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THE STOLEN
WHITE
ELEPHANT

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The Stolen White Elephant

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The Stolen White Elephant:

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Mark Twain

The Stolen White Elephant

I

The following curious history was related to me by a chance railway acquaintance. He was a gentleman more than seventy years of age, and his thoroughly good and gentle face and earnest and sincere manner imprinted the unmistakable stamp of truth upon every statement which fell from his lips. He said:

You know in what reverence the royal white elephant of Siam is held by the people of that country. You know it is sacred to kings, only kings may possess it, and that it is, indeed, in a measure even superior to kings, since it receives not merely honor but worship. Very well; five years ago, when the troubles concerning the frontier line arose between Great Britain and Siam, it was presently manifest that Siam had been in the wrong. Therefore every reparation was quickly made, and the British representative stated that he was satisfied and the past should be forgotten. This greatly relieved the King of Siam, and partly as a token of gratitude, but partly also, perhaps, to wipe out any little remaining vestige of unpleasantness which England might feel toward him, he wished to send the Queen a present – the sole sure way of propitiating an enemy, according to Oriental ideas.

This present ought not only to be a royal one, but transcendently royal. Wherefore, what offering could be so meet as that of a white elephant? My position in the Indian civil service was such that I was deemed peculiarly worthy of the honor of conveying the present to her Majesty. A ship was fitted out for me and my servants and the officers and attendants of the elephant, and in due time I arrived in New York harbor and placed my royal charge in admirable quarters in Jersey City. It was necessary to remain awhile in order to recruit the animal's health before resuming the voyage.

All went well during a fortnight – then my calamities began. The white elephant was stolen! I was called up at dead of night and informed of this fearful misfortune. For some moments I was beside myself with terror and anxiety; I was helpless. Then I grew calmer and collected my faculties. I soon saw my course – for, indeed, there was but the one course for an intelligent man to pursue. Late as it was, I flew to New York and got a policeman to conduct me to the headquarters of the detective force. Fortunately I arrived in time, though the chief of the force, the celebrated Inspector Blunt was just on the point of leaving for his home. He was a man of middle size and compact frame, and when he was thinking deeply he had a way of knitting his brows and tapping his forehead reflectively with his finger, which impressed you at once with the conviction that you stood in the presence of a person of no common order. The very sight of him gave me confidence and made me hopeful. I stated my errand.

It did not flurry him in the least; it had no more visible effect upon his iron self-possession than if I had told him somebody had stolen my dog. He motioned me to a seat, and said, calmly:

“Allow me to think a moment, please.”

So saying, he sat down at his office table and leaned his head upon his hand. Several clerks were at work at the other end of the room; the scratching of their pens was all the sound I heard during the next six or seven minutes. Meantime the inspector sat there, buried in thought. Finally he raised his head, and there was that in the firm lines of his face which showed me that his brain had done its work and his plan was made. Said he – and his voice was low and impressive:

“This is no ordinary case. Every step must be warily taken; each step must be made sure before the next is ventured. And secrecy must be observed – secrecy profound and absolute. Speak to no one about the matter, not even the reporters. I will take care of them; I will see that they get only what it may suit my ends to let them know.” He touched a bell; a youth appeared. “Alaric, tell the reporters to remain for the present.” The boy retired. “Now let us proceed to business – and systematically. Nothing can be accomplished in this trade of mine without strict and minute method.”

He took a pen and some paper. “Now – name of the elephant?”

“Hassan Ben Ali Ben Selim Abdallah Mohammed Mois Alhammal Jamsetjeebhoy Dhuleep Sultan Ebu Bhudpoor.”

“Very well. Given name?”

“Jumbo.”

“Very well. Place of birth?”

“The capital city of Siam.”

“Parents living?”

“No – dead.”

“Had they any other issue besides this one?”

“None. He was an only child.”

“Very well. These matters are sufficient under that head. Now please describe the elephant, and leave out no particular, however insignificant – that is, insignificant from your point of view. To men in my profession there are no insignificant particulars; they do not exist.”

I described, he wrote. When I was done, he said:

“Now listen. If I have made any mistakes, correct me.”

He read as follows:

“Height, 19 feet; length from apex of forehead to insertion of tail, 26 feet; length of trunk, 16 feet; length of tail, 6 feet; total length, including trunk, and tail, 48 feet; length of tusks, 9 1/2 feet; ears keeping with these dimensions; footprint resembles the mark left when one up-ends a barrel in the snow; color of the elephant, a dull white; has a hole the size of a plate in each ear for the insertion of jewelry and possesses the habit in a remarkable degree of squirting water upon spectators and of maltreating with his trunk not only such persons as he is acquainted with, but even entire strangers; limps slightly with his right hind leg, and has a small scar in his left armpit caused by a former boil; had on,

when stolen, a castle containing seats for fifteen persons, and a gold-cloth saddle-blanket the size of an ordinary carpet.”

There were no mistakes. The inspector touched the bell, handed the description to Alaric, and said:

“Have fifty thousand copies of this printed at once and mailed to every detective office and pawnbroker’s shop on the continent.” Alaric retired. “There – so far, so good. Next, I must have a photograph of the property.”

I gave him one. He examined it critically, and said:

“It must do, since we can do no better; but he has his trunk curled up and tucked into his mouth. That is unfortunate, and is calculated to mislead, for of course he does not usually have it in that position.” He touched his bell.

“Alaric, have fifty thousand copies of this photograph made the first thing in the morning, and mail them with the descriptive circulars.”

Alaric retired to execute his orders. The inspector said:

“It will be necessary to offer a reward, of course. Now as to the amount?”

“What sum would you suggest?”

“To begin with, I should say – well, twenty-five thousand dollars. It is an intricate and difficult business; there are a thousand avenues of escape and opportunities of concealment. These thieves have friends and pals everywhere – ”

“Bless me, do you know who they are?”

The wary face, practised in concealing the thoughts and

feelings within, gave me no token, nor yet the replying words, so quietly uttered:

“Never mind about that. I may, and I may not. We generally gather a pretty shrewd inkling of who our man is by the manner of his work and the size of the game he goes after. We are not dealing with a pickpocket or a hall thief now, make up your mind to that. This property was not ‘lifted’ by a novice. But, as I was saying, considering the amount of travel which will have to be done, and the diligence with which the thieves will cover up their traces as they move along, twenty-five thousand may be too small a sum to offer, yet I think it worth while to start with that.”

So we determined upon that figure as a beginning. Then this man, whom nothing escaped which could by any possibility be made to serve as a clue, said:

“There are cases in detective history to show that criminals have been detected through peculiarities, in their appetites. Now, what does this elephant eat, and how much?”

“Well, as to what he eats – he will eat anything. He will eat a man, he will eat a Bible – he will eat anything between a man and a Bible.”

“Good very good, indeed, but too general. Details are necessary – details are the only valuable things in our trade. Very well – as to men. At one meal – or, if you prefer, during one day – how many men will he eat, if fresh?”

“He would not care whether they were fresh or not; at a single meal he would eat five ordinary men.”

“Very good; five men; we will put that down. What nationalities would he prefer?”

“He is indifferent about nationalities. He prefers acquaintances, but is not prejudiced against strangers.”

“Very good. Now, as to Bibles. How many Bibles would he eat at a meal?”

“He would eat an entire edition.”

“It is hardly succinct enough. Do you mean the ordinary octavo, or the family illustrated?”

“I think he would be indifferent to illustrations that is, I think he would not value illustrations above simple letterpress.”

“No, you do not get my idea. I refer to bulk. The ordinary octavo Bible weighs about two pounds and a half, while the great quarto with the illustrations weighs ten or twelve. How many Dore Bibles would he eat at a meal?”

“If you knew this elephant, you could not ask. He would take what they had.”

“Well, put it in dollars and cents, then. We must get at it somehow. The Dore costs a hundred dollars a copy, Russia leather, beveled.”

“He would require about fifty thousand dollars worth – say an edition of five hundred copies.”

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