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*Nellie Bly As An Elephant Trainer*

*A Novel And Thrilling Experience With The Immense Animals in their Winter Home.*

*Perilous Ride On The Ivory Tusks Of Fritz.*

I tried to train an elephant last week.

The elephant was very scared. So was I. Neither of us mentioned it at the time. But I have thought of it since and doubtless so has he.

I have always had an intense fondness for elephants. This fondness has necessarily pined at a distance. I once hoped to own an elephant and—

So it can readily be understood why I rushed to see the proprietors of the “Greatest Show on Earth,” when I heard they had brought eight new elephants to America.

But they refused to sell even the tiniest little elephant. They said however, I might go to Bridgeport and make the acquaintance of their elephants and try training them. With joy and gladness in my heart I accepted their offer. It was with great eagerness I followed my guide through the door into the elephants’ training quarters.

It was a little low room, with a ring in one end, and at the other, chained in the semi-circle, were eight of the cunningest baby elephants I ever saw.

The room was heated by a large, round stove. Near it stood a barrel filled with water and a little beyond, on a pile of straw, lay three immense black and white Danes, which sprang the length of their chains and barked furiously on hearing my voice.

The baby elephants must have felt the same surprise, but they showed it less, for women are seldom seen in the training quarters.

Mr. Newman, the trainer, smiled when I told him my business, but said that I might gratify my ambition that, if I dare confess it, was rapidly growing less as I gazed on the black, swaying, shapeless forms of the baby elephants.

“They are greenhorns,” he explained. “They are only beginning to know their names and a few tricks.”

He handed me a long pole with a steel prong in the end. It was a cruel looking thing and useless in my hands. An elephant might trample me into kingdom come before I would stick him with that steel.

“You stand by me until I get them into the ring,” he said, and then he called to his helper to unchain the little fellows.

When all were free Mr. Newman called their names, one after the other, and like little soldiers they trotted forward and stood waiting in line for the next command. They came in the order he called them:

“Lizzie! Alice! Nellie! Albert! Chief! Ruth! Fannie! Pilot!”

Lizzie is a nice little thing about two years old, with a bit of a black bang that is as stiff as hog bristles. Alice also has a bang, and is very dark in color. Nellie is an advanced woman. She doesn’t wear a bang and has a large and well-developed head, quite white in color. Albert and Chief are quiet and timid. Fanny had a cold in her head and looked as if she thought life a dreary

waste dyed a deep indigo. Pilot is six years old, the oldest of the herd, and he seems as grave as if he meant to live up to the dignity of his position.

“Baby Ruth” is the next in age. She is four years old, and is the only one in the herd who is not a greenhorn. She has been exhibited for two years as the clown elephant.

Ruth has the new disease known as “wheels.” At least if I were her physician I should so diagnose her case. She wags her head all the time, right and left, right and left, just like the toy animals one sees in the stores before Christmas.

“Forward, march!” commanded Mr. Newman in a voice that meant business, and with me by his side we entered the ring, dutifully followed by the eight baby elephants.

The attendants ran into the ring wheeling two big red tubs, which are called pedestals. Mr. Newman called Albert and Nellie, who came out, and mounting the pedestals proceeded to walk in a slow, mournful manner. Then poor little Alice, with her black bang of bristles, rolled a barrel and cried as she did so.

She fell from the see-saw the other day and sprained her ankle. It was never a slender, willowy ankle, but now it reminds one of dropsical patients I have seen in hospitals and tenement houses. The poor ankle is swollen and shapeless and it hurts so!

“Please don’t work Alice. She is in pain.” I pleaded.

“We have been making it easy for her, but she is getting well now.” Mr. Newman said as Alice limped painfully back to her place in the line.

Then the poor little thing pitifully rubbed her leg with her trunk. Nothing could have been more human or expressive of intense pain. It brought the tears to my eyes.

Afterwards Lizzle had to walk the tight rope, a narrow pole that rests on the two pedestals. Chief goes her one better by standing on the pole on his head and angling his great big rubber feet in the air. Lizzle cut a figure eight under him because the rather prominent ridge of her scraped against him. And to show he knows a thing or two. Pilot creeps around the ring on his knees.

Lizzle, Pilot and Alice see-saw and the act is over and all march out to their chains.

Poor little Alice stopped on the way to fill her mouth with water. Doubtless the sprained ankle made her feel feverish. She stood on three feet when not working.

“But I want to teach an elephant some trick.” I said to Mr. Newman, when the elephants were in place and I caught my breath.

“You can put Ruth through some tricks,” he answered, and Ruth was forthwith ordered into the ring.

Mr. Newman told me to order her to sit down, and I did. Much to my delight, she obeyed, carefully seating herself on the box that surrounds the ring.

“Ask her if she wants something to eat,” Mr. Newman said, and I repeated the question.

Ruth gazed at me so blankly out of her eyes that I felt abashed. I did not quite know whether to think she was deaf or did not understand my language, or whether she considered the question, coming from a stranger, an impertinence.

When Mr. Newman repeated the question she nodded her head so vigorously that I feared she would make herself dizzy.

“Do you?” laughed the trainer heartily. “Well, there is nothing here for you to eat, so you won’t get anything.”

Then he gave me a large bell, which I handed to Ruth, who rang it noisily for a moment and then handed it to Mr. Newman as if it made her tired.

Ruth shifted round so much on the improvised chair that I told her to get up. She did so, and Mr. Newman gave her a carrot, which pleased her so well that she did not want to go out of the ring.

As I was standing talking to Mr. Newman Alice and Lizzie reached out their trunks and touched me all over with the gentleness characteristic of the blind.

I suddenly found my courage again—their apparent friendliness restored it—and I asked to be allowed to try if I could, unaided, get Alice to go with me into the ring.

With my hand resting on her ear I led her towards the ring. She stopped at the water-barrel and filled her mouth, but threw it out again without swallowing it.

She went with me well enough until she got inside of the ring and then she stopped, looking back at the others, as much as to ask why they did not come along.

I urged her to come on and she walked around the ring with me very sedately, just as if she thought she would be polite and humor me.

This little success made me ambitious for more power.

“I now want to help put the big elephants through their tricks,” I said, boldly, and everybody smiled.

No opposition was offered, however, and I felt like a conquering hero—as I never heard of a conquering heroine I can’t be supposed to imagine her sensations—as I marched with the men to the second elephant house.

I felt a little dazed when once I was inside. I suddenly realized that contact with baby elephants had dwarfed my ideas of elephants. It was a cruel shock.

It was an enormous room, with a big ring in the centre. Around it, facing the ring and with their backs to the building, were chained the largest and fiercest elephants I ever saw.

So enormous were they that everything seemed dwarfed. Even the big men that stood around the stove looked like Lilliputians, and I felt the size of a babe in arms. I did with I were until some one would carry me away.

“Miss Bly, Mr. Conklin,” my guide, Fred Hutchinson, began adding: “Miss Bly wants to ride on the head of some of the elephants.”

Mr. Conklin is a great big man, with kind eyes, and I looked imploringly at him, hoping he would answer my outspoken prayer by refusing to let me endanger my life. I would have been tempted to declare that Mr. Fred was entirely mistaken had not the artist and several other witnesses been present to back him up.

“All right. If Miss Bly has nerve enough to do it, she may try,” Mr. Conklin replied, cheerfully.

I groaned inwardly at his ready consent. I did wish he would reconsider.

But he shouted orders to his men, and they flew to unchain the elephants. I began to wonder if I could plead a sudden faintness or if it were better to frankly back down.

“Move close this way, Miss Bly,” said Mr. Conklin, drawing me aside. “The elephants go by here, and they might trample you down.”

Cheerful! And I was committed to ride on one of them! Could he not fling me off and trample me! Ugh! How I longed for courage enough to back out!

“I suppose the elephants are not used to women,” I observed to Mr. Conklin in an insinuating way I hoped he would understand.

“No; you’ll be the first woman ever to put them through their tricks,” was the reply.

“And I have been told that elephants detest women,” I added pathetically.

“It’s said so, but we never had a chance to see how ours behave with a woman about them,” was the frank answer.

A great big monument of flesh with rattling chains swept by me like a young whirlwind.

“Oh, isn’t that a frightfully big elephant?” I gasped.

“The biggest one in the United States,” Mr. Conklin said proudly. “That’s Fritz. He stands eleven feet six inches high and weighs 12,580 pounds. You’ll ride him.”

“Ride Fritz?” I repeated faintly, with a ghost of a smile.

I felt a decided chill creep up my back and stir the roots of my hair.

“It’s cold to-day?” I observed hoping to account for the shiver.

“But not so cold as it was the day before.” Mrs. Conklin answered.

I began to think I’d be colder the next day—cold and stiff!

“I’m quite superstitious,” I said to those about me, apropos of nothing. “An astrologer once warned me against big animals. He said one would cause my death, and I can’t think what he would call a big animal unless it was an elephant. It would be funny if this is the day I am to die.”

Everybody was interested enough in the astrologer’s prophecy, but they all seemed to think I was too interested in training elephants to heed warnings and they made no attempt to stop me.

The five largest elephants in America were in the ring. They were Fritz, Gypsy, Pilot, Banquet and Mandrin.

“Come with me, Miss Bly,” said Mr. Conklin, who did not even arm me with the steel-pronged pole. This time I should have been thankful for one.

I went along. I did not want to, but I had not courage enough to tell him so.

We stood before these five great mountains of flesh. I thought I could detect some gleam of curiosity in the little blinking eyes. I hoped it was nothing worse than curiosity, but I had my fears.

Mr. Conklin commanded the elephants to stand in line. Fritz headed the line.

There was a leather harness over his head. Around his body was an immense rubber hose, in which there is a chain.

From this and by his feet he is chained when outside of the ring.

Fritz has long ivory tusks. They were sawed off the other day, but they are at present four feet long. The ends are surmounted with brass knobs.

“Do you think you’ll not be afraid to sit on Fritz’s tusks?” asked Mr. Conklin.

“Oh, no; I’ll not be afraid,” I answered because I was ashamed to tell the truth.

“Catch hold of the harness as high up as you can,” Mr. Conklin instructed me, and with a little lift he hoisted me to the tusks that he had ordered Fritz to lower.

Then he commanded Fritz to lift, but before he could get six feet above the ground I overbalanced and went backwards from the tusks.

Mr. Conklin caught me quickly and I tried to apologize. After that I would have done the thing if I knew it meant instant death.

“Put me on again,” I said. “This time I will stick there.”

But I did not. As Fritz’s head was ascending somewhere up in the air I slid off again; this time front, and I hung by one hand suspended to the harness at least twelve feet up in the air.

I only had time for one thought. That was that Fritz would fling me down and crush me.

But Mr. Conklin shouted to him to lower and down came the mammoth head until Mr. Conklin was able to grasp me by the wrist and put me down upon the earth.

My heart was beating very rapidly and my left arm felt sprained, but I determined that I would do the trick.

“Put me on again,” I urged, and once more I was seated on the ivory tusks. This time I sat squarely and held firmly to the leather harness.

“Up! Up! Up!” commanded Mr. Conklin, and Fritz lifted his head until I thought I could easily touch the roof. If Fritz stands eleven feet, by throwing up his head he must have held me at a low estimate fully sixteen feet above the ground.

The other elephants stood at the same time, one with his feet resting on the back of the other.

This position was held for some time and I felt the tusks tremble under me. I could catch a gleam of the little eyes and I felt I would give a good deal to know what thoughts were within that big head against which I leaned.

Were they friendly or unfriendly? If he took the notion there was nothing on earth to prevent Fritz throwing me across the building and crushing my life out. Or if it pleased his humor he could drop me and jump on me. That is the way elephants enjoy treating those whom they hate.

And that great big trunk against which I rested, longer than my entire body, and the greater part of it thicker than my body, what if he suddenly wound it around me and crushed me to death?

I touched the trunk. I patted it in a friendly way. I thought if I could convey to him my meaning Fritz should know I felt kindly towards him.

Then came the command to lower and down went the big head until I slid off into Mr. Conklin’s uplifted arms.

No sooner was this over and I was counting on my release than Mr. Conklin commanded the giant Fritz to take a bell in his trunk and stand on his hind feet. The other elephants stood on either side, the first with their fore feet elevated on Fritz’s shoulders and the second two with their feet resting on the others’ backs.

As Fritz stood in this uncomfortable and agonizing position, Mr. Conklin told me to stand directly under Fritz and close up against his huge body.

“I don’t want to,” I said frankly. “I am afraid he’ll fall down on me and kill me.”

“Step in quickly,” said Mr. Conklin regardless of my appeal.

I obliged. If I had to die, so be it. I stood against the dark mountainous elephant while he rang a bell many feet above my head.

I dared not move. I stood there waiting for orders, when suddenly Mr. Conklin jerked me aside, and down came all the big elephants.

I tried to breathe again, but it was difficult work.

“Down again, Fritz!” commanded Mr. Conklin, and again I was hosted on Fritz’s tusks.

“Sit steady now and hold on tight.” He said. “I am going to make him carry you out of the ring. Forward march!”

Carefully the big fellow moved but with a feeling of strength beneath me that was delicious. It gave me the same feeling of power I have on board a steam yacht as it cuts through the water.

Outside the ring Fritz lowered me to the ground and went back to eat whey while the men clustered around me.

“You are very brave,” said Mr. Conklin. “You couldn’t find any other man or woman, who would go in that way among those elephants. I don’t mind telling you now that it takes lot of nerve even for trainers to stand under Fritz and that it is the most dangerous act to perform.”

I did not tell him I had not courage through it all. I merely did it because I hadn’t courage to say no.

But I want to own an elephant more now...