at the sight of his first elephant, close up.

"Namaste, Sahibs and Memsahibs – your post," announced the little man again, grandly indicating the sizeable pannier-boxes strapped to Lakshmi's broad back. There was a general move into the sunshine to crowd around the off-loading process.

Engineers claimed tools and small equipment, others collected parcels, boxes and canisters, and the mahout plucked out a battered parcel and handed it with a flourish to Parkington, "Your post, sahib – a solar helmet."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"It is what is described on the label, sahib" said the mahout pointing with a betelnut stained forefinger. "Sahib?"

"Yes?"

"I was instructed by the police to tell you that a man-eating beast is preying on your loyal subjects."

"A what?"

"A leopard, Sahib. The biggest and most savage ever seen in these parts. Most savage – many deaths!"

Engrossed with his parcel, Parkington looked up. Into the azure eyes of the only woman he'd noticed on the verandah. Her enormous sun-hat had shaded an attractive face, and seated, her graceful figure had not been obvious.

The effect on the new district officer was remarkable, most especially to himself. His voice deepened an octave, and he affected a stern expression.

“A man-eater, eh? By Jove, that won’t do at all!! Just you hang on a moment, my good man. I’m going to get my rifle and cadge a lift with you . . . and your . . . um animal. We’re going on . . . um . . . shikar, don’t you know?”

Uncertainly, the mahout watched his departing back “Ah, sahib, Lakshmi is not a shikar elephant, no, no! She is Postal Services property...I...” but the district officer had bounded up the two steps and was already in his room.

Sitting on his bed, he took up the gift his father had pressed on him at the foot of the gangway just three weeks ago. “This will be your right hand in India, m’boy,” said the old buffer, pride combining with sadness in the tears on his whiskery cheeks. “Look after it and it’ll look after you!”

A .416 Rigby should take care of most things, Archie reflected. The cartridge in his hand was bigger than a man’s finger and the hollow-point head was formidable. The most gun he’d ever handled was a light fowling piece on the estate’s annual grouse shoot. He put the helmet on and studied the mirror. The effect was spoilt somewhat by it being two sizes too big, but caught up in the moment, he strode out again.

The motley assembly had mostly dispersed but she was still there, in conversation with a man who could have been her father. He dismissed an alternative possibility and waved airily as he passed. She smiled and murmured something and then the new district officer was gone.

Presented with Lakshmi’s great bulk, he was relieved when the mahout knelt her and he managed to scramble astride her back, hampered by the rifle and with the helmet falling over his eyes. There, it was to discover that unlike the padded neck, an elephant’s crenelated spine is as unforgiving as a ridge of rock. That, and that it was a very long way from The Residence to the police post on the Ganges river-plain.

The mahout was glad of the company and kept up a running commentary until the river was in sight, falling silent only when he contemplated how his extravagant claim might differ from the facts. Lost in his own discomfort, Parkington hardly noticed, but dismounted gratefully, bereft of any feeling in his lower body.

Concealing his resentment at once again being out-ranked, Sergeant Gaveshan was bursting with importance, his fat, perspiring face all false smiles. “Yes, yes sahib, my men have located the beast, you know! Only a mile away, trapped in a shed where it was seeking refuge. Constable Chetty was jaldi – jaldi. Quick to lock the door, do you see?”

Reluctantly, now that he had regained control of his legs, but reasoning that Lakshmi’s height would provide a vantage point for a clear shot, Parkington remounted and they set off.

The small shed was of stout corrugated iron, its hasp and stable secured with a stick. Two constables stood nervously by, well out of reach in case of an escape. From the sounds within, it was clear the big cat was beyond anger. The new district officer drew a deep breath and signed for someone to remove the stick. After some argument, the braver constable found a suitable pole and managed to prod the stick out. Then a number of things happened.

The door crashed back against the building, a snarling blur exploded out of the darkness, and swarmed up Lakshmi's face. The elephant rolled her sensitive trunk out of harm's way and backed hurriedly, as she and the mahout shrieked together and the latter abandoned his perch. The Rigby discharged with a boom and propelled by the vicious recoil, helmet over his eyes, Parkington disappeared backwards over Lakshmi's cringing rump as the leopard streaked along her back, alighted and was gone in a series of long bounds.

In the telling of it, first impressions of the Queen's new District Officer were not complimentary, and Sergeant Gaveshan was well pleased.