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The Great Elephant Chase

written by

Gillian Cross

published by

Oxford University Press

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THE GREAT ELEPHANT CHASE

gillian cross

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First published 1992
First published in this edition 2010

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-278993-8
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain
Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

Author's Note

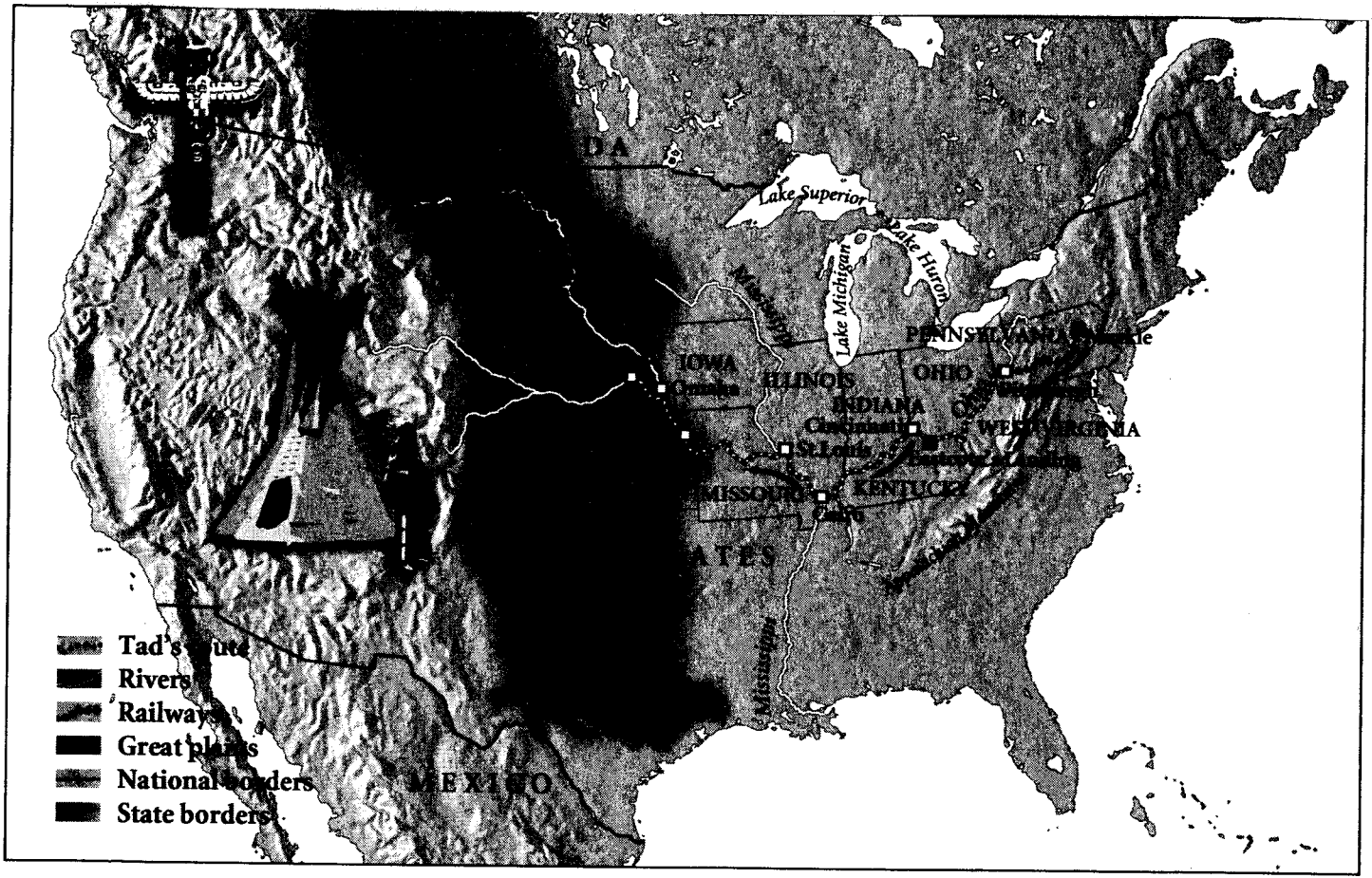
While I was writing this book, I received invaluable help from many people and organizations. I am extremely grateful to all of them and, in particular, to:

The American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Monica and Martin Arnold
Campus Martius/Ohio River Museum, Marietta, Ohio
Cass County Historical Society, Plattsmouth, Nebraska
The Cincinnati Historical Society, Cincinnati, Ohio
Harold Warp Pioneer Village, Minden, Nebraska
The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Professor M.L. Huffines
Illinois Historical Survey, Urbana, Illinois
Information Services/IRAD, Illinois State Archives, Springfield, Illinois
The Institute of Historical Research, University of London
Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska
Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island, Nebraska
Dr A.E.P. Twort

They helped me to imagine what the United States was like at the end of the nineteenth century, and I thank them all very much.

But they are not responsible for the Tamaquon River and Markle, Pennsylvania; nor for Eastcote's Landing and Albery, Nebraska. Do not look for those places on any map except the one in this book.

Gillian Cross


Lake Superior
Lake Michigan
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Missouri
IOWA
ILLINOIS
INDIANA
OHIO
KENTUCKY
St.Louis
Cincinnati
Mississippi
MEXICO
Tad's route
Rivers
Railways
Great plains
National borders
State borders

Chapter 1

It was the first of April when Tad looked out of the upstairs window.

He didn't often look. Markle was a dirty, dreary town, and he'd had fifteen years to study the view. Grimy river flats. Long lines of miners' houses crawling up Horsehead Mountain. And the Number One coal-breaker of the Tamaquon Valley and East Pennsylvania Coal Company—a hundred-foot wooden tower that crunched up coal and spewed gritty dust over the valley.

But, that morning, something caught his eye as he passed the window with Mr Levington's dirty breakfast tray. He stopped at the top of the stairs and turned back.

The mountain was crowded with miners and their wives and children, all scurrying downhill as fast as they could go, in a scatter of coloured neckerchiefs and gaudy shawls and garish bonnets. Where were they going? Tad was too far away to hear anything, but he saw them waving and laughing to each other.

He was still staring when Esther, the hired girl, came creeping out of the second back-bedroom. The one that Mr Jackson rented. When she saw Tad she jumped, and her eyes narrowed.

'What are you doing there?'

'Just looking.'

'You've got no business to be looking!'

'But there's something strange—'

'Strange?'

Esther pushed him out of the way, impatiently, and looked out of the window. When she saw the crowd, she took a step nearer, her face sharp with curiosity.

'What's happening?' Tad said, forgetting to be careful of her. 'Is it an important day?'

'None of your business,' snapped Esther, staring out of the window. 'Get down and help your aunt with the breakfast!'

'But that's your job.'

He should have known better. Esther's mouth twisted irritably. Whirling round, she gave him a sudden, spiteful push. Tad was taller than she was, but he was off guard, and holding a tray. He jerked, caught his foot in the edge of the carpet and went tumbling down the stairs in a shower of cutlery and crumbs and pieces of rose-patterned china.

Aunt Adah was just coming out of the kitchen with the boarders' breakfast. He hit her, square on, and ham and eggs and hot cakes flew up into the air and splattered down on to the Brussels carpet. More rose-patterned china fell too, crunching into hundreds of fragments.

'Thaddeus Hawkins!' Aunt Adah stepped back, out of the mess, and turned purple.

Tad scrambled to his feet. 'I didn't—'

But he was interrupted by a scornful voice. 'You know what he's like, Miss Hawkins.' Esther came down the stairs, picking her way over the broken china. 'Wasn't looking where he was going. Came to the top of the stairs and tumbled straight down.'

She was so cool that it took Tad's breath away. He opened his mouth to argue, but before he could say a word he saw a dark shape following her. Mr Jackson had come out of his room. He started to walk down towards them, with slow, heavy steps.

'Lucky not to break his neck,' he said, in the thick voice that made Tad shiver. 'Boy's not quite right in the head, if you ask me.'

His bloodshot eyes gazed down at Tad, daring him to argue, and Aunt Adah threw her hands in the air.

'Fifteen years old, and not an ounce more sense than the day he was born. As if he didn't do enough damage *that* day.'

The other four boarders had crowded into the dining-room doorway. She put on her tragic, mournful face and they tutted sympathetically and glared at Tad.

He looked down. 'Sorry, ma'am. About the carpet. And the breakfast. And the china. And—'

He could never do enough apologizing. All day long there were things he broke and muddled and spoilt, and even when he'd said sorry for all of those he wasn't square. He'd been wrong from the day he was born.

Aunt Adah folded her arms. 'Words won't mend it. You'll have to get down on your hands and knees and do out the hallway, from top to bottom.'

'Yes, ma'am,' Tad said. He had expected that.

Esther was ready for it, too. As soon as Aunt Adah finished speaking, she broke in eagerly.

'We're fresh out of ammonia, ma'am. I'll go down to the store and get some more.'

'Oh no you won't!' Aunt Adah snapped. 'I'll need you to cook the breakfast all over again. Tad will have to go to the store himself.'

'But he'll only—'

'I said Tad will go!'

There was a second of frozen silence.

Esther tossed her head and turned an ugly red, but Aunt Adah ignored her.

'You must ask for three quarts of ammonia,' she said to Tad. 'Tell him I'll pay at the end of the week, and be careful when you're carrying it back.'

Tad nodded and she bustled away, leaving the boarders to drift back to the breakfast table. Esther crossed the hall, kicking Tad's ankle as she passed.

'That's for sneaking round your aunt! You were just itching to get out and see what was going on, weren't you?'

'Of course not. Aunt Adah just—'

'Well, she won't be able to order *me* around much longer!' Esther smirked, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Mr Jackson had just reached the bottom of the stairs. He watched Esther go, with a strange, small smile, and then he turned to go into the dining-room.

As he went by, he put a big, clammy hand on Tad's arm. 'You'll never come to anything,' he said, in his thick voice.

The idea seemed to amuse him. 'You don't know how to look out for yourself. If you don't take what you want, no one's going to give it to you. Try taking lessons from Esther.'

Tad shuddered. He couldn't help himself. The pads of Mr Jackson's fingers were pressing into his elbow, like the feet of some gross reptile.

With a smile of satisfaction, Mr Jackson let go and pushed past, into the dining-room. Thankfully, Tad opened the front door and breathed in the fresh, clean air.

He had almost forgotten about the crowd on the mountain, but he remembered as soon as he stepped outside. There was a loud babble of voices coming from round the corner, in Main Street. He slipped up the alley, expecting to see a crowd.

But it was no ordinary crowd. The size of it took his breath away.

There were hundreds of people, pushing and scurrying and hurrying past. Old Mrs Bobb. The Pritchard children. Mrs Keyser. All the Rinehimers were together, chattering as they went, and Mr Garringer was coming out of the offices of the *Tamaquon Valley Mercury* with his notebook in his hand.

It seemed as though everyone was there, heading for the railroad depot. And they were all talking about the same thing. One word—whispered or giggled or shouted—came at Tad from every side.

Elephant.

The whole town was turning out, and there was only one thing in people's minds.

. . . going to see the elephant . . . heard it's a huge elephant . . . can there really be an elephant? . . .

Tad grabbed at Dolly Preston's arm.

'What's happening? Where are you going?'

Dolly looked down her nose, but she condescended to answer. 'There's a man come to the depot with an elephant. They say he's giving rides.'

'A *real* elephant?'

But Dolly had twitched her arm free and gone on. Tad looked down Main Street, towards the store where Aunt Adah had sent him. Then he looked up, towards the depot.

Elephant.

He had never seen an elephant. And what was it Mr Jackson had said? *A person has to look out for himself.*

He looked up the road again. The crowd was solid, all the way from the bank to the depot, and he hadn't got time to tag on behind. But maybe he could get round the back way.

He ducked down the alley opposite, between the Sively house and Mason's store, and began to run along the rear of the lots, towards the railroad. But even then he couldn't get close to the tracks. The crowd had flooded out of the depot and there was a line of people, eight to ten deep, all the way along.

It was impossible to see over their heads, so Tad began to work his way through, looking for spaces and wriggling into them. When a gap opened, all the way to the front, he put his shoulder into it and pushed.

His feet tangled with a walking stick. Staggering, he pitched forward, and bumped into someone in the front row. Before he could get his balance, old Mrs Bobb reached over from behind and rapped him on the head.

'Thaddeus Hawkins! You ought to be ashamed!'

'I—I—' Tad cowered away from her hand. 'Sorry, ma'am.'

'Is no use to apologize to *me*!' Mrs Bobb hit him again. 'You want that people think we are savages in Markle? Barbarians, who knock over cripples? Hey?'

Tad blinked, looked round—and saw the girl he had bumped into.

She was thirteen or fourteen, but very small, with a narrow face and pale, gleaming ringlets. Everything about her was neat and well-made, from her blue cloth dress to her shining buttoned boots.

Except for the ugly wooden crutches that held her up.

She had been knocked off balance, and the young woman next to her, who seemed barely old enough to be her mother, was hauling her back on to her feet.

Mrs Bobb tutted loudly and people began to stare at Tad.

'It is that nephew of Adah Hawkins's,' Mrs Rinehimer said. 'He pushes a cripple out of the way.'

Mr Garringer shook his head. 'That boy! Always in some kind of trouble!'

Tad could hardly speak for embarrassment. 'I'm sorry,' he muttered gruffly. 'Did I hurt you?'

The mother frowned, but the girl looked up at Tad with a sweet, angelic smile. Almost too perfect to be true.

'Don't fret. It didn't hurt at all. I can't feel much.'

Mrs Rinehimer sighed sympathetically and Tad shuffled his feet, feeling large and clumsy and uncouth. The girl was smiling at him kindly enough, but she was the only one.

Then, suddenly, everything changed, with a great gasp of breath that started at the depot and came sighing down the tracks. The whole crowd turned to look right, and people began pushing and craning their necks. Tad turned too, but for a moment all he could make out was a forest of heads.

And then he saw the elephant.

It came ambling along the front of the crowd, between the main track and the siding. Its huge feet moved delicately over the rough stones and, from high on its neck, a miner waved a nervous hand.

'Only twenty cents for an unforgettable experience!' said a voice like a trumpet. 'Take a ride on the elephant and feel, for yourself, man's domination of the greatest creature on earth!'

The elephant had almost reached Tad before he saw who was shouting. It was a short, flamboyant figure in a tall hat and a jacket lined with scarlet silk. He strode ahead, waving one arm dramatically and leading the elephant on a short length of frayed rope.

The elephant.

It passed close to Tad, not five paces away. Its side was like a wall of rock, grooved with a thousand interwoven wrinkles. A few hairs sprouted from the rock, like lichens on an ancient crag, and the ripe, grassy smell of elephant flesh filled the air.

Tad was mesmerized. If Mrs Bobb had hit him with a mallet, he wouldn't have noticed. If the girl with the crutches had burst into song, he wouldn't have heard. He couldn't take his eyes from the great, slow body of the elephant.

The elephant stopped, twenty yards further up the line, to

let the miner dismount. As it turned back towards Tad, he looked up into its face, at the small, remote eye, almost hidden in a cocoon of wrinkles.

'. . . most wondrously loyal and intelligent creatures!' the man in the tall hat bellowed, almost in Tad's ear. 'Capable of understanding a vast range of commands . . . '

Tad's eyes travelled over the humped head and down the long line of the trunk, to the massive legs. The nearest foot was thicker than his whole body, with gnarled yellow toenails the size of his fist.

The great foot took one more step, and the man in the tall hat raised his voice, suddenly and sharply.

'But still I have not revealed the most amazing fact about Khush—'

He paused, as though to gather everyone's attention. It was a dramatic silence, and even Tad took his eyes off the elephant and looked round, for a second.

And in that second, the elephant moved. The long, grey trunk snaked down—so close to Tad that it brushed his cheek—and looped itself round the girl with the crutches. Before anyone could react, it lifted her high into the air.