



The Jules VERNE

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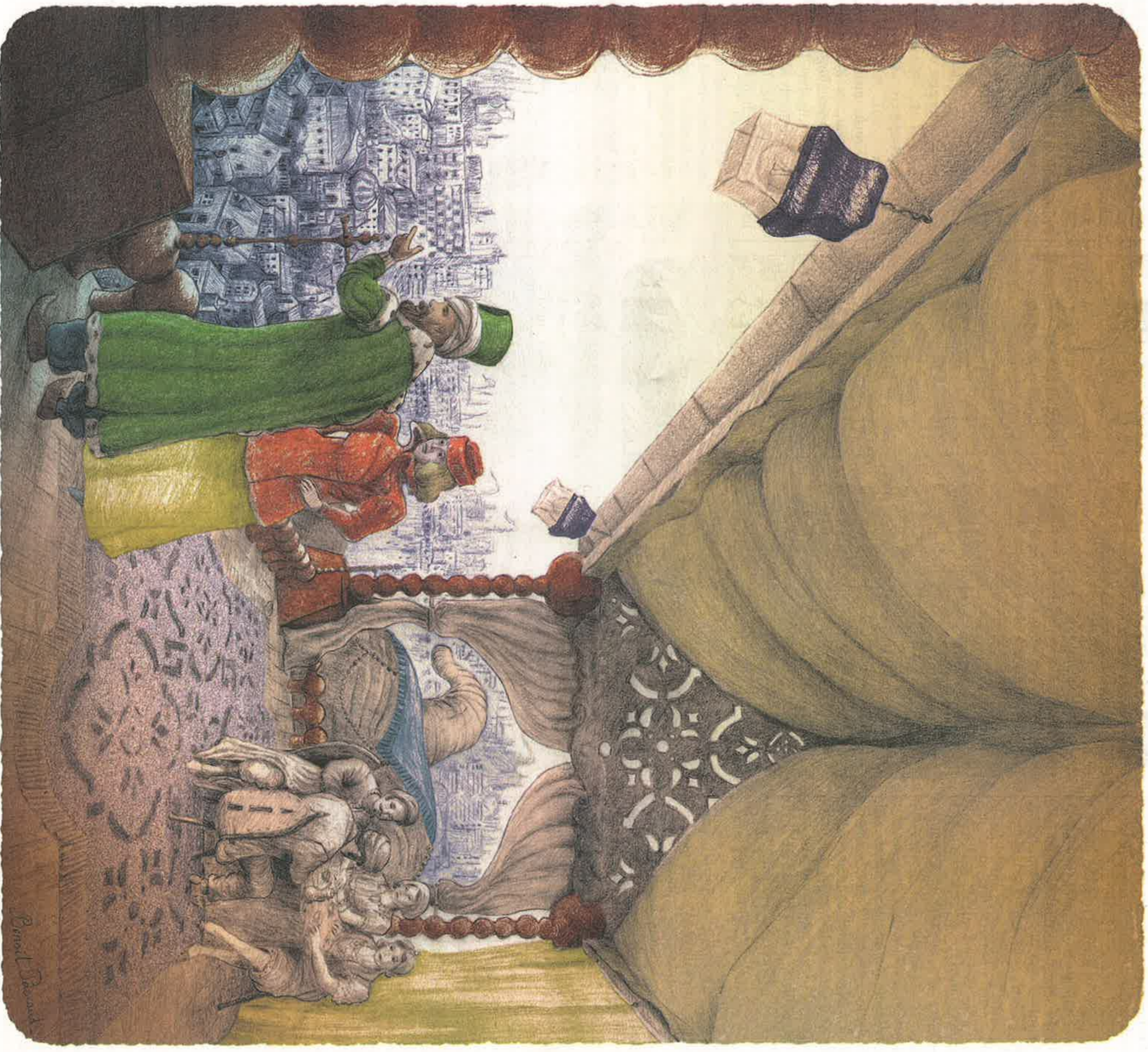
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THE SULTAN'S ELEPHANT

View from the terrace, tea time

-05- Apparition

I lit my lantern and set off down this Roman track, my mind bristling as with a magnetic storm. But, the absence of any cries of wild animals heartened me. I'd been walking for a good half hour when the fog thinned out somewhat. I estimated that, since leaving my cabin, I had walked about a kilometre in the belly of the elephant. All at once, without warning, there was clear daylight. Surprised at how abruptly the fog had vanished, I emerged from it as if from a room onto a balcony, and my heart stopped at the sight of an improbable panorama: in front of me and below the hill on which I stood stretched a vast, oval desert, maybe 100km by 300km, ringed with mountains. A lunar landscape...in the distance, silhouetted against the sky, an irregular fretwork of volcanic lace. Here and there, volcanoes smoked placidly as in a photograph. There was no vegetation, nothing moved, not the smallest cloud appeared to disturb the stillness. Silence as heavy as the sun could slumber here in this fabulous basin.

Bowled over by the sight of it and oppressed by the torrid heat, I sat down dazedly on a large boulder. A very bad mistake. I jumped up in pain, my buttocks scorched by the baking temperature that had built up in the rock.

I looked all round. My God. Good heavens. It was all so extraordinary. The crepuscular light neither night nor day suggested dawn. But the most astonishing thing of all was a sort of division of the sky: to my right it was day, to my left an immense sheet of blackness out of space sliced through the landscape like a razor and plunged the rest of the desert and the surrounding mountains in night, the sky cut in two, night and day together, like a wedge of cake.

Bemused, I stretched out my arm across the beam of light. Wonderment. My arm disappeared into the wall of blackness, became invisible. Leaning in to look, I picked the panorama extending far into the distance lit by a Milky Way. Soon I was crossing over into it. It took a childlike trust: passing from day into night as if through a curtain in an apartment, gave me a childish pleasure.

Aware that there were surprises to come, I resumed my role as observer. Good. I had seen night and day cut in two, a matter of some curiosity given that, after all, I was in the belly of the elephant.

But what I saw next shattered my equilibrium in this lower world with the unparalleled violence of a javelin thrown at the speed of light. My whole body tensed from top to toe, a sort of nervous seizure which instantly reduced my brain to the size of a grain of rice: I stood in pieces. In place of the moon the earth hung in the sky...a beautiful segment of the earth. And the earth, three times bigger than the moon, shed its light upon me. I could see

continents bathed in blue radiance, magical, awe-inspiring. A balloon floating through the universe on a windless night...

Before it should crumble into dust, my mind (was it my mind?) strove to get back to its normal size. I was, then, on the moon, in a lunar valley of incomparable beauty, certainly, but on the moon. And the enigma of this discrete landscape must lie in this hidden face, secret, unseen from earth. I shivered. How was it possible for me to be here as well as down there, in the belly of the elephant marching across some part of these continents? How can two bodies simultaneously possess but one body?

Memory can divide up the mind by recollections which bring back the

I took the shell to be a missile, pointing boldly into the sky, and the billows of smoke enveloping it gave it a ghostly air.

What was the significance of this device and why was it here at the edge of the desert? Just as I was about to go down to take a closer look, I stopped, seeing a movement just in front of it.

Another pang of fear shot through me.

I saw a small girl of five or six years' old carrying a pile of branches in the skirt of her dress. But, as she approached the hearth, I realised I needed to adjust my idea of size. She put the load of wood down and stood up again and as she did so I flattened myself on the sand. She must have been five metres tall.



past, yet how can the body speed through two different places in the same instant? Decidedly this voyage through time on the back of an elephant was throwing up multiple questions.

Putting aside these musings, I leapt into the part that was day. The wisest decision would have been to go back but suddenly a mini-tornado swept me off my feet, throwing my lantern against a rock. The blast lasted several seconds – it seemed to be roaming about the desert. Trembling and overwrought, I took one last look at this boundless desert: something caught my eye. A white column of smoke, different to that from the volcanoes, seemed to be coming from behind a hill, tracing a line in the sky.

Although I was shaken by the series of events you have now read about, I set off purposefully towards this latest phenomenon, without asking myself why. The ground was clear of obstacles and I soon reached the top of this little hill where, from behind the cover of a hummock, I could observe at my leisure what there was to be seen. I was not disappointed. The column of white smoke was indeed produced by a fire which, on a metal platform, stood a form of steel artillery shell lined with rivets.

mistake his tail for a mosquito. He wasn't totally duped, however, since he warned me that I had better have a simpler explanation for the sultan.

Damn. This put me in a real spot and, still buffeted into the walls, I began to climb up the companionways. Emerging onto the terrace, I was drenched head to foot with the equivalent of a bucket of water which hit me with such force that I lost balance and fell against the handrail. I'd scarcely got back on my feet when a second bucketful of water knocked me over and, as the terrace floor pitched steeply the other way, I slid down and smashed into the other handrail. Grabbing tightly onto it, I saw the mountainous waves of an angry sea heaving all round the elephant: we were on a boat, tossed, propelled, battered by

the most appalling storm. Evidently I was alone on the terrace - no sailor would have been crazy enough to venture onto it.

Swept along, shaken, battered by the waves, the elephant, solidly tied down with ropes, was fending for itself as far as it could, counterbalancing the full weight of the tramp steamer to which it had been belayed. In fact, the exhausted crewmen were taking it in turns to work the joints of the beast – more colossal, still more stupendous in the eye of this frenzied, nightmarish onslaught from Neptune.

Its trunk waving this way and that bellowed so loudly that one couldn't tell which was more impressive, the animal or the sea. It was as if it were fighting a battle with the elements, keeping

the vessel afloat by sheer determination, defiance, courage and rage flung at the walls of water which seemed, yes, to be receding. My God. How fine he was, our elephant. Magnificent, imperious, titanic like a locomotive driving under full steam into the thunderclouds of a tornado.

I learnt later that we had embarked from a port in eastern Manchuria bound for the Americas across the Pacific. A droll name for such a storm-rent sea...

The cargo steamer's funnel toppled over, fortunately towards the stern, thus sparing the elephant. Realisation hit us like a slap in the face – we would have to release our pachyderm from his chains. We couldn't know if he would float but if there was any chance he could, we had to try.

Gigantic flames erupted from the engine room. With a series of explosions all the fuel caught fire and spread over the surface of the sea like a vast burning carpet. We could not get the lifeboats, swallowed up in the smoke, into the water. The sailors were screaming in utter panic.

We all plunged into the water. It was at this point that the elephant had one of those fits familiar to us. The deck tipped up as the ship

Yet, refusing to pay any heed to the tingling thrill of fear that coursed through my whole body, I told myself that even courage has its limits. And, in a fury, despite the general collapse of my nerves, I determined to go back to my cabin...

-06- Storm

My tiny cabin shook violently... several times I was thrown against the walls.

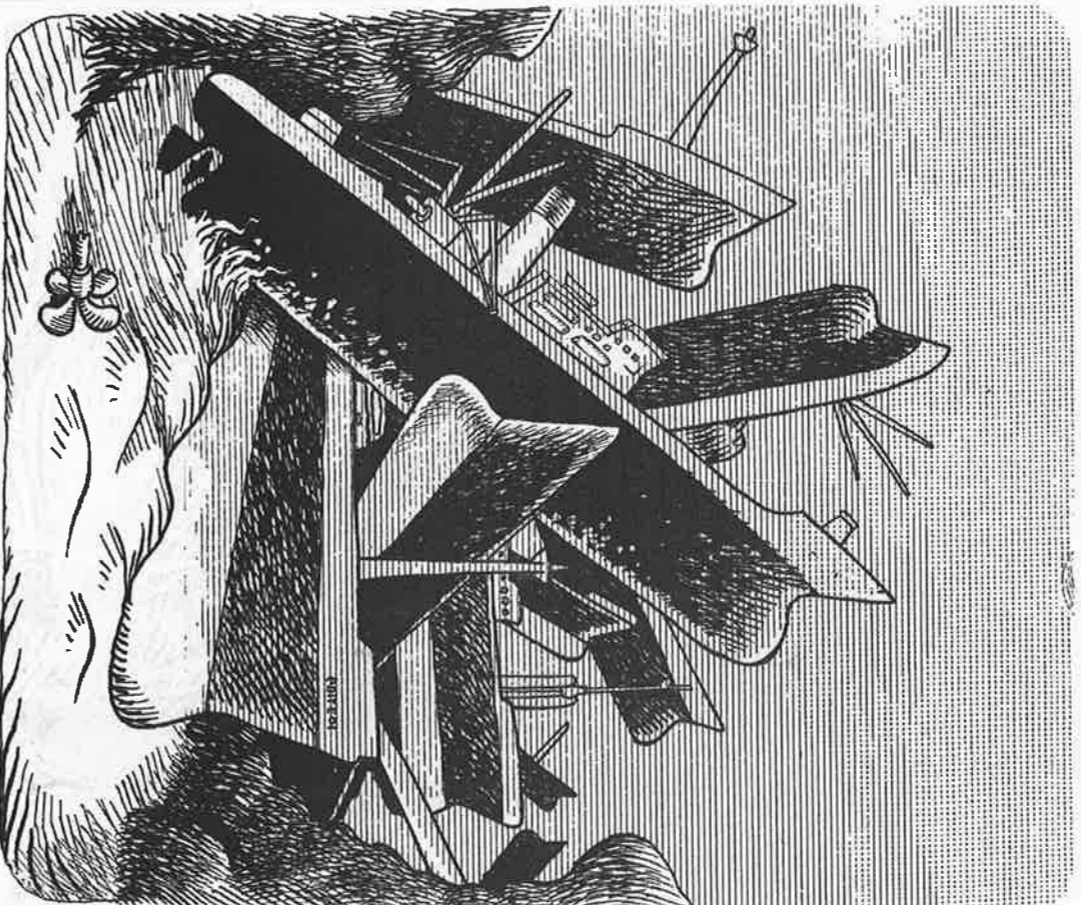
The elephant appeared to be careering madly along. Were we in danger? Going out into the corridors leading to the terrace I met the eunuch who seemed very surprised to see me. He told me I'd disappeared for over a month and, after a number of searches, the crew had concluded that I'd gone missing. I trust my readers will pardon me for having had to weave a complicated series of lies, which I'll spare you. The convolutions of my imagination led me to heights of incomprehensibility which left the eunuch mystified. I baffled him with the yarn I span and managed, thus, to submerge his curiosity in a swamp so murky that even a lizard would

The ocean floor

We came to rest on the ocean floor at a depth of 5000 metres. However, during this last stage of the manoeuvre, the parachute continued to descend and came into contact with the torches. It was so badly scorched that we had to cut it free. Luckily, our vessel was holding up against the pressure and, so overwhelming was the sense of relief, that a number of people could not hold back their tears. Although it had been severely jolted in the landing, the engine room had not suffered too much damage, at all events not to anything crucial which might compromise our onward journey. Any cracked seams were soldered tight and the crew's morale lifted minute by minute as positive reports on the vessel's fabric and structure came in. A level beach of sand stretched all round us: the pressure must be so great that not a single grain had lifted on contact with the elephant's feet - and they sank into it no more than if he had been walking on rock. Needless to say, there was not a single trace of the little girl to lead us on. Behind us, the cliff which we had conquered reared up into infinity like a barrier, a gloomy defensive wall, a colossus planted in the sea. During our descent, the lookout had noticed some black marks over to our left. What could they signify? As much as a precaution as from curiosity, we needed to check what he'd observed. The council decided to leave the concubines locked on the moon for the time being; we still had plenty of respirable air aboard. Our elephant set off again in the direction of the marks that had been seen at the foot of the cliff but we needed to be able to view from a greater height. The sultan ordered the hoisting of a mobile observation post. A metal ball, two metres in diameter, equipped with floats, fitted with portholes, large enough to carry one person, was attached to a chain a hundred metres long and to a communication tube of the same length. As soon as its passenger was installed, the ball was launched. It rose slowly into the water at first, and then at a speed controlled by the paying out of the chain. The sailor leaned towards the lower porthole. He jerked back violently and cracked his head. He'd never seen the like in all his life. Below him and lost to other view, thousands of cargo ships crowded together across the plain. Lips quivering, he spoke into the tube: 'A cemetery...a cemetery of freighters...there are hundreds of them...some piled one

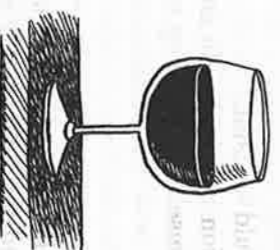
on top of another in a mountain of iron. But not one of them seems to have broken up. It's incredible.' Of course, the restrained emotion in his voice had betrayed just how shaken he was. Several seconds passed before he spoke again. 'Wait. 30° to the left there's one of them burning. The smoke drifts free like the ink from a giant octopus to form an immense black cloud over its head spreading into the sea. The flames make a halo of light over the other boats...' Making for the pile of boats, we passed a vessel lodged against the cliff. 'It's a sunken cargo ship' said the captain to the sultan. We could see its rusted hull, a hundred metres long. It had been a tanker come

terrace, the sultan eats alone in a chiaroscuro of shadow and gently rippling light diffused through the sea currents by the underwater lamps. The eunuch carves him a leg of lamb, with potatoes roasted to his own liking and a carafe of wine from one of the best vintages they'd come across in the course of the voyage. He misses the concubines but it won't be long before they are brought back. The council suggested 'Twelve hours to be safe'. The wine in his glass hardly stirred: the elephant moves slowly and with an incredible smoothness over the ocean floor. Suddenly, however, everything on the table shoots onto the terrace. Scanning round the sultan sees the beginning of a desert of dunes

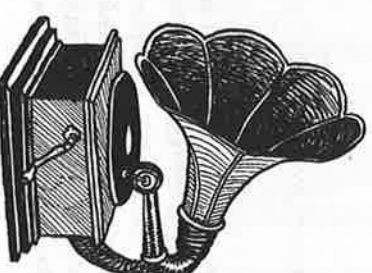


to end its days against the wall of the cliff. 'Captain' cried the lookout 'Captain, I can see steel cables - you'd think the ship had been sewn to the rock...' Everyone on the terrace was stunned. The sultan said, simply: 'And so here we are on the track of the giant little girl.' They hauled back the floating lookout into the vessel and the engine room was ordered to get us under way.

worthy of the Sahara. The elephant had simply crossed over the top of one and, from the summit, one could see, in what light there was, an immensity of motionless waves of sand.



'Good heavens' exclaims the sultan. 'I told them, did I not, that we'd find everything that exists up there down here? I wouldn't be in the least surprised if we saw a caravan of camels from here...'



Because the oxygen was getting scarce, the need to open the trapdoor had become pressing. So, it was opened and a draught of air flooded the whole vessel with a lovely freshness. The sultan, overjoyed to be getting his concubines back, was the first to lean over the hatchway. His face recorded his disappointment: there was nobody there.

The experience which your humble correspondent had described several months earlier led me to believe that because time passed more rapidly aboard the elephant, hours spent on the moon translated into months for the crew. If this theory were well-founded, the twelve hours passed since the door was closed would correspond to no more than a few minutes on the moon. The concubines had been installed on chaises longues, kitted out with large petrol lamps, some food and a costly gramophone received as a gift from the last emperor of China. A crewman, looking down through the hatchway, threw a couple of torches down into the hall. They revealed that the place was quite empty. A team (me included) was instantly despatched. It was extremely difficult to dissuade the sultan from joining us. When we reached the ground, we noted that all the utensils were coated with dust. Checking the petrol lamps, we found that their reservoirs were empty. But, there was one lamp missing. As for the gramophone, it had disappeared, too. The little bags of food had gone mouldy. The inspection of the mould by one of the engineers seemed to make everyone uneasy; I asked him for his diagnosis. He looked aghast. He said, simply: 'More than two years have passed down here.'

I was deeply upset as you can imagine. What was this new enigma? And, was I not responsible for the concubines, having assured the sultan of the accuracy of my report? Speechless I drifted after the other crewmen like a cloud to the main door. It was wide open and the engineer, running a hand over the surface, found dents made by blows. Even as he registered this his face grew longer. From the top of the steps he sent

the men off to look for clues. With tears of lead in my veins, I went apart to sit on the trunk of a tree. As my eyes roved the scene, they lit on the gramophone.

'Look here' I said. The gramophone, smashed, trampled, lay like the corpse of a gramophone. The engineer said: 'There's been fighting here...it must have been around two years ago.'

-14- The concubines' Journey

When the sultan heard the news he flew into an unspeakable rage, plunging into such a tantrum of grief that even the eunuch kept out of his way.

As the elephant continued its passage of the dunes on the ocean floor, a powerful expedition was organised to bring the concubines back. A skeleton crew stayed behind to man the elephant. Forty men armed to the teeth went down through the trapdoor and immediately formed up in marching order. But, we'd hardly set out when unbelievable lunar winds slowed us to a crawl. We had to lie down and let the sandstorms pass. This was the desert in full fury. Strangely, although these tourbillons were violent, they faded out abruptly and rarely lasted longer than a quarter of an hour.

Three scouts went more than 500 metres ahead of the main body, constantly running back and forth, relaying reports to the commander of the expedition. It wasn't long before they reported the presence of the first village. It had been flattened, a ghost town. The second village confirmed what we had seen in the first: clearly, meteorological conditions had made this region altogether inhospitable.

Tracks analysed by our experts seemed to be heading in the direction of the moon's hidden face. Had the former inhabitants taken refuge in Night to escape the tornadoes?

The company set off again, but the men were soon worn out by this forced march under the sun and they needed to stop to recover near the black curtain before passing through it. And then, in a silence broken only by the sound of their breathing, they heard a low rumbling from the moon's dark side, like the noise of a massive, protracted avalanche.

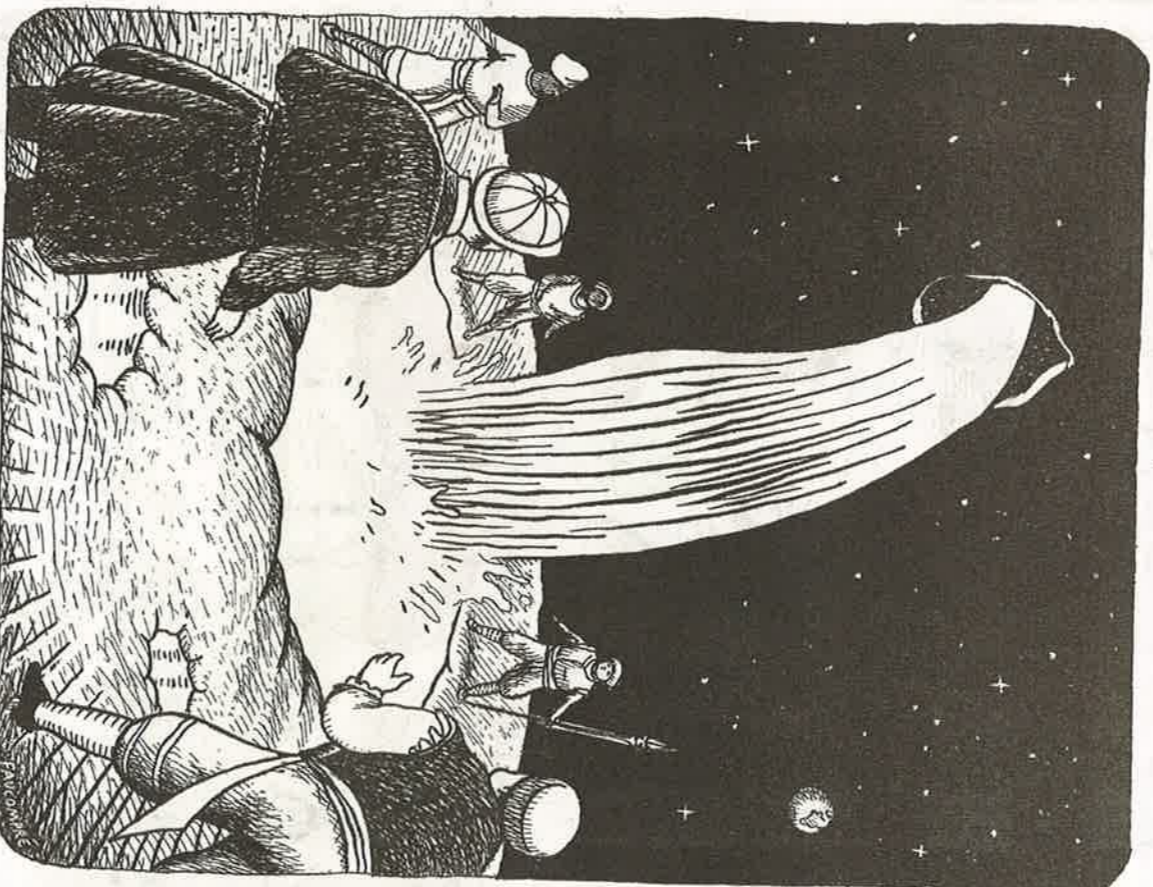
The halt ended, ten torches were lit and we made our way into Night. The temperature had dropped dramatically so groups huddled round the flames for warmth.

The next three hours, as we approached the riddle of this

deafening noise, were more and more trying. The wind seemed to veer the nearer we got to it. We had to shout to make ourselves heard, and then, the magical impact of what we saw made our senses reel: there was a waterfall crashing straight down out of the sky - there was no mountain - with a mighty roar and geysers of spray. A cascade, ten metres in diameter, plummeting out of the air. The shock of its impact on the ground had hollowed out an enormous crater, for sure, and the water ran off in a single channel to form a river disappearing far into the distance.

We were so surprised, each one of us stood hypnotised by this strange submarine show of fireworks. Fish of all shapes and sizes and colours traced long trails of glowing particles, spilling luminescent puddles onto the edges of the crater like reflections cast by a fire of coloured flames.

Suddenly, a group of local people rushed, shouting, towards us from a nearby hill. We instantly got into defensive positions. But, as they approached, we quickly realised that they were whooping with joy, singing happily, waving, not hostile at all. Some thirty people showered us with the most exuberant show of



The first engineer tasted some of the spindrift and immediately realised what had happened. There was, too, a strong smell of iodine coming from the periphery.

'There's a leak in the elephant' he said. 'This water is from the Atlantic - it's emptying out onto the moon. We need to find the leak and seal it. Meanwhile, let's follow the course of the river, I'm pretty sure it will lead us to the concubines...'

The march resumed.

We soon found ourselves on the rim of an immense crater out of which pulsed light. As we got nearer, we saw that it contained a saltwater lake, home to algae and swimming with shellfish, squid, dolphins, sharks and other varieties of marine species, all dazzlingly phosphorescent.

surrounding radiance of those lights it felt just like being in a lunar paradise.

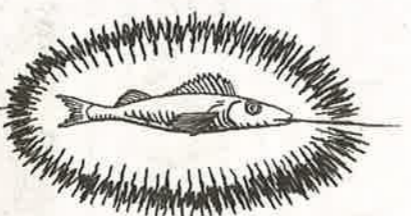
The following day we finally met up with the concubines. They beamed with delight. They recounted the trials they'd suffered. Panic had seized all the inhabitants of the moon and they'd been desperate to open the trapdoor. The sudden torrent of water sent the balance of the atmosphere askew. Lunar winds of an incredible ferocity swept the sun aside and rendered the place uninhabitable. Tempers exploded. Fighting broke out. The dead and injured lay everywhere.

Then, drawn by a sort of mirage in the form of a giant young girl disappearing into the sandstorms, they were led, as if by a protecting hand, to the marvellous calm beside this growing lake with its magic of lights produced by the fish. The fish underwent an astonishing change which rendered them phosphorescent, even as they fell from the sky. The decision was made to set up home here.

Cerfeulle, Lazulie, Pamplona, Mirabelle and Taine were beside themselves. They'd awaited our arrival impatiently but Time moved at its own pace and two long years elapsed. When we told them that for us it had been a matter of only a few hours, we all felt quite topsyturvy.

A week later, the sultan himself explained.

On the moon there was earth time and time under the sea. Place changed the direction of Time. Under the sea it was reversed. 15 hours to the elephant was equivalent to two years of life on the moon. And, in the opposite direction, when the elephant was tramping the earth, 15 hours on the moon translated to 2 years aboard the elephant.



Next and final instalment
tomorrow.