Topsy the Elephant

by Stephan Clark

The handler found Topsy as docile as a woman being fitted for a shoe. Each time he tapped his cane against her ankle, she lifted her foot and held the pose, allowing him to dip his sponge into a bucket and pull it wet across the thick ridges of her skin. It was regrettable that she hadn't shown such cooperation the previous month, when she'd lifted a man who'd fed her a lit cigarette and set him down without his life. But then she had to go, it was the third death in as many years and so she must.

The handler reminded himself how thankful he should be: the owners had first proposed a hanging, only opting against this when a group speaking on behalf of the animals suggested there was something unseemly about a three-ton beast struggling for oxygen in mid-air. Poison was considered next, with the elephant's owners advertising that Topsy would be served a lunch of carrots and potassium cyanide at a certain date and a certain time. The handler had had hopes for this — a quiet and humane death, he'd thought. But while the four-hundred milligrams of poison proved potent enough to draw a crowd to Coney Island's Luna Park, it did not prove strong enough to lay the animal low. Finally, Edison intervened, writing to offer the use of six thousand volts of alternating current electricity, word of which drew the largest crowd yet — some fifteen-hundred people, all gathered now behind the yellow ropes.

The handler dropped his sponge into the bucket and moved Topsy's foot into one of the specially designed wooden sandals lined with copper wiring. He wiped his hands on his trousers after he had the foot secured, then stepped back to see if the animal was ready. Chains fell down around her on all sides, giving the elephant the look of a grounded zeppelin.

The handler lifted the bucket and crossed the reedy sand toward Edison, mindful not to stare into the camera that had been set up at

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the inventor's side. Edison bounced on his heels, saying the animal served a purpose yet. The handler nodded and set his bucket down. He knew better than to respond, for Edison stood with his good ear away from him, waiting for the spectacle to begin.

The handler had never seen people like this, not for Topsy at least — and their numbers would only grow when Edison's film could be seen in all the Nickleodeons from here to San Francisco. He supposed it was a good thing and that Edison was right: the public needed to learn about the many horrors of alternating current electricity. “Westinghouse is lobbying Congress to wire all of America's homes with it,” Edison had written Topy's owners. “But just as certain as we will each face our own death, a customer will be killed by such a system within six months. It is better to manufacture a display of this threat than to wait to read of it in the headlines.” Direct current technology had also been mentioned in this letter, but these comments were limited to its safety (“A cat jolted by it might totter and fall,” Edison wrote, “but certainly it won't die”) and made no mention of the inventor's many related patents and claims to this technology.

The handler dropped to one knee and reached into the bucket, if only to give himself the cover needed to avert his eyes. He wrung the sponge dry and set it down in the sand, then wiped at the caustic solution, a film like salt water, that remained on his hands. The elephant groaned. A doctor had said the solution in the bucket would provide a better connection, that it would prevent the animal's skin from burning. But it didn't seem to be working — the handler could hear as much and now he could also see. Smoke rose from the elephant's feet, causing an unpleasant smell to mingle with the scent of roasted peanuts, sold at two cents a bag.

Topsy tried to escape. She lunged forward as if to charge, bringing a roar from the crowd that was equal parts fear and delight. But the pachyderm could do little more than make the people imagine a threat. She was tethered to the ground, held in place by chains and shoes. So the smoke thickened. It lifted and clouded the animal's face, and was pulled by the breeze toward the

Atlantic. Then at last Topsy fell forward on her knees, her death preceded not by a wild roar from her flailing trunk, but instead just a quiet gasp of air, like when a window is lifted in a sealed room.