



The Jules VERNE

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THE SULTAN'S ELEPHANT

Central Square, Canton: 1 March 1912

-01 - The visit of the sultan of the Indies on his time-travelling elephant

In the year 1900, a humble engineer began work on the construction of a prodigious elephant which could travel through Time. The reason was this.

His sultan was afflicted with a morbid obsession. For some weeks past, this most illustrious sovereign's dreams had been haunted by the image of a young girl moving through Time. Night after night without cease she loomed in his sleep. So grievous was his distress that the whole court was shocked to behold it. And then, one morning, the furrows in his brow spelled out words which told of an animal that could travel through Time and of a young girl made of various sorts of precious wood.

The sultan, tormented and sick with dread, fearing that he might put an end to his own life, gave orders for someone to tie him down at night lest he strangle himself in his sleep. Profound confusion and sorrow gripped the palace.

There was nothing else for it: they must extricate the child from the sultan's brain. Since it was impossible to draw her out through his nose or his ears, his advisers, determined to bring their sultan peace of mind, decided that they must somehow search through Time to find the child. By diverting her they might stop her from plaguing their sovereign.

The scientists had no faith in this plan and handed the problem over to an engineer nobody had ever heard of. He, lacking a certain rational perspective, jumped at this unexpected opportunity of adding his name to the roll of legendary scientific geniuses.

His attempts to convert giraffes and monkeys into machines over a number of years proved disappointing. Not that his regime of mechanisation harmed the animals, but he could not induce them to cooperate with the treatment. Besides, their powers of memory were too limited, they could not concentrate for long enough to go back in Time. Only an elephant would be able to do that. Faced with the sultan's displeasure, he acquired a herd of elephants and fed them a diet of metal filings, gunpowder and toxic mineral oil imported from Abyssinia. This he used because the trees growing in the vicinity of the source had turned into giant metal sculptures.



But, if he associated metal with aeons of time, it did not deliver the

movement necessary to his creation. Certainly the elephants did turn into metal after a few months but once they were metal they were as immobile as sculptures. The sultan fretted with impatience. Every night the young girl jangled his dreams beyond endurance.

The engineer was forced to accept that there remained only one option: a special elephant. In those days, in a remote mountain range in the heart of the Indies, there lived an elephant which was three hundred years old. The entire court was directed to capture the animal.

Time passed. The elephant became a sculpture, too, like any one of the hundred sculptures adorning the municipal gardens.



Despite this setback, yet fearing the sultan's wrath, the engineer hit on the idea of making steel wheels to fit into key positions in the joints. He hired puppeteers and, with the aid of cords, jacks and springs, succeeded in making the creature move. He installed a habitable terrace on its back, bedrooms, a kitchen and bathroom in its belly, just like a ship.

He invited the sultan and his entourage to board the machine and then directed the members of the crew to set the elephant in motion. To his surprise, his astonishment, his horror, he watched as the trees grew steadily taller, the buildings crumble, the town sprout like a mushroom.

The sultan was entranced. He heaped gold on the engineer and, some weeks later, embarked on the elephant's back on a long voyage through Time in quest of the young girl made of precious wood.

The engineer, dumbfounded at what he had created, watched in utter dismay as the travellers faded from view like a smear wiped from a window pane with a cloth.

-02 - Report on the elephant expedition First week

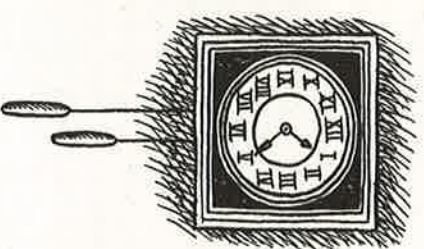
A week had scarcely gone by when the members of the expedition were confronted with a most extraordinary puzzle. Having set out on Monday 14 February 1905, they found themselves, a few days later, in 1912, Friday 1 March, in a region of China, in the town of Canton, just as a mighty inferno of fire erupted all round them.

Gunpowder and blood, the screams of the survivors froze all the occupants of the elephant with terror.

Having all but run out of food, they had made for the town against the advice of the local people whom they asked for assistance. The captain, although his nerves were on edge, had, with the sultan's consent, resigned himself to stopping at the town to replenish supplies, to recruit themselves, so to speak. The decision had been absolutely critical to the future of the expedition.

Those first days of their travels through Time were a frightening experience for them all. Indeed, from the very outset, most of the voyagers admitted to losing track of the clock: they found it impossible to be sure what day it was, what night, what time, what season. Unable to know when it was time to sleep, each of them succumbed

to fatigue. More than half the company, disoriented by this brutal loss of familiar bearings, sank into a sort of trance, like a waking nightmare. The captain soon realised that not everybody was fit to travel any further: it was absolutely vital to disembark those who were suffering worst - in any event those who seemed to be beyond hope of recovery.



The belly of the elephant and the engine room now more closely resembled a psychiatric hospital. This hampered their progress enormously. Addressing the sultan, the captain said: the portentous word: 'Ballast.'

As a capable Time traveller, he had understood that the unconscious or delirious passengers would gradually slow the machine to a stop. The outlandish vessel depended on practical theory: in short, they must divest themselves of the sleep-walkers. For, since the Thursday on their own calendar, they had got no further than February 1912. It was as if machine and passengers formed a single entity: the vessel worked by using the very sweat they exuded as steam. But, those of them in a trance not only burned off their own sweat, they also tended to swallow that of the others. To cap it all, a dreadful panic seized the entire company when the elephant veered out of control. It briefly seemed to come alive, stampeding, trumpeting non-stop, charging at a house, a tree, a rock; bellowing, trampling, crushing animals in its path with crazed savagery. During these unaccountable outbursts, fortunately infrequent, each of them clung on for dear life aboard this heaving mountain. These mysterious episodes rarely lasted more than a minute and, suddenly, order returned, like a nightmare cut off by the glimpse of a bed room. The central square of Canton was awash in chaos and horror.

Luckily, the attackers, confronted by the stupefying sight of an elephant made of steel, were rooted to the spot, as if God himself had suddenly appeared before them. The captain knew from experience that such visions did not last long. They must make haste. He urged the elephant to trumpet. The noise hypnotised the combatants - like an image frozen - and, without

delay, the captain disembarked his invalids onto the square, knowing well that he was abandoning them into the jaws of hell. Some of the sultan's courtiers were also disembarked, no less unceremoniously. Terrified as much by the flames of the explosions as by the thunder of the detonation, the passengers pondered their chances of escaping from this inferno unharmed. Taking advantage of a temporary lull, a group of the healthy among them ransacked houses for provisions and rounded up some live animals - chickens, cows, pigs.

Thus, an hour on board the elephant lasted but a second in Canton.

As soon as they had finished loading, using the company's fresh sweat, they merely found themselves propelled onto this same square in Canton on 31 January 1927 at 6 o'clock in the evening watched by a crowd hushed and cowed by this awesome apparition. The elephant crossed the square and disappeared behind the palace.

From your correspondent
Voïdec Rouchkov,
inside the belly of the elephant.



-03-

Elephant expedition. First year

Leaving the square in Canton, the elephant set straight off at a good pace.

From now on, the passengers, alert to the risks of sickness, concentrated on the thousand and one things that had to be done. Their spirits did not falter because the captain was careful to stop for the night each evening in a tranquil location in a zone of Time far from the commotion of situations beyond their control, such as war, revolution, epidemic.

A strict roster of teams kept watch over the expedition continuously, day and night. The overnight stop was organised thus: after travelling for twelve hours' they stopped the elephant; historian mapmakers sent out groups of scouts; the scouts brought back information to the members of the navigation council who met to decide on where to stop. If the council judged the situation too dangerous, they moved on several months ahead to sound out a historically quieter place. The sultan, convinced that the distance they had already travelled

was bringing him closer to the little girl, wanted forever to be pushing on. Luckily, the captain, alert to trouble, reined back the royal impatience by imposing a sensible speed on the machine.

Although the interior of the elephant was spacious, accommodation of passengers was restricted. So, the sultan's harem consisted of five women only. Apart from the Mongol eunuch in their service, the palace cook and five servants, the court numbered a total of forty souls (not counting the members of the council.) It was a very reduced number for a sultan accustomed to an extremely opulent life style so his daily fits of pique were quite understandable; yet, in other respects, we might say that he

she'd received and often reminisced about them. She could recognise, blindfold, any man who had ever kissed her by simply touching his bare skin with her finger.



Chervil was the most highly-strung. She knew every story in the world and recounted them in a fluent pleasing voice. She had but to blow on a man's brow to send him straight to sleep. And, strange thing, she could manipulate each one of her toes if the fancy took her to play a game of knuckle bones.



exhibited a certain magnanimity, given his high status. Nevertheless, the adventure took its toll.

The crew comprised some hundred individuals who had to sleep either in tents in open country or else were billeted with local inhabitants on those occasions when we were lucky enough to be welcomed in a country at peace. And then the sultan and his suite were invited to the city as guests of high distinction and we could stay put for several weeks, to the delight of the children and their families. The concubines, all very different, never ceased to excite curiosity. Mirabelle loved to lounge on fruits and often took baths of grapes. When she sang, she could enchant any man in seconds and render him her slave, madly in love with her. She kept a tally of the kisses

with lust, but, unwanted suitors beware: she could show her nails like the claws of a leopard.

As for Taline, she had undoubtedly worked out the Theory of Non-sense: her gestures consisted of a series of movements without rhyme or reason. She suffered from repetitive amnesia and seemed to be constantly rediscovering the world with the sublime rapture of an alien, as in: "You're great, what's your name?" or "What are we doing on this elephant?" She passed her time playing hopscotch on the terrace or admiring her nipples in the bathroom convinced that one day, fountains of sparkling water would spurt from them, if you can credit that. Not only did she sneeze through her ears but on moonless nights she could swim through the air as easily as in the water of a swimming pool. She would leap from the elephant's balcony and her body, afloat in some invisible sea, was held suspended two metres above the ground. She swam like a fish round the elephant on the surface of the air.

Perhaps thanks to the precautions taken by the navigation council, nothing extraordinary, nothing of report, happened during this first year of the voyage, apart from the usual quarrelling, inclemencies of weather depending where we were, sweat drying up in some of the sailors and, of course, no trace of the little girl made of precious wood forever present, pulsing into the sultan's dreams. That is, until what happened yesterday, which made me take up my pen again.

This summer of 1938, we stayed for several days on a large square of beaten earth, received eagerly by the people, happily at ease. But yesterday, the confused sounds of some kind of disturbance in the village broke the calm of the siesta. We ran to the central square. A gale was blowing out of the elephant's windows and Chervil, almost naked, was hanging onto the curtains, screaming in panic, tossed flat by the incredible force of the gusting wind.



A jumble of objects hurtled past her through the air, smashing down all round the elephant. It was as if a volcano were spewing out the contents of a house through the chimney. The noise was like the roar of a torrent cascading down a cliff.

Everyone ducked to avoid being crushed by the plates, chairs, clocks, raining down out of the sky. From the balcony, the eunuch watched as the palace emptied itself from the elephant's two sides. Powerless, alarmed, he ran from right to left, observing this apocalyptic spectacle.

On the ground, the sultan barked an order to the captain who relayed it to the lieutenant. He shouted it on to the other officers and, eventually, the command ricocheted from ear to ear all round the members of the crew. Then, in a concerted rush, shrieking at the top of their voice, they hurried themselves at the elephant with ladders, ropes, grappling hooks, from who knows where, and made for the balcony.

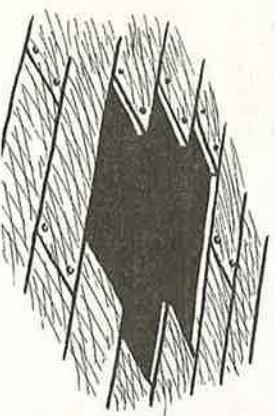
More than forty men climbed up onto the terrace. The eunuch, in a frenzy, cheered the boarding party on, bawling at them, his angry shouts inaudible to me from behind the tree where I'd taken shelter.

It was a veritable battle, coordinated by the under officers, directed from the ground by the captain. Here and there, crewmen were swept off by the wind and plummeted to the earth. The orderlies attended them under an incessant hail of disparate objects slicing down into them. Two men secured with strong ropes held by ten men were thrown out into the tornado and gradually brought level with the concubine still clinging to the curtains. They manoeuvred so skilfully that one of them managed to ride the whirlwind towards her. He grabbed hold of her and held onto her with all his strength. Hauled back up by the crewmen, the two men were soon on the terrace again, totally exhausted.

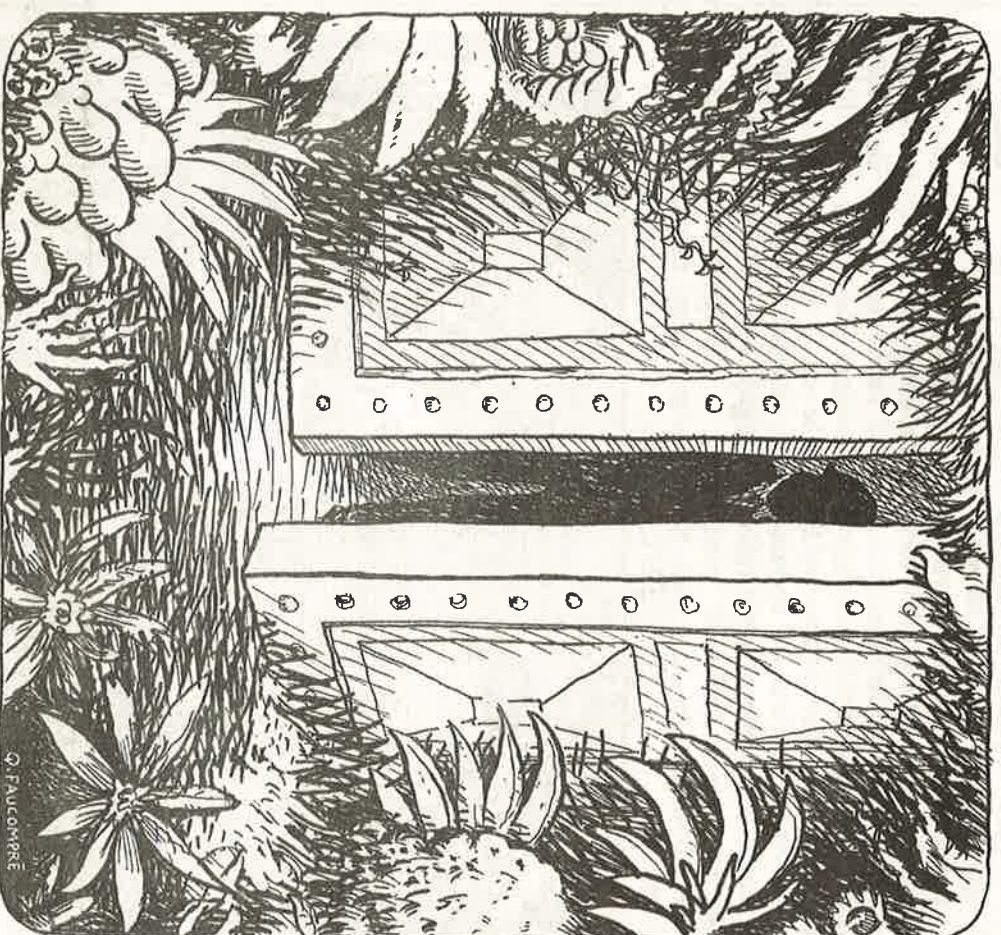
But the tempest, furious still, was whipping up clouds of dust over the square. Orders were given to close all windows.

It took the engineers more than an hour in their battle to secure the elephant itself with blocks and tackle. Ropes attached to the door handles held it to the ground in front and behind where the tornado could not reach them. Horses, oxen and men joined forces and, at last, brought the hellish episode to an end.

Twelve sailors who entered the elephant's belly through a trapdoor soon found the cause of the almighty discharge of power. The floor of the kitchen which lay right at the very bottom of the elephant - there were no rooms below



it - had been blown out. Looking into the room, the men could see only a bottomless black hole. So disquieting was this discovery that the council gave orders for the opening to be securely filled in to allow them time, you understand, to investigate this latest, most alarming, mystery. In the meantime, they issued an edict: "Entry to



this kitchen is strictly forbidden to all personnel, apart from the cook, until a full enquiry has been carried out."

-04- Escapeade

My responsibility as a reporter obliges me to reveal, here, one of my innermost secrets. Having transcribed the interdiction necessitated by the presence of the mysterious trapdoor, everyone will understand how difficult it is for me to admit to how I disobeyed it, impelled by the fundamental curiosity of a calling totally devoted to keeping you informed.

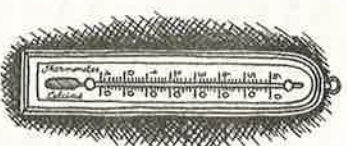
The cabin to which I had been assigned, albeit narrow (just the length of my bunk and not nearly as wide), put me in mind of a splendid casket. Made of the rarest sorts of wood, inlaid with marquetry incrustated with ivory, gemstones and precious metals, forever being polished by the servants, the entire cabin was redolent of a heady fragrance worthy of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The ceiling of faintly vaulted pink-veined marble dispersed the coolness from a tiny fountain set into the wall. The light cast by a powerful oil lamp overhead made up for

the lack of portholes. In addition to the discreetly placed cupboards, a tray which slid out from the wall served as a worktable. In short, this tiny casket, rocked by the motion of the elephant, induced a most calming effect.

As I lay on my bunk, I recalled my decision, many times put off, to clean my travelling library stowed

under the bed. On my knees, half my body reaching into this storage space, I was pulling out my science and history books when my fingers encountered a small raised slot in the floor. Curious, I brushed the surface and realised what it was: as my eyes adjusted, I saw a section of floor, half a metre square, of a different wood from the rest. Surely a trapdoor, a hatchway, a cover. Excited by my discovery, I was tapping along the edges when the lid sprang up in my face. At the same moment, a fairly loud whistling noise sounded in the cabin only to die out in the confined space.

It didn't take long before I felt the chill from the opening. The thermometer inside the cabin registered 7°C. Very, very circumspectly, I leaned over the hole.



Incredible, staggering, amazing... no superlative could encompass what I saw.

I was looking down from the ceiling of an immense room, thirty metres high, a hundred metres long. I was on the threshold of the biggest scoop of my career. Casting aside all caution, I took the safety rope from the locker, tied it round the shaft of the axe, dropped the rope through the hatchway, lay the axe shaft across the opening and, equipped with a coat and a lantern, I slid into the opening, and, not forgetting to close the cupboard doors to leave no trace of my discovery, began my perilous descent.

When I at last reached the ground, the place seemed to me even more immense. An opaque, light haze of dust waited about my ankles. Granite walls held up the vast ceiling without supporting columns. The interlocked pattern of stone blocks evoked the undressed geometric architecture of an Incan civilisation. The diffuse light, from no visible source, seemed to come out of the very walls. Spirals of dust curled up from under my feet, as if stirred by palm leaves, revealing glimpses of large rectangular flagstones, smooth and perfectly aligned. This dust, grey and fine, like a pall of heavy smoke, changed shape in slow-motion and gradually settled once more, suspended in the air. It was like a marsh of lazy clouds, whose ripples spread in wider and wider circles, like those made by a pebble thrown into a pond. A muted sound imparted to the whole room an unthreatening, rather welcoming impression.

At one end of the hall stood the only exit, an imposing double door, made of beaten copper and silver. One of the flaps hung slightly ajar, leaving a gap just wide enough to pass through. Slowly, I peered round and observed all that lay beyond. Strange: it was night, no moon to be seen, a damp, thick fog, in which could be discerned the shape of a large number of trees in leaf as well as thickets of brambles, bushes, ivy. And, leading into the night from the foot of the steps up to the door, a stone path dotted with tall weeds.

I must confess that at this moment, your servant's courage was most redoubtable for, although common sense told me to go back, I boldly decided to pursue my exploration, even if it cost me my life.

Would I ever return from this folly?

Was it not madness to plunge still deeper into this strange world?

Yet, I was a journalist. If I was to keep my readers in suspense, I had no choice.

Don't miss our hero's next exciting adventure in tomorrow's paper