
Shooting an Elephant

Author(s): David Hartley

Source: *Ambit*, Spring 2016, No. 224 (Spring 2016), pp. 27-32

Published by: Ambit Magazine

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44345576>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Ambit

JSTOR

Shooting an Elephant

David Hartley

He strode in, the first customer of the day, an angular man with sleepless eyes. He flicked out his card from a magicked nowhere and slapped it into place on the desk.

'Elephant,' he said.

'Certainly sir. Please take a seat in the waiting room.'

I processed the payment. It cleared without problem so I clicked it straight through to the troupe. I hoped they were fully stretched and limber. The gentleman didn't strike me as the patient type.

On my monitor the Arena waited, blank and serene. A few moments of stillness passed then the troupe swarmed in, lithe bodies in grey lycra. They chalked up and I set the atmos to Savannah. Helen spoke a few words to the group, strode to the camera and held up two hands, fingers splayed.

I moved out from behind the desk and approached the gentleman. He was already deep into mime and didn't look up when I spoke.

'There'll be a ten minute wait, sir,' I said. 'You're first in today and we like to allow time for the atmos to settle. Can I get you a drink?'

He grunted and shook his head. I nodded and left him alone.

Back at the desk, I swiped the waiting room onto the monitor. The gentleman's mime was complex and precise. He was stooped over a case of some kind and his rifle was in sections. He picked up and inspected each part then slotted them together and faked the weight of it across both hands. He frowned and took it apart again. For a long while he cleaned the barrel, a frantic hand buffing thin air, then he made minute adjustments to what I assumed was the dial for the scope. He slotted it back together, clicked his tongue as every piece found its place. He snapped the magazine in with pop of his lips and flicked the safety catch. I couldn't tell if he'd switched it on or off.

He closed the case and propped it against the wall. He laid the gun across his lap and waited, hands hovering just above his legs. I checked in on the troupe. They were ready. Helen swung from the front of the face, her body curled into a very convincing trunk.

The gentleman crouched as he waited for the Arena doors to open. His pointy elbows and knees made him look like a cricket. He had one thumb pressed upon his shoulder where the strap of the rifle lay. His other hand pressed invisible binoculars against his chest.

I put him on all the monitors as he made his way inside, including the online live stream. The gentleman stalked forward and hid behind a shimmering bush. He put the binoculars to his eyes and peered across the Arena. The elephant was grazing only a couple of hundred metres away.

I switched angles. The troupe's beast was as magnificent as ever. Sixteen of the men in four groups made up the legs, belts locked. They gripped the ankles of the youngsters above them who curved back and interlaced to form the width and bulk of the body. At the rear, Lucia's gentle arm flopped loose to make a tail.

Darren, Geri and José made up the head. José in the middle, Darren and Geri either side, their outer arms hidden in the controls of the lycra earflaps. José was braced by an army of hands so that he in turn could hold onto Helen. She swung upside-down in full trunk mode. She bent herself around a bundle of straw and passed it up to – who was that? I changed the angle – Carla, one of our newest recruits. Carla did an exemplary job of pulsing the bundle to let the elephant chew before making it all disappear inside. I allowed myself a small smile. Our service was second to none.

I changed the angle and brought the gentleman back into view. He crept out from behind the shrub and shifted his shoulder to swing off the rifle. He advanced on the elephant, watched his step for our virtual twigs. He reached the edge of a rocky outcrop and dropped to one knee. He clicked his tongue as he loaded a bullet into the chamber. José gave a quick grunt and the elephant's head lifted and turned. Geri raised an ear. José huffed.

The gentleman stayed very still and waited. The elephant took a few tentative steps away then Helen swung down and the scour for food resumed. The gentleman sidestepped behind the rocks and lay down. It was a good position.

He flattened himself and brought his hands up. His shoulder kinked back as the stock found its place. I zoomed in. He closed one eye and peered down the scope. His finger curled against the trigger.

I flicked to an angle behind and framed the troupe in the distance. The gentleman fired and shouted the bang. The troupe flinched as the shot hit. Tomas was the closest and he was quick to let the red ribbon spurt from the back of the elephant's head. It sprang out and left a twisting trail. José bellowed his best roar and the elephant bolted.

The gentleman fired off another shot and hit the left flank then leapt off the outcrop and sprinted across the Arena in pursuit. The elephant made good progress, but stumbled as the first wound took hold in the brain. It twisted back to try and rid itself of the trail of ribbon spooling from its rump. The gentleman lifted the rifle and fired then tugged on the reload and fired again. The two bullets found their marks in the face and José was smeared in bursts of red. The troupe slumped and José gave a muffled cry. The gentleman strode to the dying beast and emptied the magazine into its heart.

He posed for the picture but didn't smile. The Arena flashed when I pressed the icon and the image filled my monitor seconds later. I ported it onto the keyrings and fridge magnets and waited for the gentleman to emerge. As soon as the Arena doors opened he burst out, marched straight to the desk and slapped down his card.

'Again,' he said.

It was the first time in my career I had ever hesitated. I cancelled off the photographs and cleared my throat.

'Elephant?' I asked and he nodded. He would not make eye contact with me.

I processed the payment. It cleared.

'Certainly sir. Take a seat.'

'Ten minutes,' he said, as he thumped away.

Five minutes later Mr and Mrs Booth arrived.

'Morning Sami,' they said, almost in unison.

'Good morning Mr and Mrs Booth.'

'Today's the day,' said Mrs Booth.

Mr Booth put an arm around her shoulders and grinned. He lifted his card and rapped it against the desk.

'Giraffe, Sami. The best you have.' He winked and Mrs Booth giggled. They had been saving up for this for some time.

'Certainly Mr and Mrs Booth,' I said. I did not allow my smile to falter. 'There will be a short wait.'

They peered into the waiting room. 'Oh no bother. We've got plenty of time,' said Mrs Booth.

'You can take the payment now Sami.'

I processed the money. 'Thank you. Take a seat. I'll bring through some tea.'

'You're a good'n.'

They bustled into the waiting room and sat opposite the gentleman. Mrs Booth tried her hardest to catch his eye so she could smile her way into a conversation. The gentleman was resolute in his denial that anything else existed. He pointed his right hand into a revolver shape and twisted it to let the chamber fall loose. He clinked in the bullets with his left thumb then snapped the chamber back in and spun it. He made the noise like a purring cat and stuffed his fingers into a holster at his hip.

Mr and Mrs Booth joined me in reception as the gentleman made his way inside for the second hunt.

'Curious chap,' said Mr Booth. 'What's that he's shooting with? Pistols?'

'Revolvers I believe. Two of them.' Both the gentlemen's hands were pointed into gun shapes, thumbs cocked as hammers.

'Funny things to hunt an elephant with,' said Mrs Booth.

Mr Booth leaned closer to the screens. 'What on earth is he doing?'

The gentleman did not bother taking cover this time. He strode straight towards the troupe, hands at his sides like a cowboy. The troupe tottered, not quite sure how to react. They couldn't pretend they hadn't seen him. Lucia whipped the tail, Darren and Geri raised the ears. The leg-men stood firm.

The gentleman stopped and fired into the air. His bang was loud and his mouth flapped as he sounded off the echoes too. I saw a frown flicker across José's face. He whispered something to Geri and she passed it through the

whole elephant like a twitch. Helen stiffened as José lifted her and trumpeted.

The gentleman lowered his hand back to his hip and stood his ground.

'What's his game?' chuckled Mr Booth. Mrs Booth gripped her husband's arm. I switched the angle for a wider view.

The gentleman shouted: 'Hey, hey, hey!' The elephant tottered, José huffed. Darren and Geri raised the ears to full height and the head lowered. The four men of the front left leg jumped and made the elephant stomp.

The gentleman didn't flinch. The elephant charged.

He waited and waited and waited, then lifted his hands and cracked off round after round, straight into the elephant's head. At the last moment, he leapt and rolled away. The troupe skidded and crashed to the floor, chest first. There was half a moment when I thought they were going to give it all up; I could see irritation on their faces and Carla looked as if she had taken quite a knock to the shoulder. But they stayed together. José made all the right agonised sounds. Gouts of ribbon spouted from the holes in the head and streamed across a limp Helen. The body rose and fell with laboured breaths.

'Christ almighty,' whispered Mr Booth.

Without a care in the world, the gentleman stripped bullets from a bandolier and reloaded both his hands. He walked up to the troupe and peered into a few faces. Then he clambered onto the elephant's back and banged the twelve rounds directly into the base of the skull. I hit the alarm and the Arena flooded red.

'You can't do that,' said Mrs Booth. 'You just can't do that, Sami.' Her worried eyes met mine. I pressed for the intercom.

'I'm sorry sir,' I said, a quiver in my voice. 'No climbing. Please return to reception. Your session is now void.'

He stared into the camera, leapt off the complaining troupe and set off for the door. The elephant dissipated as sore acrobats broke off and rubbed bruises.

'No respect,' tutted Mr Booth. 'No goddamn respect.' He put his arm around Mrs Booth whose face looked shrunken.

I took a deep breath and opened the Arena doors. The gentleman burst out and slammed his card onto the desk.

'Again,' he said.

Mr Booth tutted.

'I'm afraid we have other customers waiting and--'

'Again.'

I stood my ground. 'Mr and Mrs Booth are next sir--'

The gentleman raised his gun-hand and was pointed it at Mr Booth's head. Mrs Booth screamed. Mr Booth gave a nervous laugh and stepped back.

'Ok, ok,' he said, 'we're happy to wait Sami. Let the man have his fun.'

The gentleman lowered his hand but kept the gun shape. 'Again,' he said.

I pressed my lips together and processed the payment. It cleared. The gun hand disappeared and the gentleman pushed past Mr and Mrs Booth

to resume his seat in the waiting room. I clicked it through to the troupe and heard the echo of Helen's swear as she received it.

This time there was no mime. The three of us watched him carefully on my monitor, the Booths besieged behind my desk. This was the last time. I was determined. I was planning some sort of statement on behalf of the troupe and had a call to the local security on standby.

The gentleman was sitting very still. No fixing up of a weapon, no movement of any kind. I looked at each part of his scrawny body. Did he have an invisible machete strapped to his back? A dagger on his calf? Some kind of blowpipe on a string around his neck? We checked in on Helen. The elephant was reformed and grazing at the far end of the Arena, the furthest point from the door. I wondered what their play was.

I let the gentleman sweat for a little while longer. The time stretched to fifteen minutes before he began to tap his foot.

'Better let him in,' muttered Mr Booth.

'The Arena is ready,' I said through the intercom.

The gentleman stood and his hand gripped around the handle of a case. From the straightness of his arm and the stiffness in his shoulder, it seemed to be quite heavy and cumbersome. He hobbled past us and waited by the door. I opened it and he bustled through.

'I don't like this,' said Mrs Booth.

The gentleman huffed his way to the outcrop. He stopped twice to rest his arm and flex his carrying hand. The troupe stayed well away but kept the elephant on the move. It strode around the edge of the Arena. This one looked older than the previous two.

The gentleman laid his case across the rocks and opened it. He lifted out a large object using both hands and put it on the floor. He closed the case, set it aside then fiddled for a while with his weapon.

'What is it?' whispered Mr Booth. 'Is this allowed?'

'I don't know.' I eyed the call for security, almost pressed it.

The gentleman curled his hand into a scope and peered through it. He moved his free hand to the end and twisted. I changed the angle to the camera nearest the elephant to get a better impression of the troupe's point of view. They would have to get closer if they wanted to act this one out with any accuracy. I could see the same thoughts pass across José and Helen's faces. The elephant soon began to amble away from the edge to a more open space. I checked the live stream. There were thousands of people watching.

The gentleman lowered his scope and stashed it away. He stood for a while with his hands on his hips and waited for the slow advance of the elephant of acrobats. When there was a clear line of sight, he picked up the weapon and lifted it onto his shoulder.

He lowered to one knee and leaned his head in. One eye closed as the other hovered behind a viewfinder.

'Bazooka,' said Mr Booth. I called security.

The gentleman fired and leapt away. He shouted a loud boom and a violent swoosh as the rocket cut open the air, and then jumped and threw his arms wide as the explosion blew from his cheeks.

The troupe flung apart. Ribbon sprang and whipped, bodies hurtled high and limbs flailed. The leg-men crumpled and sprawled, José and Darren fell inwards while Geri sprung out head first and crashed against the wall. Helen folded hard into the ground and shriveled up just as a splatter of acrobats came thudding to the floor. The ribbon twirled and settled. For a sickened moment there was nothing. Then Carla started to scream.

My finger shook as I cancelled the live stream. Mrs Booth whimpered. Carla's femur was sticking out of her knee joint. I could see three other acrobats unconscious, including Geri. Heads began to rise to look at Carla, agony breaking on their faces as they too discovered wounds and fractures. The gentleman strode over to the edge of the chaos and watched it. He turned and crouched, thumbs up but no smile.

'Sick bastard wants a picture,' said Mr Booth. I did not give him the satisfaction.

I pressed for the medics and cleared out the atmos. The Arena faded to blankness as all the outcrops, bushes and trees shimmered out. The gentleman took a last look at the carnage and began to walk calmly back to the exit. Security were still three minutes away, the medics ten.

'Go through to the office,' I said to the Booths, 'I'll do what I can.'

The Booths did as they were told. I grabbed the first aid kit – a beautiful connection between the flesh of my palm and the mottled green plastic of the handle – and marched to the Arena door.

I broke into a run as I entered. Carla's screams filled the hall, a dead sound without atmos, primal and hollow, almost pure. For a moment I smelt the heat of the Savannah, the choke of dust, a raw prickle on drying lips, a sticky glaze of sweat at my hairline, but it soon faded into the cool silver-grey of air-con and strip lights.

I looked at the gentleman. He was strolling towards me, mimes all gone, lost in a happy somewhere. As we drew close he looked me hard in the eye. He halted me. Snared me.

He placed his fist to the side of his head and formed a gun with his other hand. He put the gun to his temple, thumb-cocked, and fired.

'Pow,' he said.

He released his fist and a stream of ribbon fluttered out. It was a poor mime. The tangled ribbon clumped to the floor. The gentleman carried on walking.

David Hartley is a short story writer based in Manchester. His latest flash fiction collection is *Spiderseed* (Sleepy House Press). His fiction has appeared in *Structo*, *Shooter*, and *Foxhole*. Follow him on Twitter @DHartleyWriter. Read more of his fiction at davidhartleywriter.com