

The White Garden—Chapter 1

THE ELEPHANT THOUGHTS OF AMBROSE GODDARD

I HAVE ALWAYS, for as long as I can recall, identified myself with the elephant. This is not something I readily admit because in my profession friends and colleagues are only too ready to leap in with an analysis, to place a facile interpretation on this most intimate, personal and colourful of facts. You will occasionally find me throwing people off the scent (supposing they are *on* the scent) by making reference in a light-hearted way to ‘a herd of elephants’ or to the fact that the elephant never forgets.

Certain African tribes believe that after death the chief of the tribe becomes an elephant matriarch, respected and honoured, and an ally when members of the tribe are hunting elephants. As I feel myself falling asleep at night I experience myself as the elephant matriarch, appearing in silence from a swirling mist, roaming hugely among thick greenery and large, colourful flowers, and then I drift back into the mist, fade, and, with soft lilac cloud-forms drawn across my eyes, I sleep. The feeling is profound and satisfying to me, and I have all my life sought to understand it. It is an element of the beauty of sleep itself, and is perhaps partly what has brought me to study the function of sleep in the life of the mind, the health of the mind, and to apply the science of what I have learned of sleep to my patients.

It was with fear and dread that I learned, when I was in my early teens, of

John Merrick, the so-called Elephant Man. For a time my own elephant feelings had to be suppressed as I felt myself in danger of succumbing to the disease from which Merrick suffered. Consequently, my sleep was, for some months—it could have been a year, I’m not too sure—severely disturbed. Such are the fears that children suffer, unspoken. How could I, a healthy Australian boy, mad about cricket and football and science and even Shakespeare, how could I confide in anyone the reasons for my insomnia?

I recall my mother decided I had toothache—strange the solutions we find to each other’s problems—and I was always at the dentist. This was in the days before the elegant anaesthetics of recent years. Anything Mr Hudson did to me was painful in the extreme and only served to increase my nervousness and sleeplessness.

I lived in horror of the dentist, and I found it not too difficult to connect the thought of the tusks of an elephant with my own fairly respectable teeth. If I could remember dreams (and I can’t, thank god) I would probably be able to recount wonderful tales of my tusks and my trunk and the colonies of vermin that live in the folds of my magnificent dream-elephant skin.

What really matters is that my elephant *consciousness* is always present so that I know I command great power and respect in the world in which I work. It’s better than being a lion, in fact. Although I have never betrayed the depth of my elephant-being to Abigail, I know she has some inkling of my elephant thoughts because of the games we sometimes play where she rides me round the room before I turn on her and subdue her. This is very enjoyable.

On Sundays when I walk along the cliff-tops with the dogs, I adopt a wonderfully particular ambling gait. I stroll my elephant stroll across the top of the world; I look lordly down on the endless waves, crawling like furrows in a field, viridian, aquamarine, beneath me. I experience at those times a deep sense of well-being in my roaming large-animal self, and, in the solitude of the windy cliff-top, I trumpet and bellow to the sky.

The White Garden—Chapter 28

THE VIOLETTA LETTERS

A WOMAN wearing a blue dress walks barefoot along a clifftop high above the sea, which is calm and clear and green as glass. The full skirt of the dress catches at the woman’s knees and billows out behind her in the breeze.

A worn leather satchel containing her shoes and books and cigarettes hangs from her shoulder, bumps against her thigh as she makes her steady way along the cliff. She is deep in thought. It is late afternoon. The place is lonely and remote; there is nothing between this woman and the sea.

She reaches a place at which the cliff juts far out into the sea, and there, high up on the point, she stands and stares for a long time at the horizon.

Laura Field has come to the clifftop, not very far from the Goddards' seaside retreat. It is the cliff where Ambrose used to walk his dogs. Laura knows this. She sits down on the grass and from her bag she takes the small red book, *The Eagle and the Dove*, unties the ribbon, opens the book and studies it page by page. She plans, when she has looked at it, to throw it into the sea. She reads the library stamp—date on or before which this item must be returned. The black and white photograph of the medieval walls of the city of Avila; the mermaid colophon of Michael Joseph Ltd, 26 Bloomsbury Street, London, WC1. The date, 1943. A note from Vita Sackville-West: 'Owing to the impossibility of communicating with France, I have been unable to ask permission from the Carmel of Lisieux for the reproductions of illustrations from *L'Histoire d'une Eme*, but I trust that some day they may forgive me the unavoidable discourtesy.' 'Set and printed in Great Britain by Unwin Brothers Ltd, at the Gresham Press, Woking, in Bembo type, eleven point, leaded, and bound by James Burn.' A lion sits on top of an image of an open book which bears the words 'Book Production War Economy Standard'. A black and white photograph of a letter from St Teresa—an exuberant joy in the handwriting, the marks of ancient folds in the paper.

The woman comes to the end of the book, reads the poem Therese Martin wrote to Memory, and the prayer she wrote for France to offer to Joan of Arc, the Liberating Angel. Then she turns the page and finds, in very small neat handwriting, a collection of letters written on the blank section at the back. Across the top is written: 'The street I live is Loneliness; My house has no address; The letters that I write myself begin *Bonjour Tristesse*.' And following is a series of strange sad little notes, love letters, addressed to Therese in her own handwriting and signed by 'Violetta'.

The last letter is an entreaty from Violetta to Therese:

Sweetest angel of damage and death, I instruct you to burn all my letters for I fear our plans to be together will be discovered. I will write no more. I further instruct you to meet me by the swings. We will be united as we have never before been united, and together we will don

our wings and fly into the bright sun of eternity. My own heart's darling, come to me, I burn with longing.

Violetta

Laura turns the pages over and over, reading and re-reading the Violetta letters. Then, without thinking, or so it seems to her, she begins to tear the pages of the book from their binding where they had long ago been assembled and fixed by James Burn. In a long, hypnotic ritual, she slowly releases single pages into the air. They flutter seaward in little flurries. Some pages she ignites with her cigarette lighter, and, as the pages burn, she lets them go, and they are taken up by a soft wind, blown, charred paper and ash, out to sea.

When Laura holds only the cover and the ribbon, she lets them drop over the edge of the cliff. The red wings of the cover open and close in downward flight towards the sea; the scarlet ribbon, serpentine, moves slowly.