





The Jules VERNE

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FREE ILLUSTRATED SUPPLEMENT

Royal de Luxe

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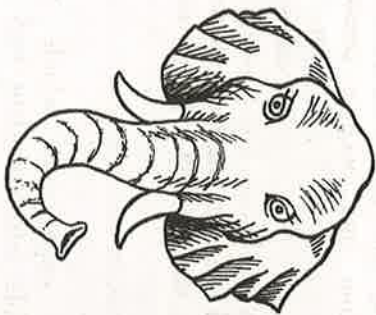
Number 3



THE SULTAN'S ELEPHANT

Crossing the Atlantic

It's the day of our departure. The elephant stands on a flat sandy beach whose gentle slope will give us an untroubled entry into the ocean. The lowering, over-cast sky spits heavy spots of rain into the sea. The lap of the tide at the water's edge caresses the sand sleepily, almost languorously.



The elephant has been rendered completely watertight; over the terrace has been fitted an immense glass hemisphere strengthened with a metal frame. The engine room behind it is a colossal compartment of riveted metal perforated with portholes. The lower part of each of the elephant's feet has been encased with iron which makes it awkward for him to walk - he sinks at least a metre into the sand at each step, digging a furrow as does a horse in a great depth of powdery snow.

Each man is ready at his post. For reasons of convenience, the crew is 60 strong. The rest remain in the mysterious region in the belly in case we need them.

The entire court is gathered on the terrace and when the water reaches the edge of the great cockpit everyone feels suddenly very tense and apprehensive. The spatter of the rain on the cockpit glass dies out in a magical silence as it is engulfed by swirls of sand kicked up by the animal. We submerge serenely into the depths of the ocean.

As the sea floor shelves more steeply, the darkness deepens. The captain gives orders to light three enormous underwater lamps suspended like balls 15 metres over the vessel. These are the pride and joy of the chief gas-fitters who hit on the idea after nine month's research. Flames of an exceptional white brilliance, four metres tall, burn in the water like incandescent torches in a grotto. The secret is an alchemical formula preserved in the form of metal blocks which burn fiercely on contact with water. Dangling from chains attached to floats, they make small lamp-like suns above the elephant and are so powerful that they illuminate to a radius of more than 300 metres. Each block lasts ten

hours. Replacing them requires a simple, but perilous, manoeuvre: the float is hauled down on its chain to the level of the engine room; a new block can be attached in a flooding chamber; the chain is abruptly released and, a few seconds later, the block ignites. They are, of course, impossible to extinguish.

Around us appear the first rocks, like castaways on the sand. So, we must work our way round them and find the best route to make sure of our descent. At last, the long voyage begins.

-11- The cliff

We have been at the bottom of the sea for 72 hours. There is no night, there is no day as we negotiate sheer rock buttresses, hugging endless hairpins, like a cyclist down an alpine

close for any sign of the little girl, spoke rapidly to the pilot through the speaking tube linked to the engine room. The executive officer halted the elephant. Our hearts beat faster when we learnt what was happening.

'Cliff ahead' shouted the lookout. We found ourselves on the very brink of an infinite void. The whole court crowded into the cockpit because, so to put it, the hour for our plunge into the water had tolled. We had no choice but to leap into this unknown or else go back the way we'd come. Happily, the engineers had found a solution to the question they had addressed many times but it had not been tested and there was no guarantee that it would work.

Looking from the dome of the hemisphere down into the bottomless hole made us dizzy. The news reached the villages on the moon. We were all

expecting the world to end.

If the elephant broke up,



what would become of the planet?

Perhaps it would explode, like the shock of colliding with a huge meteor.

The council woke the captain and he immediately orders the launch of flame canisters to fathom the ocean's depth. A magnificent sight of fireballs soaring out across the void, illuminating the edge of the cliff and sinking slowly out of sight like dying stars. After three minutes, their light was gone.

Taking into account the velocity of their descent, calculations of the distance they had fallen delivered an estimate of some 3000 metres. How long would our descent take?

What pressure could our vessel withstand before imploding like an ant crushed underfoot by a hippopotamus?

Near prostrate with worry, yet convinced he was going to find the young girl made of precious wood, the sultan's face became an oriental mask of impassive defiance as he assumed his mantle of visionary. As for me, head down, vomiting into the toilet, it took courage of the highest order to record these notes.

As a precaution, the concubines were evacuated to the moon and the trapdoor closed behind them. If the elephant were to disappear what exactly would happen in the desert?

Perhaps two worlds could coexist in a single body without the loss of one involving the loss of both...after all, the elephant was walking along under the sea of an earth visible from the moon which it carried in its belly.

The following manoeuvre began with the most intense concentration.

The chains holding the underwater lamps were retracted by three quarters of their length to within 4 metres of the cockpit. A water parachute, from which the elephant would hang, was sent up over the lamps to a height of fifteen metres.

The moment of reckoning arrived. Putting its weight on its back legs, the elephant sprang forward over the edge of the cliff and we began to fall like an aeroplane hitting an air pocket. Our insides heaved into our throat. Our brains went giddy with fear. Ten seconds later, the parachute opened. The brutal effect of the braking sent our stomachs in the opposite direction. Our speed stabilised at 40kph. The following ten minutes were appalling. By chance, as we started to fall, a light current carried us away from the cliff-face. At least we wouldn't crash into it. All we could do now was pray that the engineers had known what they were doing. Our lives weren't worth a damn.



Intermittent cracks from the pressure on the metal resounded in the cockpit. Trickle of water seeped through the seams. In the engine room, the reading on the depth gauge steadily increased: 2000, 2500, 3000 metres...

started to sink and, as the elephant slid down, it trumpeted deafeningly, flapping its ears, beating troughs in the sea with its trunk, to survive. And on the billows he created, we were able to swim away from the wreck. The entire court stayed inside, petrified, party to what might be another shipwreck. Even as the cargo boat slipped under, our elephant, with a brutal effort, recovered its calm and, a few seconds later, had become a floating dune. Lucky it was that it did float.

The survivors were fished out, happy to come upon this huge lifeboat. The elephant rose above the sea, its balconies skimming the surface of the water, but since the engine room was completely swamped, we had no motive power and bobbed about like a glass jar in the arms of the ocean. Men crowded onto the terrace, the head and all the floating parts of this second embarkation except the bedrooms, the interior and the court's private balconies. A few of them had managed to rescue oil drums, planks and various tools, so the captain organised the construction of a sort of platform which he lashed to the elephant's tail so there was space for everyone – not very comfortable but safe.

The tempest lasted two days and two nights and although we were seriously incommoded, I was most grateful for it, because, when I bumped into the sultan several times on the gangways, he evinced no surprise at my presence, being too preoccupied with his concubines, some had suffered worse than others. For all that, he finally fell asleep, worn out, and, by some wizardry or other, the whole company with him.

Now the expedition took an altogether bizarre turn: parallel worlds seemed to mingle like phantoms wandering in a labyrinth. In short, we all had the same dream at the same moment: under a benevolent sun in a cloudless sky we watched in astonishment as a school of whales in harness tugged the tramp steamer along. There were four, tied together by cables looped under their chin, each pulling an enormous hawser made fast to the boat. They stayed on the surface, their massive tails swishing in the sea. Aboard each sat a mariner firmly anchored with a lasso and, as the whales swam, the mariners disappeared briefly below the surface – not for long, in truth – taking a deep breath before each immersion. They steered the mammals with their feet, rather as a mahout does straddling an elephant. It was a sight of majestic slowness across a mirror-like sea, whilst, following the procession, clapping her hands for joy in the water, came a five-metre tall female giant, perched on the back of a hippopotamus.

'But it's her' I cried 'the girl I saw on the moon.'

The whole crew woke up, startled to have seen the same images in the same dream. We were still on the elephant but the sea, hitherto in such wild uproar, had become a flat sheet of silver on which reposed our pachyderm like a gift for a king...

The fishing proved plentiful and, the elephant's hold being well stocked with firewood, we had sumptuous barbecues on the platform, transformed for the purpose into a floating restaurant. The dormitories in the shade of the terrace functioned day and night.



The crewmen, divided into four teams, occupied their time with fishing, barbecuing, swimming, sleeping and a variety of games such as dice, cards or chess.

We fought off boredom with such energy that soon we saw the lights of the port of Valparaíso twinkling like the sparks of a Milky Way.

'Land ahoy' cried the mahout and we all got ready to dock.

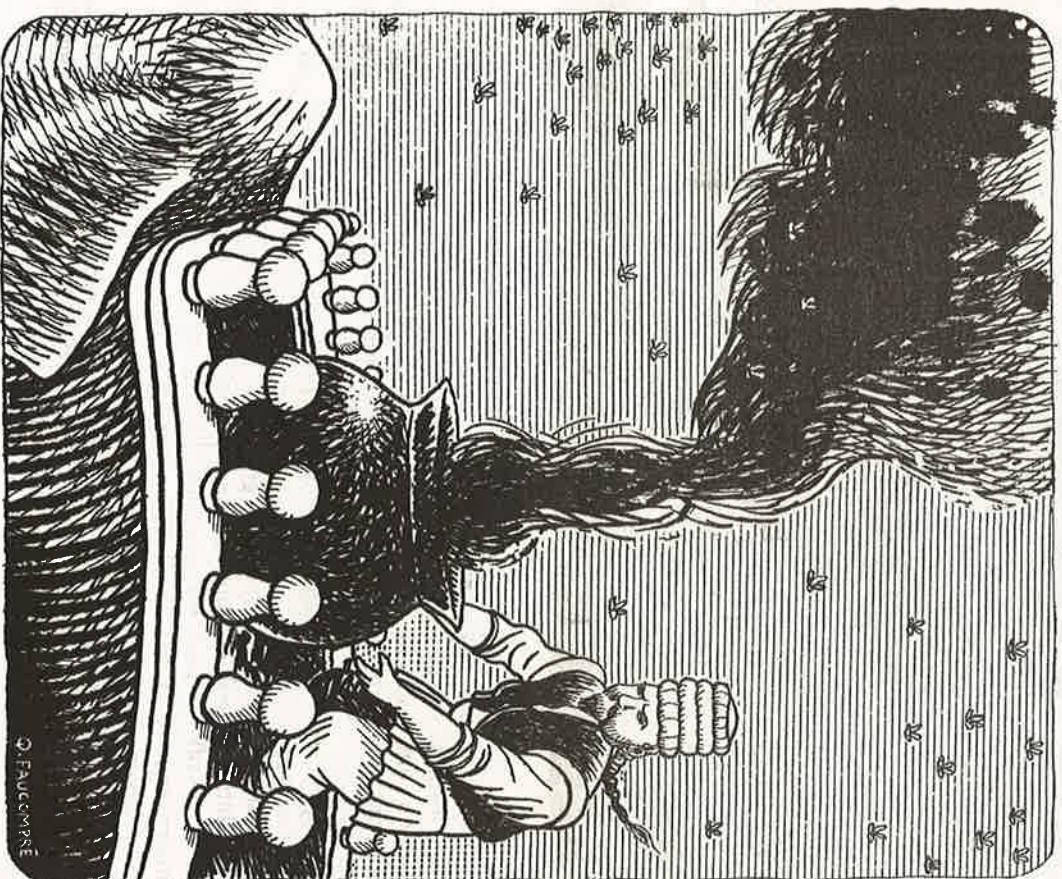
The problem is that we'd landed right in the middle of the Chilean coup of September 1973.

rupted. Somewhat embarrassed, I decided I must describe the adventure I'd had after I discovered the moon in my cupboard. Given the situation in which we found ourselves, they were more astonished than disapproving: they welcomed my account like a miracle popping out of a case.

I was rather proud to receive the entire delegation in my cabin and to watch them, one after the other, bending over into the cupboard after I had opened the trapdoor. There was no time for dithering. Our concubines gathered a heap of baggage and disappeared through the ceiling of the immense hall I have already described, together with the cook and two trusted men.

We have been incarcerated in the great prison in Valparaíso for five days. The elephant sits in lonely state, inert, in the middle of the prison yard, flayed by the sun.

Confined in tiny cells in groups of forty, court and crew mixed together, we have to take it in turns to sleep on a mezzanine of planks suspended from the ceiling. The



-07- Escape

We were greeted like the dust from a vacuum cleaner: straight from the ground into the rubbish bin, that is to say the 'luxurious' prison of Valparaíso situated on the hillside overlooking the sea we had just crossed.

As the tanks were taking us to prison, I found the sultan and the captain in the kitchen deep in conversation. They were discussing how to hide the concubines in the hole through which the wind had rushed up out of the elephant's belly. I excused myself and inter-

air is barely breathable and the men have to stand, tight-packed together. We do our best to protect the sultan, his council and the captain. It goes without saying that they have place of honour in the sleeping area and when they come down, the men huddle closer together to avoid touching them. A bucket serves us as a toilet.



The sultan occupies cell 42, the captain cell 53 and the councillors

38 and 39. Luckily, the eunuch is with the sultan, I am with the captain. Each group communicates with the others by organised unison singing. The communications officer has taught everyone Morse and one crewman nominated as conductor for the purpose sends sonorous messages ringing along the corridors. A low note signifies a dot, a shrill note a dash. With these well-rehearsed choirs we decode the messages. These little diversions give us heart. Obviously, the messages mostly turn on the fate of our concubines, the morale of the crew and plans for an eventual escape.

The sultan consults the oracles with the eunuch each evening at sunset. To do this, the men hoist the eunuch up and fasten his hair to the mezzanine. Thus dangling 50 centimetres above the ground, he clenches his teeth so tight that sweat starts from his temples, runs into his beard and drips, drop by drop, into a mug. Then the sultan drinks this medication if I may call it that, and stretches out on the mezzanine. We wait till next day to see if his dreams have won us liberty. And, on the fifth morning, the sultan awakes, in high excitement and explains his plan of escape.

Every day, one man from each cell has to carry the pail of excrement to the far end of the prison yard to empty it. This means going right past the elephant in single file, a hundred men from the hundred cells in the prison. The sultan gave orders not to use the buckets but to fill them to the brim with sweat. It was so hot this proved easy. Thus, four buckets of 15 litres apiece produced 60 litres of sweat, sufficient for the elephant to make a small leap in time and to arrive back in the prison yard, unexpectedly, some days later.

The four men were carefully selected. At the end of the day, they followed the line of prisoners and, when they came alongside the elephant, they dashed inside and into the engine room. The stupefied guards saw them emptying into the boiler what they supposed to be excrement. Within thirty seconds, the elephant, with the first engineer at the controls, began to move. It was no easy task for four men but it was enough to raise one foot and let it fall for them to disappear and find themselves four days away from here. And it worked.

It took a month of earth time for our quartet to pave the way for our escape. The elephant, in order to remain invisible without going too far into Time, walked slowly, pace by pace, to make a circuit of the yard. Sometimes, at night, it stopped for a few seconds to trumpet, so impressively, that the whole city was talking about the phantom elephant in the prison of Valparaíso. The roar of the elephant, sounding from different directions, through those nights, kept our spirits up. We had broad, fixed smiles. One might say they lit up the entire prison.

And so, on the thirtieth day, at dawn, a fire broke out in the governor's office, clearly started by our men. Our warders were commanded to fight the flames and we fomented panic even as the fire got closer and closer to the powder store. In the middle of the yard, the elephant was bellowing fit to burst. Our gaolers were terror-stricken caught in this vision of hell: flames to one side, the pachyderm to the other. Rifle bullets ricocheted onto him but he wasn't scratched.

The keys stolen, the doors opened, the corridors suddenly crowded with prisoners, and everyone had poured into the prison yard. Our escape had been carefully organised for over a month, but it took only three minutes for the whole crew to take up their positions. Fifteen seconds later, we were in tomorrow and the strength of our elephant pulverised the prison gate to the accompaniment of the intoxicated shouts of freed men.

We liberated the concubines, thoroughly bewildered, having spent no more than a handful of minutes on the moon.



-08- The Birds

Some months later we were on the pampas of Argentina. One night, as the elephant lay snoring, two birds flew into his open mouth. They'd been chased for over a week by a cloud of grasshoppers, 2km wide and 5km long. Exhausted, they saw the unmoving bulk of the steel elephant and were irresistibly drawn to him. The cloud of grasshoppers flew into the metal like kamikaze planes to be squashed like a shower of mosquitoes on a windscreen.

The crewmen, caught up in yet another form of nightmare, woke in rage and, quitting the flimsy encampment of tents, took refuge against the flanks of the elephant. We got out shields, thick linen cloths and any material that could afford protection. Panic seized everyone, even the captain, utterly horrified to see some of their number picked over completely in the space of a minute – even the powder of their chewed-up bones evaporated as if by magic. How many died like this? Thirty? Forty? Anyone in a tent further away than a few metres who couldn't reach shelter.



Twenty minutes later, the insect cloud was still harrying the expedition.

The eunuch took matters into his own hands. In peril of his life, he

carried a cauldron of boiling oil out onto the terrace and lit a fire under it. What had he put in the concoction? Whatever it was, an acrid smoke thicker than I have ever known soon spread round and over the elephant. This noxious fog at first kept the grasshoppers at a distance but then, pushed by those coming behind, they could not avoid flying into it. And then came a rain of dry, dead scales falling from the sky like snowflakes. Our men, protected by the mushroom of smoke, were able to replenish the cauldron. A mass of stifened grasshoppers cluttered the terrace and we organised a cleaning operation with copious numbers of shovels and brooms. Soon, other fires were lit round the elephant to enlarge the safety zone. A bizarre factory of dried grasshoppers went into action. We piled up

seeing his palace invaded by birds did not appeal to him at all. On the other hand, to release the birds who had sought asylum and protection in the elephant seemed to him a bad omen. The council was called to immediate session and, two days' later, delivered its verdict.



The presence of the birds in the palace was declared to be a positive thing. What is more, the concubines, amused by the idea, were eager to construct a bird house. No sooner was it finished than the first chicks were in residence. The speed of their hatching (perhaps due to the displacement of the elephant in time)



two enormous heaps of them to be incinerated. What with the smoke produced by the cauldrons, the flames from the pyres of burning grasshoppers and the constant to-ing and fro-ing of the crew, it was like being in one of Hieronymus Bosch's diableries. There was plenty of sweat but assigning some of the crew to the task of driving the elephant away into the future was out of the question. In fact, given the speed at which the insects travelled, the factory had to be kept going flat out. The captain organised the watches and it was only after three days and nights that we saw the first rays of the sun, sign that the work was nearly finished, the extermination of the cloud completed.

Meanwhile, the cook found the two birds cowering in the kitchen, transfixed with fear and fatigue. He set about making them a nest in a cupboard. But, after a few days, the female had laid no fewer than fifty eggs. When the sultan was told, he remained rapt in thought; the risk of

was mind-boggling: they reached adulthood within a few hours. The birdhouse was approved on the proviso that the number of birds should be reduced to a decreed number of 50.

The unhatched eggs decreed a lucky supplement of food: omelettes, hard- and soft-boiled, scrambled...

The birds left over were to be ejected, live, through the elephant's anus. This was for practical reasons – the birdhouse stood near the animal's buttocks. So, from time to time, one lifted the tail and a dozen birds, occasionally more, flew off into the sky.

This pleased the sultan. He enjoyed seeing everyone staring, open-mouthed, eyes fixed on the sky, uttering small cries of delight. He thought of himself as another Méliès* about whom he'd heard so much.

*Georges Méliès 1861-1938, magician and film conjuror, developed technique of multiple imaging; his most famous film *The Trip to the Moon* 1902

-09- Decision and Preparations

Having crossed the Cordillera of the Andes and the pampas of Argentina, we found ourselves in Brazil looking out over another ocean – the Atlantic. One morning, the sultan woke up full of excitement. He had seen the little girl walking along the seabed, first receiving and then casting aside a white pebble that a tiny octopus, moving at lightning speed, eagerly brought her. The octopus laughed and made bubbles when the girl held one of his tentacles with one hand and tickled him with the other. Then the sultan had watched as she sewed a boat to a rock with a large needle, two metres long, and a metal cable instead of thread.

His highness had the brilliant idea of crossing the sea underwater, convinced that we would easily find our little person's new playground. Also, he'd got it into his head to find none other than a submarine passage, a route linking the two continents. He wanted to be the first to plot the course which he had already christened "The Highway under the Ocean of the Sultan of the Indies". We itemised in full the fantastic complexities of such an undertaking, the risks involved, not to mention the impossibility of withstanding the phenomenal pressure to we'd be subjected: to no avail.

He retorted that we would find under the sea exactly what we had found above it, the same mountains and passes, the same plains, and what we could do in one element we could do in the other.

I cannot go into the strenuous preparations, the calculations, the elaborate constructions developed by our finest engineers. At first, there was funk, then a crazy enthusiasm for, a growing obsession with, this extraordinary undertaking gripped the entire company.

The work took a whole year during which the sultan toured the kingdom in the belly of the elephant. He used the time to make borings in the ground, to build villages and people them with natives of the ports of Brazil, to cultivate the land, to bring in domestic animals, to plant fruit trees. Somebody found a mine containing diamonds, copper and coal. Luckily, keeping the trapdoor open equilibrated the speed of Time between the moon and the elephant. We no longer needed fear those oscillations which I'd met with after making my discovery and the concubines had experienced during our sojourn in the prison. My cabin became no more than a doorway for the comings and goings of the workmen.

I'd told the sultan about the apparition of the giant young girl on the moon, but there remained no sign of her, except the traces, barely visible, of a shallow crater in the place where I'd lit upon her. Had she, perhaps, set off earthwards in her rocket?

Don't miss the next instalment in our adventures, in tomorrow's

Jules Verne