

ELEPHANT ON
THE MOON

based on a true story



HELEN STRAHINICH

**STORY +
STUDY GUIDE**

The Elephant on the Moon



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P.O. Box

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One sleepy afternoon in 1650. . .

Astronomer Sir Paul Neile was snoring in his armchair. His cat Galileo was snoring on the floor.

Galileo used to be the best “mouser” in London. For years, he had kept Sir Paul’s house free of mice. But Galileo was getting old.

When a little mouse entered the room, Galileo didn’t move. The old cat didn’t even open his eyes.

The mouse climbed up Sir Paul’s armchair. It slipped onto his desk. It rattled Sir Paul’s papers. It jumped onto Sir Paul’s lunch dish. And then . . . it bumped into Sir Paul’s telescope.

Galileo opened his eyes and saw the mouse. The old cat felt rested after a long nap. In fact, he felt like a young mouser again.

Galileo pounced onto the desk. The mouse squealed. The old cat licked his chops.

And then . . . the tiny mouse jumped onto Sir Paul’s telescope — and disappeared.

The mouse had found a small opening in the bottom of the telescope. It was now hiding inside.

Galileo screeched. He batted the telescope with his paws.

The noise woke up Sir Paul. The Astronomer saw Galileo hitting his telescope. “Stop, you crazy old cat,” he howled.

The astronomer picked up Galileo. He plopped him onto the floor.

Galileo didn't understand. Why wouldn't his master let him get that mouse? He jumped back onto the desk again.

This time, Sir Paul threw Galileo out of the room and shut the door.

Sir Paul yawned and stretched. His wife and son were out of town. He didn't have to dress for dinner. He could nap a little longer.

But the sun had set. The night sky was clear. It was warm outdoors. Better yet, there was a full moon. He might as well get to work.

Sir Paul set up his telescope on the balcony off his study. He aimed the telescope at the moon. He looked through the eye lens, and then . . .

"My heavens!" he cried.

Sir Paul couldn't believe his eyes. He took a deep breath and looked again.

It was still there: An elephant.

An elephant was traveling through a valley of the moon. It was as clear as the freckle on the end of Sir Paul's nose.

The astronomer trembled with delight. He'd always dreamed of making an important discovery. And now he had.

Sir Paul spent the night watching the elephant on the moon. He was amazed by its speed. Stranger still, this elephant had fur.

At dawn, Sir Paul was too excited to sleep. He spent the morning writing a paper.

England's greatest scientists would be meeting in another week, right here in London. Sir Paul was one of the greatest. He would present his paper to the Royal Society. At that time, he would announce his discovery of an elephant on the moon.

Sir Paul finished a draft of his paper. Now he was ready for breakfast. He stood and walked toward the hallway. He opened the door.

Galileo had been waiting by that door all night. The cat wanted to get that mouse. He ran inside Sir Paul's study. He jumped onto Sir Paul's desk and charged Sir Paul's telescope.

Sir Paul picked up the cat. He carried Galileo downstairs. He threw the old cat outside and closed the door.

A week later, Sir Paul presented his paper to the Royal Society. His discovery was received with cheers.

Word spread from scientist to scientist and from country to country. Soon Europe was buzzing with the news: An elephant had been spotted on the moon.

By the time Sir Paul's wife returned home, his name was known far and wide.

"I heard about your discovery at my sister's house," his wife said. "I'm so proud of you."

Sir Paul grinned, as he led his wife and son from their carriage.

"Is Papa famous?" his son William asked.

“Very famous,” his mother replied.

“Can I see the elephant on the moon?” the boy asked.

“Tonight,” Sir Paul promised. “There will be a full moon. I’ve planned a dinner in honor of your return. After we eat, we will all view the elephant.”

When they reached the front door, Galileo tried to slip in. Sir Paul grabbed the cat. “Don’t let that cat in the house,” Sir Paul said.

“Why not?” William asked.

“He keeps batting my telescope,” Sir Paul said.

William was fond of Galileo. He hadn’t seen his cat for weeks. He was about to cry.

So, of course, Sir Paul relented. Galileo entered the house again.

That evening carriages crowded the front drive of Sir Paul’s home. Excitement was in the air as the guests sat down to eat.

After dinner, Sir Paul led everyone to his study. William followed the guests. And Galileo followed the boy. They all crowded onto the balcony.

Sir Paul looked through the eye lens. Yes, the elephant was still there, grazing on the moon.

“You first, my dear,” he said, bowing to his wife.

She peeked and cried, “Incredible!”

Each guest followed with *oohs* and *ahs* of amazement. Each one shook Sir Paul's hand. Each one declared that the astronomer had made a miraculous discovery. Sir Paul was a great man.

Finally, William took his turn. He stood on tiptoes and looked through the eye lens. He didn't say a word.

"Do you see the elephant?" Sir Paul asked.

William shook his head: no.

Sir Paul checked the eye lens. "It's there, clear as day," he said.

William looked again.

"Do you see it now?" his father asked.

"I see something, Papa," the boy answered.

"And . . . ?" Sir Paul asked.

"And it's not an elephant, Papa."

Sir Paul checked again. "Of course, it is."

"No, Papa, it's not."

Sir Paul's face turned red. Why was his son ruining his night? It was past the child's bedtime.

"Can I see your telescope, Papa?" William asked.

Sir Paul sighed and took the telescope off the stand. He held it for his son. William looked through the bottom of the telescope.

"You will never see the elephant looking from that end," Sir Paul said.

The guests chuckled.

William gently twisted the bottom of the telescope. A furry little head popped out.

“A mouse!” the guests shrieked.

The little mouse jumped to the floor.

Galileo raced after it.

The mouse scurried around shoes. It slipped under long skirts.

Hats went flying. A gentleman threw a cane. Guests scrambled around the balcony.

A lady screamed and fell to the floor. The mouse scampered over her.

“There it goes,” William cried.

The mouse ran out the door.

Galileo chased it into Sir Neile’s study. But the little mouse was too fast for the old cat. It slipped into an opening in the wall and disappeared.

After that night, Galileo never chased the mouse again. The old cat spent his days napping in the astronomer’s study. William often kept Galileo company while reading his science books.

Poor Sir Paul Neile! He hoped everyone would forget about his discovery. But the story of the elephant on the moon is remembered to this day.

Story Questions

(Possible answers are in parentheses.)

1. When does the story take place?
(It takes place in 1650)
2. What is a "mouser"?
(A "mouser" is a cat that is good at catching mice.)
3. Why does Galileo have trouble catching the mouse?
(Galileo is old.)
4. Where does the mouse hide?
(It hides in Sir Neile's telescope.)
5. Why is Sir Neile alone?
(His wife and son are away.)
6. What does Sir Neile think he sees when he looks through the telescope?
(He thinks he sees an elephant on the moon.)
7. Why does Sir Neile mistake the mouse for an elephant.
(He thinks the elephant is far away on the moon.)
8. Why does Galileo keep batting the telescope?
(Galileo wants to get the mouse hiding there.)
9. How do Sir Neile's dinner guests react to the elephant on the moon.
(They are all amazed.)
10. Who discovers that the elephant is really a mouse?
(William makes this discovery.)
11. What words best describe William?
(William is smart and observant.)
12. What does the story show about astronomer's telescopes in 1650.
(In 1650, telescopes were small and poorly made)

Activities for Students

1. Make a poster about the moon.
2. Research the Hubble or Webb Telescope.
3. Read a book and write a report on one of the following:
 - a. Galileo,
 - b. moon explorations,
 - c. astronauts.