

# **Useless Augustus Good for Nothing**



by

**D. R. Summers**

Copyright © D. R. Summers 2001

D. R. Summers has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

Produced by bamboo associates

All characters and events in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the author, nor may it be circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

ISBN-13: 978-1532935589

## A PURPOSE

Today is a day of great joy. I have a new challenge: a task, a job, a purpose! Useless Augustus Good for Nothing, a being of exceptional talent, will have the privilege to offer his unique brand of service to delight and amaze even the most discerning of clients.

Do not, I beg you, be disconcerted by my name. I appreciate that it is neither auspicious nor particularly flattering, but it is mine and mine alone. How I became known by such a complex title is one of many fine stories I often compel myself to recall. All I require is a receptive audience. I will recount its origin in time...

*Patientia est virtus* - patience is a virtue.

I rumble into the blazing sunshine but no shadow do I cast. It is midday. The sky, which only an hour before was plagued by a mischievous haze, is pure sapphire.

There now, poetic prose! Intrigue upon intrigue, I'm sure you'll agree.

To be honest I am rather anxious, for as yet I have no inkling of what my mission might be. I shouldn't care really, for it's so long since I've been given the chance to excel that, unless my owner intends to have me stuffed and mounted, just about anything will do. However something novel, absorbing or, dare I hope, exciting would be a real treat...

Oh, and it just may be that my lucky number has popped right up. Instead of being herded into my boring old holding pen, which I hate; instead of then waiting hours only to be given some banal task or other, I am being carefully nudged in the direction of the Big Shed.

Now, the Big Shed is so called because it is a shed and it is big. That said; the most important point is that only buses, cars... And elephants selected for the most important of engagements are made ready there. Never while in the service of my current owner, Mr Tripathi, have I ever entered this hallowed place.

I've arrived and it is truly a marvel! The great wooden doors rumble apart by themselves accompanied by a cacophony of rattling chains and petrol motors. Inside it's as if a sun has exploded – the light is so bright. For many seconds I feel blinded, but gradually image after image spiral into focus. Everywhere there are machines, spare parts, fabrics and tools: hundreds of tools. Heaven's workshop, here in our very own back street of Mumbai<sup>1</sup>. Astonishing!

'Augustus, I want you to be a very good fellow: best behaviour and no silliness.'

Mr Tripathi has materialised apparently from thin air. He is waving his finger at me playfully but his expression is stern.

'I have a very important job,' he continues, 'and you are the only one I can trust to handle it. Don't be letting me down, now.'

I imagine myself shrugging at the very idea but in practice nod my head and trumpet loudly.

Mr Tripathi smiles. We understand each other.

The pear-shaped man, as I affectionately call him, is looking a little frail these days. We have been together for five years: in fact from the exact date of his 50th birthday. For the first

---

<sup>1</sup> formally Bombay

three years I noticed no change in either his appearance or behaviour. He is somewhat short in stature: a man quick to smile, even quicker to clinch a lucrative deal, and of course he is shaped like a pear. During our fourth year together, however, his strikingly curly black hair began to grey and thin. Within months his complexion had lost its lustre, his eyes had retreated into their sockets and, most disturbing of all, the smile I mentioned suffered in some indefatigable way. It was as if a shadow had befallen him and refused to fade. Of course he is ill, but what ails him is a secret he guards as closely as his money. He is a bachelor, has no family I have ever seen and, I fear, few close friends. Once, at the conclusion of a particularly successful business venture where much expensive malt whisky was consumed, I heard him joke to a client's wife.

'Don't worry yourself about me, good lady. I have my work and my God. What more can a humble soul require?'

I was glad to hear this. Mr Tripathi's work includes me *ergo* I am an important part of his life... Given these circumstances, however, I feel no compunction in not heeding irrational statements of denial *vis-à-vis* his poor health. I *shall* worry...

I am wrenched abruptly from my reminiscing by a sweeping broom jabbed sharply against my underside. This is *not* a good sign. Four casual labourers with whom I'm not familiar have been hired to attend me. Their self-appointed leader railroads me toward the rear of the shed and into an area clearly set aside for cleaning vehicles. This is a more promising sign. A full 'wash and brush up' can mean only three things: rich clients, no hard labour and, my number one favourite, chocolate.

The cleaning process is harsh and uncomfortable. The hired help is clearly more suited to cleaning burnt saucepans than skilfully bathing an elephant...

But then I am rescued! Mr Tripathi has returned, is startled by the scene of my torture and is on the rampage. All work stops while much shouting and waving of arms takes place. He is very displeased, as his instructions on how to treat me have been woefully ignored.

The leader yells insults and uses foul language.

Oh dear, what a terrible mistake.

Mr Tripathi's sunken eyes suddenly catapult forward, his mouth trembles. He grabs a sweeping brush from the man nearest him.

'Get out, weasel,' he commands. 'Filthy mouth, dung beetle. Be gone.'

I know what will happen next. I've witnessed it on other occasions when employees have chosen to be uncivil...

You should know that Mr Tripathi very much enjoys ninja and kung fu films. And it is in ninja mode that he is tapping, pushing and thrusting the miscreant out into the street. For the record, the man is unceremoniously fired and his cohorts severely berated. After a few moments of calm, however, a new accord is reached. Mr Tripathi removes his jacket and repeats the demonstration he must have given earlier. At the conclusion the trio nod their understanding then, with their 'new' boss taking the lead it's time to wash the elephant – again.

My 'bath' was most enjoyable and, as I dry off, I've been given fresh hay, fruit and vegetables to eat and water with a little bergamot to drink.

While happily munching away I hear the sound of cartwheels rattling to a halt just outside. Another pleasant surprise. It is Mrs Gupta, Mr Tripathi's preferred associate when it comes to the supply of exotic fabrics and furnishings. Today she is hauling a significant load wrapped in a range of coloured tarpaulins. What can it be?

All available hands are mustered to manoeuvre the cart into a predetermined position then peel away the coverings.

Amazing! It is the only word to describe the sight that captivates the assembly of both man and beast. Mrs Gupta is beside herself with glee.

‘What do you think?’ she bubbles. ‘Is it not perfectly magnificent?’

Of that there can be no doubt, for in all my years I have never seen the like. A howdah: one fit for an emperor. An artefact of significant age, the saddle is constructed in two sections. At the rear is a seat covered by a domed pavilion designed to comprehensively protect the occupants from the harsh rays of the sun. Forward of this position, a cantilevered extension provides effective shade for the mahout<sup>2</sup>. The entire creation is clothed in scarlet velvet adorned with gold sequins, ornaments and long flowing tassels. Each of the many fastenings is fashioned from the finest leather wrapped in cashmere. It is a true work of art.

For me this is a momentous occasion. Never have I been the bearer of such an exquisite piece. Before today I’ve supported only the simplest of howdah. In fact I’ve considered myself lucky to have carried nothing grander than a few planks of wood tied together or even an old park bench. It is now obvious that I am destined to transport a person of extraordinary wealth and standing. Long ago such a howdah could only have belonged to a maharaja<sup>3</sup> or maharani<sup>4</sup>, but today..?

Hmm, there it is again... My favourite word... Maharani. What a *wonderful* combination of letters. Every time I hear it I consider it to be more of a natural phenomenon than a mere word. As the phonetics roll through my mind they conjure up the image of a lilting breeze teasing the tree tops, the dawn sky fragmented by the first rays of sunlight, a mighty river crashing into the sea... Maharani – the sound of ecstasy...

Eh-hum; my apologies... Just a little distracted there for a moment!

One hour and 10 minutes is my estimate of the time taken to hoist the elaborate platform onto my back and secure it in position. Now Mrs Gupta is signalling Mr Tripathi to bid me kneel so that the remainder of my outfit can be installed. Like my owner, Mrs Gupta is aware that kneeling is not an easy manoeuvre for me these days. I know, therefore, that she does not make her request lightly. But the good lady is a perfectionist and she will not sleep tonight unless it is her hand that completes my dress.

It is very late and everyone has gone. Time for this old elephant to rest awhile. It was Mr Tripathi’s last gesture to me before guiding Mrs Gupta and her cart out of the Big Shed. Since I am regaled in splendour I cannot afford to become too drowsy. Should I suffer even a moment’s lapse in concentration and, God forbid, accidentally lie down, the consequences for the howdah would be dire. I am, however, not especially worried, for I would not have been left this way unless the intention was to move me within a fairly short time.

So I am alone with a single lantern to see by and three large moths determined to render themselves unconscious by head-butting its filament. What shall I think about, I wonder? I know, I’ll recall, once again, the origins of my names and the reason why I judge it necessary to do so. On this occasion the ‘receptive’ audience will have to be my three entertaining dive bombers. I only hope they can hear my thoughts above all the buzzing and thudding.

‘Useless’ was the name given to me by my first owner, Mr Aaron Schwartz. In truth this gentleman was not so much my owner but rather an overlord, so to speak. You see Mr Schwartz was the general manager of a rather splendid hotel on the northern outskirts of Agra. I was taken there as a baby, from where I do not know, purportedly as an ‘attraction’. At my debut I was led by a handler into an open air courtyard adjacent to the hotel’s premier restaurant, there to be joined by a young, fresh-faced boy dressed in a gaudy and completely

---

<sup>2</sup> elephant rider and carer

<sup>3</sup> Sanskrit title for great ruler or king

<sup>4</sup> female equivalent for greater ruler or wife of maharaja

inauthentic Indian ‘royal’ costume. After much prodding and poking I realised that I was supposed to walk around in a tight circle, occasionally waving my trunk at any interested onlookers. My partner in this spectacle had a much easier role. He smiled expansively, bowed from time to time and, when requested by members of the audience, posed alongside me for photographs.

*Every day except Thursday, 9:30- 9:45 am and 5:45- 6 pm, see a live bull elephant and his handsome royal master. Enjoy this unique experience before dining in our world-class five-star restaurant.*

Such was the overblown and wholly inaccurate billing our double act boasted in the hotel brochure.

For my part I didn’t mind at all. Once I got the hang of things I enjoyed being a performer and, if I may make so bold, being the star of the show. Excited children dared each other to touch my ears, ladies either feigned concern or smiled benevolently, and the gentleman did as you might expect – donned a sober expression and stood firm.

For about a year our daily appearances took place without incident. Then disaster struck. One evening a special party immediately before dinner caused the courtyard to be overflowing with guests. Just before our performance was scheduled to begin a great argument flared between my handler and Mr Schwartz. My handler complained that the courtyard was too crowded with no room for me to move about safely. Mr Schwartz, however, would not be swayed. Important guests had brought their children along specifically to see a baby elephant and that was what they’d get. My handler protested further but was fired on the spot. Then to the surprise and horror of my prince, he was appointed replacement and we were shoed out into the courtyard. The scene was chaotic. Barely had we travelled 10 paces when a small boy, unseen by his parents, was knocked sideways, tripping and falling at my feet. A woman, misinterpreting the incident, began screaming. Startled guests responded by shuffling in all directions, a waiter dropped a tray of glasses – pandemonium.

An enquiry concluded that it was all my fault. Even my prince blamed me. I was pronounced ‘useless’ and barred from the show. Three months later I was sold, but not before a group of mean hotel employees picked up on my recently-assigned title and taunted me with it every chance they got. Up to then I’d never been referred to by any other name than ‘the elephant’. I was young, distressed, confused, and eventually convinced myself that the ‘incident’, as it became known, *was* indeed entirely my fault. Useless, therefore, was not an unreasonable description for me and thus was more than fitting as a title.

The origins of my other names are far less elaborate. After only two weeks in his service, Mr Tripathi gave me my middle name, Augustus. On a hot, humid afternoon he paid a visit to my stables and, after inspecting my overall condition, retrieved a bag of apples from his satchel.

‘You *are* a fine fellow,’ he said softly. ‘I know you to be very special. In fact I know you to be extraordinary. You and I were alone in this world, but now we have each other. Let us eat apples together and be the best of chums.’

I remember nodding my head, I remember Mr Tripathi laughing, and I remember his parting declaration.

‘My best friend must have the finest of names. Let me see now... Ah yes, today is August 1st. It is a sign. With your kind permission I name you after the great Roman emperor, Augustus.’

I now have only my surname to explain. However, I have a confession to make. I have completely forgotten! I could blame the excitement, the heat, or too much hay for dinner, but that would be a disservice to all three. I have arrived at a clutch of sensitive topics I am reluctant to address. Naturally those lucky enough to have picked up on my transmissions may have a question or two about the odd situation they find themselves in, not the least of

which probably runs along the lines, 'How is it I can hear an elephant's thoughts? Will he start talking?'

Please allow me to tackle this somewhat thorny issue a little later. For the moment I have just enough courage to continue with my confession.

My best guess is that I'm now about 60 years old. Before Mr Tripathi bought me I was part of a travelling circus based near Jaipur then later Ahmedabad. In fact we rarely ventured far from either location, as the company was of only modest size and invariably suffered financial distress. For close to 10 years I performed nightly alongside a grouchy old lion, two irritating orang-utans, a perfectly normal parrot and a lopsided donkey. My long-term employment hinged on the fact that I could regularly learn new and often adventurous tricks. I got on famously with most of the human performers, and the trust which developed between us helped generate a significant repertoire of popular, eye-catching stunts. Then, suddenly and without warning, life began reclaiming that which it had given. I made mistakes, lost my timing and finally almost caused an accident.

Our circus master wasn't the friendliest of sorts but, to his credit, he always looked after his animals. At great expense he summoned a vet to determine what was wrong. Had I suffered an undetected injury of some sort? No, I had not.

'This elephant's too old for the circus,' the young vet pronounced with conviction. 'He may seem healthy enough but I suspect he's suffering from early-stage dementia of some kind. He needs to be retired, now.'

My reaction to this shocking revelation was first denial, then more denial, but finally reluctant resignation. Suffice it to say, from that day on I began to worry. Worry has since led to anxiety, and anxiety, in turn, has led to obsession.

So now you know my terrible fear. Unless I constantly recall my treasured memories and experiences, one day I will forget them all – completely...

Now then, where was I? Oh yes, I'd forgotten the source of my last name. No matter. I suppose if I have to forget certain memories, better that the unpleasant ones go first...

I'm feeling morose now. How annoying. What I need is—

Exactly that! The doors of the Big Shed are on the move and here is Mr Tripathi, Mrs Gupta and the elephant 'cleansing' team – my three musketeers.

I rouse in anticipation of an imminent departure and trumpet thrice as a signal that I am alert and ready for anything.

Mr Tripathi hastens to my front and beckons me to draw closer. I bow my head.

'Augustus, old friend, the hour is late but we must bide a little while longer. Mrs Gupta needs me to make a few final adjustments then we will be on our way.'

I give a moderate snort to indicate my understanding.

'Good fellow,' Mr Tripathi strokes my trunk. 'It will still be dark when we leave, but no need to fret. I shall accompany you at all times. At dawn our clients will arrive to witness splendour, true splendour.'

Mr Tripathi is clearly beside himself with excitement, therefore so too am I. Without further instruction I pace over to a balcony especially constructed to allow men to work on high sided vehicles. The instant I'm in position Mrs Gupta hurries Mr Tripathi up the staircase and begins issuing detailed instructions.

This type of fussing and fidgeting with straps, belts, buckles and hooks usually gives me a headache. Lucky for me, though, Mr Tripathi has anticipated my likely distress and has switched on a large television screen suspended from the ceiling. These machines are such wonders! Two smaller sets are installed in my stables: one intended for 'animal pacification', the other for human education. As a responsible employer Mr Tripathi believes it to be his duty to keep his employees both happy and mentally stimulated. As a rule only informative and cultural broadcasts are allowed, but clear definitions have never really been established,

thus 'acceptable' programming is extensive. I have gained much of my knowledge about the human race and the world we all inhabit from this medium. Many themes absorb my mind but I particularly enjoy craft programmes, and I am confident that, if possessed of hands, I could build a very presentable bathroom cabinet or even sew an American quilt with some skill. Sadly it is from this source that I have also learnt about medical matters...

Time usually passes quickly when I am watching 'the tube', especially if one of my favourite programmes is on. This night, however, it is impossible for me to settle. I freely admit to a mounting sense of anticipation over our departure, but there is a more disturbing factor. The relaxing classical music recital I was watching only moments ago has been replaced by a horror movie. Yuck! Zombies in search of brains! Why otherwise intelligent humans favour this kind of nonsense is a mystery to me... What must un-cooked brains taste like, I wonder?

Thankfully I have no more time to dwell on such a morbid topic. Mr Tripathi is climbing down from the balcony and, judging by Mrs Gupta's smiling face, all preparations have been completed satisfactorily.

I receive many admiring glances from my dressers. Indeed I must appear as spectacular as Mr Tripathi promised. Time for one last bucket of bergamot water, a bar of chocolate and we'll be on our way.

The early morning air feels cold after the lingering warmth of the Big Shed. Like my usual stables, electric cooling fans battle the daily heat, but even after sunset the temperature is reluctant to concede any of its gains. This is a strange experience for me. I have rarely been moved during the night and never to meet a client at dawn. Although I generally have a good sense of direction it is severely impaired in the dark and all but lost in the midst of a large city. Fortunately my entourage is well organised. Mr Tripathi has taken point with Mrs Gupta. Behind them two musketeers, carrying large lanterns, march along just ahead of me, on either side of the road. Bringing up the rear, the third and least fortunate musketeer pushes a wheelbarrow with a bicycle lamp secured to each handle. Mr Tripathi is a man of strong social conscience...

As we slowly pace along I can feel depression crowding in on me. Sheltered and protected as I am in Mr Tripathi's care, it is easy to forget the great challenges that face my country. Out in the open I am reminded of them at every turn. Poverty, discrimination, disease, terrorism: the list is no different to anywhere else, but in India it is the sheer scale of the problems that overwhelms me. The streets are lined with sleeping souls: many destitute; the broken, the sick and the dying. I shudder to think how many, on this November night, will not see another day. Nevertheless it is as Mr Tripathi sometimes says.

*Life is a traveller who may not rest, and The road leads forward and there is no turning back.*

I believe they bring him a modicum of comfort in this troubled world, and for that I am grateful.

Two more right turns and we enter a street I suspect I have visited before. Dawn is breaking and, as the sun embraces the earth, I think I know where we are headed. Even so, Mr Tripathi has gone to extraordinary lengths not to divulge any aspect of my task. This has never happened before. He always talks to me, explaining all that is expected, just as if I were human. Perhaps he has chosen this route to fool me into incorrectly guessing our destination. It is possible. Sometimes he is a *very* naughty man.

Well, I *am* surprised. My deduction was correct after all. We have arrived at the hotel owned by Mrs Gupta's brother, Mr Mehta. This modest establishment is just across the way from Bhika Behram well, set at the southern end of Cross Maiden. The well is unusual in that it contains fresh water, and the surrounding area has, over the years, proved a popular festival

site. I've visited this location twice before: only two weeks apart some three years ago. On both occasions I was employed to entertain a family of Japanese tourists by performing one or two tricks and posing for photographs. These events could not have been cheap. The cost alone of policing my arrival and keeping unwanted onlookers away must have been staggering. Allowing for my dicky memory, I do believe I enjoyed myself. The children, although overexcited, were well behaved and desisted from feeding me unsuitable foods. I remember one little chap dropped his ice cream on my foot but insisted on cleaning it off despite considerable resistance from his parents.

I am perplexed. Why am I dressed up like a royal elephant of the British Raj? And who in their right mind wants to take photographs of me at dawn?

The answer is – phone a friend! (Sorry, just a little elephant humour there!)

Wait a minute! That's it – I'm to star in the movies. How could I have misinterpreted the signs? All the secrecy, Mr Tripathi's elaborate preparations and Mrs Gupta's painstaking attention to detail.

*I shall carry a rescued Maharani across the Thar Desert, suffering many hardships along the way. But not to meet a fat, evil Maharaja. Oh no! To rendezvous instead with her handsome Bollywood prince who awaits her by the glistening ocean...*

Oh dear, Mr Tripathi is shaking his head. I wonder, is that an Indian 'yes' or a Western 'no'? The pear-shaped man knows me too well. He can see that I'm becoming agitated. I cannot pretend otherwise. I must calm down. Still, to think – my very own movie! I shall remain hopeful.

I don't know the exact time, but it's obvious that our client is late. Mr Tripathi has already used his mobile phone five times and apologised to Mrs Gupta no less than 11. The surrounding buildings are now bathed in a pleasing burnt yellow glow: a sign that, if we are forced to wait much longer, the sleeping throngs will rise. Then where will we be?

Suddenly Mr Tripathi thrusts his arms towards the heavens as two pristine executive limousines glide to a halt directly in front of the hotel. They arrive without sound like unearthly phantoms drawn from the ocean's depths - they are definitely German! For several moments nothing stirs: only the sunlight playing on their jet black exteriors betrays their presence. A moment of great anticipation grips our assembly. Mr Tripathi unwisely stops breathing. And so it begins.

The driver's door of the lead limousine opens abruptly and a man, immaculately dressed in a dark grey suit, steps out. It is Colossus! A veritable giant, he could storm a lion's den and emerge unscathed. He inhales deeply, purposefully scrutinises his surroundings then removes his dark glasses.

The setting is secure.

Strangely, he does not move to attend as the back door opens, and, in the blink of an eye, he is joined by a single passenger. Magic!

A Female? Yes, of that I am certain. She is tall with short black spikey hair and is worryingly thin. Of indeterminate age, she sports a dark red tailored jacket, tight leather pants and stiletto heeled, knee-high, black suede boots. This lady will *not* be joining our party – of that I am certain.

Mr Tripathi approaches the new arrivals, his naturally affable manner visibly overflowing, but he is met with deplorable indifference! The woman focuses on her mobile phone – or ear suppository, as I regard such contraptions – and barks orders at invisible minions. Mr Tripathi may as well be on Mars.

Circumstances, I fear, are deteriorating rapidly. Mrs Gupta is so annoyed that if her emotions were flammable our rude client would be a mound of ash. The three musketeers are grinning like hyenas. They have no idea what is going on. And Colossus? Well, if I were forced to guess, he's about to destroy the city and most of the surrounding countryside.



My heart, however, is with the pear-shaped man. He is completely at a loss for words, a state hitherto unknown to me.

God, it seems to me, is a very tricky fellow. I do not understand his ways. But, there again, neither do six billion humans. Throughout history many clever men and women have proposed theories about our world and God then insisted that they alone were right. With the greatest respect, the ideas of scientists and philosophers do not impress me. For example, 'the world is flat', 'the Titanic cannot sink', 'man will never fly', and Mrs Gupta couldn't possibly lose 10 pounds before her daughter's wedding! Each prediction was the product of brilliant minds and each one was completely wrong. It is with this knowledge that I can predict with certainty that when it comes to human affairs the Almighty can be downright mischievous.

Oh, and just in case you're wondering, I prefer the Augustus 'Imperimetric' system of measurement. It amuses me, and to be honest I don't have the heart to let the past slip away completely. So, for 'personal' measurements, think imperial; for anything else, think metric.

Sometimes, as the Americans might say, being right sucks! My eye is distracted by a figure riding a bicycle, heading towards the limousines. His progress is erratic in a disturbingly familiar way. It is none other than Mr Bhattacharya, the devil's own mahout. Surely things can't get any worse! He waves to attract Mr Tripathi's attention. He reaches the back of the second vehicle... Then, in an instant, he is gone. A door flung open has sent him careering out of control while a being not of this world stumbles onto the pavement, oblivious to the calamity it has caused.

It is the oddest of sights. A girl, perhaps in her early teens, dressed completely in black, she is 'punctuated' with chains, pins, belts and studs. Apparently a victim of indiscriminate body piercing, tattoos and excessive black make up, she looks like a horror movie escapee.

Without question the daughter, all eyes turn to her. She moves without clear purpose in my general direction, Mr Bhattacharya's plight ignored by all. Suddenly she stops dead in her tracks, swivels round and yells.

'This one's too old. I told you I want a new one.'

Oh, perfect!