

red velvet, but still he did not die. Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. One day something happened which in a round-about way was enlightening. I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. It made me vaguely uneasy. The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. The rifle was a beautiful German thing with cross-hair sights. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. At last, after what seemed a long time—it might have been five seconds, I dare say—he sagged flabbily to his knees. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. I got up. The Burmans were already racing past me across the mud. His mouth was wide open—I could see far down into caverns of pale pink throat. It seemed dreadful to see the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him. I sent back for my small rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat. They seemed to make no impression. All this was perplexing and upsetting. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, scandalized cry of "Go away, child! Go away this instant!" I had halted on the road. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at. But I did not want to shoot the elephant. It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behaviour. If he charged I could shoot, if he took no notice of me it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. A white man mustn't be frightened. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. His mouth slobbered. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. It was obvious that the elephant would never rise again, but he was not dead. I waited a long time for him to die, but his breathing did not weaken. He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could

damage him further. I felt that I had got to put an end to that dreadful noise. This happened more than once. In a job that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. But I could get nothing into perspective. Would I please come and do something about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got on to a pony and started out. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. But I had got to act quickly. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him. But also I know that I was going to do no such thing. For at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do. There was only one alternative. They were going to have their bit of fun after all. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay. In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away. I heard later that it took him half an hour to die. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing.