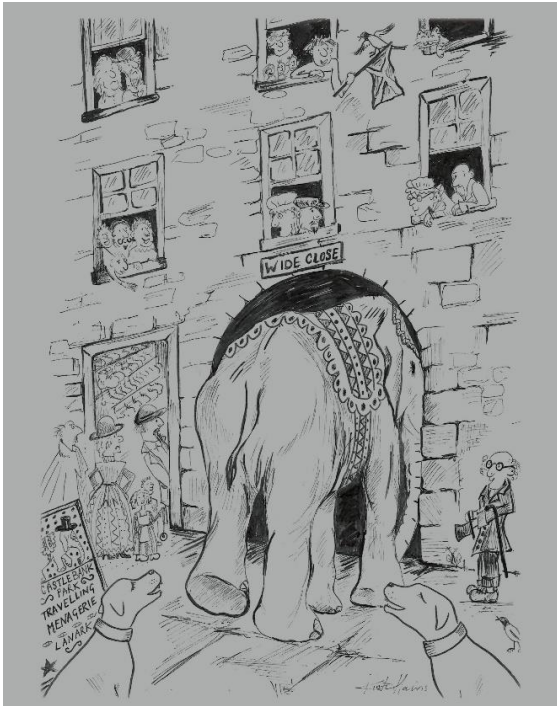


A TALE AND A TRUNK



Artist: Kirsten Harris

Once upon a time, a long while ago, well in 1895 to be exact about things, there was an elephant called Abdullah who lived in Lanark. Yes, Lanark! This is his story.

History doesn't tell us much about how he got there. Rumour had it he became a burden to a troubled travelling troupe, Gandey's Grand Circus, which visited the town every spring. Before the circus hit hard times, it used to travel using its own train. It would crisscross the country with relative ease, often venturing as far south as the north of England. With the train now gone, it was necessary to travel using horse drawn carts and wagons.

Abdullah was big and had to be transported in his own large, caged wagon because if he was allowed to walk, he would regularly stop at a burn or a grassy verge. Quite often he would charge through fencing like it was matchwood to feed on ripening crops.

Gandey decided he could no longer afford to keep paying for damaged crops and fences, or the number of horses needed to transport the elephant. There were also the expensive food bills. After all, it took quite a lot to fill a hungry elephant and Abdullah was always hungry.

From the size of his ears, one knowledgeable Lanark resident decided he was an Indian elephant although you would have imagined his name might have been a bit of a giveaway, but it was a long time ago and I suppose there would not be many Abdullahs in Lanark at that time. In fact, Abdullah was a very common Muslim name from the west of India in what is now called Pakistan. The name means servant of God.

He was a big elephant, estimated to be 9 feet 3 inches tall which is just under 3 metres for younger readers, and he weighed in at nearly 4 and a half tons. It was widely claimed that Abdullah was bigger than the famous Jumbo the Elephant who was brought to London Zoo from Paris in 1865. P T Barnum, the American circus impresario, was quick to buy Jumbo, to much protest, in 1885 and exhibit him. He claimed Jumbo was 4 metres tall and weighed 6 tons. Barnum was well known for never letting the truth get in the way of a good story. As Jumbo was only born in 1861, he would have been young, in elephant terms, and this would cast some doubt on Barnum's claim. Jumbo's fame was such that the name is now universally applied to all elephants.

Back to Abdullah. What little is known was that a raffle was held in which he was the first and only prize. The winner if that is an accurate term, was one James Kaye, a local Lanark weaver. It is highly likely that James was, as magistrates at the time often quoted when passing sentence, the subject of 'strong drink taken.' How else would someone buy a raffle ticket where the prize was an elephant. Maybe James felt the cachet of being the owner of the only elephant in the whole of Clydesdale was worthwhile. Maybe he thought he could make some money from his win. History doesn't tell us anything.

James now found himself in possession of a large elephant with nowhere to keep it, so the creature was allowed to wander the town at will. He often stopped at the various Lanark inns where he would be provided with a large bucket of ale.

It was decided, by the powers that be, that it was unacceptable to have a large elephant roaming the town and a Mr Tweedie of the Commercial Inn was 'encouraged' to offer Abdullah board and lodgings in the coaching section of his premises.

This situation continued satisfactorily for some time with no reports of a wandering elephant on record.

Inevitably, when you keep a large beast incarcerated, it is going to miss the freedom to roam it used to have. Abdullah opted for freedom to roam. He missed the burns and verges and especially the luscious fields. At four and a half tons there were very few barriers to achieving that freedom. He was a thoughtful fellow and waited until early on a Monday morning and the end of the Sabbath before shattering the locked gate which imprisoned him. He proceeded to make his way down the High Street. Maybe he thought his actions would be deemed less serious than they would have been during the Sabbath.

He stopped off at the Market Hotel where a friendly face provided a long missed bucket of beer. Suitably refreshed, and a tad tiddly, he continued his ramble, where he encountered a passing cabinet maker, perhaps

With his trunk caressing the man's neck and shoulders the new friends headed for Wide Close in search of an adventure. They passed through with some care. It was a tight squeeze for Abdullah. The close was indeed wide but it was not very tall. Their progress was witnessed by two concerned passers-by who rushed to the Commercial to inform Mr Tweedie of the escape, but the innkeeper assumed they were just looking for alcohol and sent them packing.

Eventually, Abdullah was back in custody. The cabinet maker, still filled with fraternal, and possibly other spirits, accompanied George and Abdullah back to the confines of the Commercial. Neither man nor beast were any the worse for wear. With Abdullah safely secured, the cabinet maker was commended by George on his bravery. He shrugged off the compliment but was shocked when George told him that the elephant had been trained to use his trunk to strangle old horses when the nags' final role in life was to be food for other animals. On reflection, the cabinet maker decided that maybe it had been his lucky day.

Today there is a plaque on the wall in Wide Close in Lanark that bears witness to Abdullah and his time in the town.

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