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FEBRUARY, 1940

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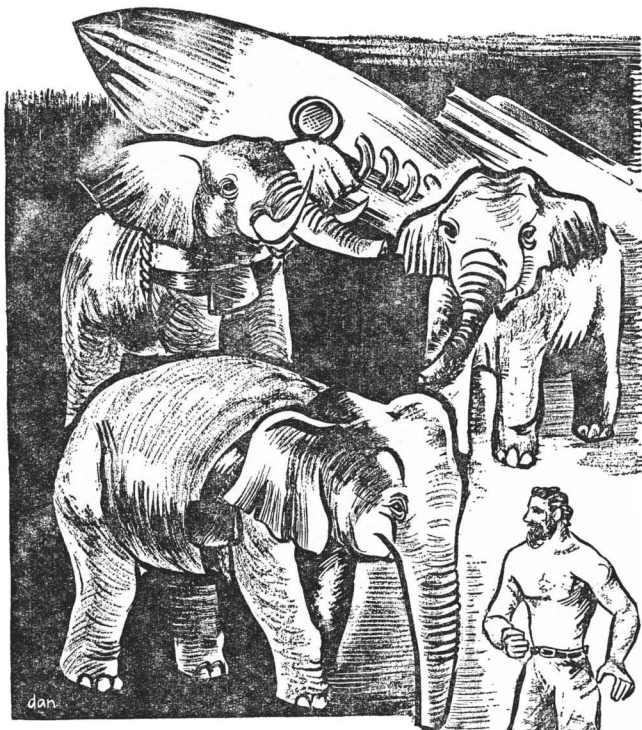
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ELEPHANT EARTH

When all the living men had died,
a dead man came to life again—and
found the world ruled by elephants.

By **Gabriel
Barclay**



AT FIRST, when I woke up, my attention was wholly caught by the odd fact that elephants were carrying me. It was not for ten minutes or more after I awakened that I remembered I hadn't been asleep. I had been dead.

That jumped to my head and cleared it a bit through sheer shock. I'd been put in the lethal gas

chamber, for a murder I never committed. Just before that, a scientist had offered two thousand dollars for my body, and I'd accepted to pay my lawyers. After that, the bare room, rather comforting, and oblivion. . . .

And now I was alive again. But where? In a circus? I lifted my head and saw that my two elephants—I was riding in a sort of a hammock or litter swung between them—were part of a long parade. I saw a long column of wrinkled backs, serpentine trunks, lettuce-leaf ears—and not a mahout among them.

That much I took in before a trunk-tip shoved me down to the bottom of my carrier. An elephantine squeal counselled that I lie still.

I lifted my hand to my throat. Something hung there, a tablet of lead. I jerked at it, and the supporting wire broke. I held it up and gazed at the stamped letters:

TO THE OPENER OF THIS SEALED VAULT:

You see here a number of records and articles of the twentieth century. This tablet lies upon the breast of a living man, treated chemically to suspend animation. When fresh air enters the vault, he will awaken. Let him tell you of the future about the age in which he lived.

"I'll be damned!" I grumbled, in a voice that seemed choked with dust. "Have I done a Rip Van Winkle?" Nobody answered, but one of my elephants gave me a wise look out of his piggy eye.

We had come to a slope. I could see below and behind—a throng of elephants, carrying all sorts of burdens, but no man riding or accompanying; behind them sprawled a wild landscape, all trees and bushes, with here and there what looked like ruined walls and tumbledown roofs. My carriers came to a halt upon a level surface and lowered my stretcher. I looked up into a circle of broad, intent elephant-faces.

Now I was allowed to stir. Two trunks helped me to my feet.

WE WERE on a deck of bolted metal plates, the elephants and I. It was a tremendous ship, lying low in the water, with two chunky funnels and two sprawling, one-story cabin blocks. Everything was elephant-squat and elephant strong. Up the sturdy gangplank, from a half-ruined stone dock, lurched more great beasts.

Then I felt faint and dizzy, and I guess they carried me to a cabin, a place ten feet high and thirty feet square. The walls were set with drawers and circular ports, but the only furniture was a big pallet. There I was set down, and a big gray brute folded down on his knees to watch me.

First he gave me a lemon-tasting drink, from a big cup with a spout. Then, with a sponge or cloth, he wiped my face and chest.

"Thanks," I said, wondering if he understood. "Now, what's all this business about?"

He reached his trunk into a pouch that hung from a sort of shoulder harness. First he drew out a yard-wide pad of paper, then a pencil as big as a walking stick. And he began to scrawl. I stared.

First he made some funny marks, like Arabic, then achieved three capital letters:

M A N

"Man!" I almost yelled. "That's me—man!" I pointed to the word, then to myself. At once the beast touched the word with his trunk, then my chest. He savvied. I grabbed the pencil and wrote **MAN** in turn, and my name, **WILLIARD**. After this, I printed out **ELEPHANT**. "That's you," I said, pointing to him. "Elephant—you."

His trunk reclaimed the pencil and began again, slowly and carefully: **I UNDESTAND SOME MAN RITING. YOU UNDESTAND.**

I took that last for a question. "Sure I understand," I said, and nodded. He continued, with more capitals: LONG TIME ALL MAN GONE. ELP (He scratched this out) ELEPHANT RULE NOW.

I stared at the writing, at the big monster with the pencil, and I felt cold and panicky. "Is that true? Gosh, if you could only talk." I got the pencil again and wrote: ARE ALL MEN DEAD?

He studied the question mark, and copied it several times before he scribbled an answer: LONG TIME AGO DEAD FROM SICK.

"A plague," I guessed, and printed a new question: HOW LONG AGO?

He wrote again: LONG TIME. Then: WE LEARN TALK ECH OTHER.

We began with names. On mine he could get only a snorting squeal, Huillid. Of his I made the word Aarump. You can see how hard it would be to get a common speech medium. We compromised, each learning the other's tongue and speaking in his own. We wrote a lot to bridge gaps, in English.

I never tried to master the elephant writing.

OUR ship was sailing, and I was kept in the cabin like a prisoner. Aarump was my guard, philosopher, and friend. In the days that followed, I made a sort of killlike garment of cloth woven from coarse linen-like fibers, with moccasins and belt of very good dressed leather. And Aarump was able to give me more dope on the death of humanity.

It had happened "long time ago"—so long, he could not say for certain. A disease, deadly and mysterious, had swept the world, killing whole nations between dawn and dusk. It may have happened well past the end of the twentieth century, for Aarump mentioned a world league of nations, and the mining of metal and coal in Antarctica. Then, too, he told of six rocket ships ready for interplanetary

flight when the sickness came. Several score people had fled the plague in these, heading apparently for Venus. Their fate was unknown. All others had died, except myself, in the sealed vault; and I was beginning to think I wasn't very lucky to have lived.

The elephants, man's most intelligent and capable servants, had carried on.

The first elephant-rulers had merely continued, through habit, the work they had been taught to do. Then wise leaders, by chance or enterprise, began to plan for themselves. Man's tools and machines, left idle, were reclaimed and altered to the touch of trunks instead of fingers. Language and organization grew, century by century, and abstract thinking. It must have taken ages. Finally an elephant-scholar stumbled on the key to old human books and writings. Now they could read well, though they didn't always understand.

"Which book inspires you most?" I asked. "I mean, of those written by humans?"

"There is no one in particular," Aarump replied. "Several volumes have been found, dealing with the career of a human being who excites our admiration intensely. He was reared from infancy by apes, became strong and wise and practical. He did return to civilization, but was inclined to reject it because of obvious faults and—"

"Tarzan!" I cried, and when I had written the name, Aarump said: "Yes, that is the book. Tell me, did this individual win the appreciation he deserved among his fellow-men?"

It took some explanation to make Aarump understand that Tarzan was a character only in a lively imagination, and he was considerably disappointed. He then said that, rejecting the ape-man as not a reality, he was inclined to admire most a sapient human being who, as described by a doctor-colleague, had flawless deduc-

tive methods that brought criminals to justice.

"Sherlock Holmes," I said. "Sorry, friend, but he's fiction, too."

Aarump was deeply shocked, and had something rather Bible-sounding to say about all men being liars.

Between discussions he brought me dried fruit and floury buns, and sometimes he mixed my drinking water with very good grape wine. I remembered that elephants sometimes enjoyed liquor; this must have been one of the most popular of the acquired human crafts.

We were crossing the Atlantic, I gathered, to reach the great elephant-country in Southern Europe. Aarump drew me a map, and I saw that their chief city was on the west coast of Italy, perhaps where Naples had once stood. There were other nations, he said, to the north and east in Europe and Asia Minor. "Ten millions in all, or more," he estimated, "not to mention the savage, unorganized bands far south across the land-locked sea."

"And I am the only man on Earth," I added.

"You are the only man on Earth."

It chilled me with loneliness.

THE day came when I, locked in my cabin, heard commotions, engine murmurs, whistle signals. Aarump came and told me that we were landing.

I went on deck, dressed in my homemade tunic and moccasins. It was a bright, warm afternoon. The crew of elephants was ranged at the rails, gazing out over a landlocked expanse of blue water, dotted with broad, low-built craft of all sizes. Beyond rose the square, massive buildings of a stone city.

Closer we steamed, and a sturdy tug came alongside to take charge. It towed and shunted us into a great slip next a dock of red stone. The long, strong gangplank was run out. An officer-elephant went ashore, conferred with some col-

leagues on the dock, then returned. Aarump and a companion came up at my two elbows, and I felt a loop of thin, strong metal chain slide over my shoulders and tighten at my waist. The other end Aarump clipped to his shoulder harness. Then we went down the gangplank.

Aarump called the town something like *G'au*—another word I can't pronounce or spell exactly—and said it was the largest community of elephants on Earth. We left the dock, moved along the street above it, and boarded a great, low, open car, like a motorized tumbrel. It rolled away with us.

The elephant-capital *G'au* was built of stone, mostly white and red. The streets—all of fifty yards wide—were paved in concrete, and the sidewalks were as broad as the old front yards of men. But the thickest buildings were almost all single-story jobs; the rare second and third stories seemed added as afterthoughts to completed one-story houses. Some of these upper levels were reached from outside by solid ramps. I never saw a staircase in *G'au*.

Of course, this type of building was understandable. How could elephant-workmen climb, swing on flimsy ropes, walk along narrow girders? There could be no skyscrapers for them.

The inhabitants moved all around us, riding in cars like ours, or pacing the sidewalks. When there were two or more together, they kept step, like soldiers. Most of them wore shoes, fitted cylinders of metal-clamped leather or rubber, on all four feet. Some, perhaps the dandies of the place, were draped in gay-patterned cloths, like the trappings of a rajah's favorite beast. They weren't any more than mildly curious about me; I remembered that man, so eager to stare and know and find out, was descended from the ultra-curious monkey. And I remembered, again, that I was the last of my race. I felt a freezing weight of lonely terror.

At last we dismounted from the car, and Aarump led me into a white stone house that reminded me of a mausoleum. The room inside was uncomfortably spacious, with a thick rug but no furniture or pictures. I felt like a minnow in a bathtub. The other elephant that had come with us tramped away through an inner door, and I heard him squeaking and burling to some others. Aarump informed me that I was about to meet the leaders of his people.

WHEN they arrived, they were mighty unassuming, for all their bulk. None of them wore caparisoning, only utilitarian harnesses to support their pocket-pouches; but all of them were long on native elephant dignity. They gathered around me, about fifteen of them, like dogs told to guard a squirrel—watchful, cautious, somehow yearning to do something to me. Aarump made a little lecture about how I was found, and what I had had to say about myself and my dead race. He was most respectful. Then the Number One elephant of the examiners—he was the smallest one there, no more than seven feet at the shoulder, but bumpy and high in the brow—began to ask questions. I could understand him pretty well, and Aarump interpreted for me.

Before long, the boss beast had me talking religion, and he was mystified and fascinated. He must have asked a hundred questions on the subject, and I doubt if he wholly understood any of my answers. Perhaps Aarump did not interpret me quite well enough. Then a bigger riddle came up—man's ancient necessity for laws and their enforcement. The whole mastodon committee laughed, actually laughed, with deep gurgling in their trunks. The chief wondered aloud why mankind couldn't accept rules made seriously for the good of the race and the protection of the individual, and this time I was stumped for an answer.

Then I described governments, politicians and orators, and they almost popped their big sides with elephantine laughter.

"Tongues, not brains, ruled your people," said the chief. "It is well that you died, all of you. Likewise understandable."

Nothing malicious or sharp in his manner, only a flatly definite opinion. I tried to disagree in the same dispassionate manner, saying that the arrival of the plague was nothing more than bad luck.

Aarump tried to translate, but paused. "What was that last word?" he asked me. "Write it on this pad . . . yes, we have seen the word in men's books, but find it hard to understand." He passed the pad to the chief, and it went from trunk to trunk around the circle, all the huge gray heads nodding seriously above it. Meanwhile the chief addressed me again:

"We are, naturally, interested in you as a survivor of a race from which we have learned certain useful things. I am sure that you will repay our study and discussion." Others in the group made sniffing noises of agreement. "I wish that we had recovered more human beings, especially a female."

A female, a woman! And suddenly I thought of all the nice girls I'd known, with bright eyes and soft hair and ready smiles; girls who'd taken tea with me and ridden in cars with me, and let me hold hands in movies, and who had written me letters on tinted stationery; and now there'd never again be one for me to look at and talk to and maybe kiss. . . .

"A female would give you children, to be studied or trained for our use," the chief was continuing.

I lost a little of my temper. "You'd better be glad I'm alone," I snapped. "With a dozen men to help, I'd put you elephants into servitude again."

All listened solemnly to Aarump's translation of this, but I got no answering spark of rage.

"Why speak of such things?" the chief asked carelessly. "Since there is only one of you, there shall never be more. Possibilities are not important unless they can be converted into actualities."

This struck me as being a true elephantism, and I said so; but the chief shook his head.

"It was recognized by at least one outstanding member of your species, a human being whose autobiography I have read. Many copies have been discovered, so you may know the same history. He was shipwrecked on the most desolate island, with all his companions lost; instead of despairing, he lived and even thrived alone for years; he taught himself to do without the things he could not have, and to profit by the things he did have. So that, after saving a prisoner from some savages—"

"Robinson Crusoe," I groaned. "More fiction."

Aarump translated, and added something of what I had told him concerning Tarzan and Sherlock Holmes. They all stared at me. I felt like a kid trapped stealing cookies, by all his aunts and uncles at once.

AFTER this, the meeting was thrown open, so to speak. The lesser leaders began to argue.

"I represent the Medicals," said one who was maybe the tallest of them all, but quite gaunt and rickety for an elephant. "I think the most important item to be studied in this specimen is his structure of bone and muscle. See!"

With the tip of his trunk he drew my hand forward.

"This prehensile instrument," he lectured, "is the most delicate ever achieved by nature, superior to our own natural equipment."

A colleague agreed with him, but urged against vivisection of me. "He is small and dext, and we will be better advised to

keep him alive, to use him in doing certain delicate work," he pointed out. "Perhaps he can achieve greater perfection in, say, the assembling of electrical apparatus, than we."

A third urged that I be placed on exhibit, so that the citizenry of G'au and other cities might observe me, but he was quickly shouted down. Several spoke in support of the rangy Medical leader, whose suggestion that my "structure of bone and muscle" be studied seemed to involve a general chopping and hewing of me apart. I was glad to find that the other school of thought, the one that would keep me alive to do "certain delicate work," had its adherents as well.

"I think I ought to have some voice in this matter," I ventured to say to Aarump, but he did not think the remark worth translation. Instead he asked permission to offer a plan of his own, and the argument died down for a moment.

"I am one of those who study rocket engineering and the possibilities of flight to other worlds," he began diffidently.

"A most imperfect science," grumbled the Medical leader.

"Not if we use this specimen," argued Aarump. "One of our own race would be too large and weighty for the ship we have been perfecting; but here is a living, intelligent being, not more than a tenth of the weight of the lightest of us. If he was allowed to fly in the ship—"

"I do not approve it," the chief cut in. "He might be killed, or lost in space. The opportunity of study, or other benefit from him, would be gone forever."

"Give him to us," pleaded the Medical spokesman.

"No, no," interposed the head of the Mechanical party. "Again I point out—"

"Silence," the chief interposed. "I have the final decision in this matter. Let us foregather tomorrow, and I shall then announce the inclination of my viewpoint. This meeting may stand dismissed."

We broke up then, and Aarump was instructed to take me to a secure lodging in the rear of the building.

When he and I were alone, and he had brought me food for which I had very little appetite, we talked.

"How do you think the chief will decide about me?" I asked him. "Do I get butchered, or put to work?"

"I cannot tell you that. It may depend on how well you do delicate mechanical tasks."

I shivered a little, knowing that I was no better a mechanic than the majority of my race.

I had a vision of myself being set to work at, say, clock-making or lens-grinding, failing miserably, and being turned over to the Medicals with their scalpels and probes. Ugh!

Finally Aarump took his leave and locked me in. And loneliness rode down upon me like a charge of dark, silent cavalry. What if I did win the boon of life? It would be work, hard and unhandy; food now and then, a place to sleep—and elephants, monstrous, impersonal elephants, interested only in the novelty of my appearance and the profit of my handwork; slavery and isolation, captivity and friendlessness. Perhaps death would be better than that, even death as an agonized subject under giant surgical instruments. The pain would come to an end after minutes, after an hour at most. Then oblivion, the next world. Perhaps I'd see, as my long-gone Sunday School teacher used to promise so confidently, the loved ones I'd lost. . . .

It was hours before I slept, and then I dreamed horribly about alternate drudgery and torture.

AARUMP'S trunk twitched me awake in the dark hour before dawn. He and two other elephants, strangers, had forced the lock of my door. They told me, very quietly, to follow them.

"Where?" I asked Aarump. "To the laboratory or the sweatshop?"

"To neither," he replied. "We are going to let you escape, after a fashion. Come."

I went with them, out into the night of stars and through an alley and into a meadow-like open space. Beyond, in the midst of some rough sheds, was a big oval contrivance of gray metal, set in a steel-lined pit like a ten-foot egg in a cup.

"It is a rocket vehicle," Aarump told me. "We shall fire it within five minutes, and before many hours it will come to the planet Venus." He put his trunk-tip, very insistently, upon my shoulder. "You, Huillid, shall go inside."

"I? Go in that?" I gasped.

"Yes. Our engine will not lift the weight of one of us. But you are small enough, light enough, to ride to Venus."

I protested that I knew absolutely nothing about space-flying.

"That need not matter," I was assured. "The vessel is automatic, and if launched now will hold the proper course. Your only duty will be to inform us if you land safely."

One of the others opened a panel in the side of the egg. I could see a little cell of a cabin, lined with cushions and furnished with a hammocklike sling. A single metal lever showed in one padded wall.

"If you are alive on landing," Aarump directed me, "pull that lever down and then around in a circle to the right. It will fire off a special charge of white-burning explosive, that will flash clear through the cloudy envelope of Venus and advise us, here at our telescopes, that the journey was a success. It will also open the door of the ship and let you out."

I nodded, rather stupidly. "And let me out," I repeated. "After that, Aarump?"

"After that," said Aarump, "you must fend for yourself."

I studied the big metal egg, the three elephants, the starry black sky. I studied,

too, the grassy soil under my feet. Suddenly I wished I could take root in it forever—stay here on Mother Earth.

"You'll get into trouble over this," I reminded Aarump.

"That need not concern you, Huillid. But if you do not wish to go, you may remain. You will die by torture or live in toil."

His words were no chance shot, and they decided me. I stepped toward the open door of the space-ship. Three trunks helped me in and strapped me into the hammock. I gazed at Aarump in what must have been a pitiful manner.

"Wish me luck," I begged.

"What does that word mean?" he asked me, as once before. And then the panel closed and locked. I counted thirty seconds before there came a roaring whoop of exploding fuel, and a humming vibration as I took flight. I could not see out, but I knew that I was going faster, faster. It was not sleep that came, nor yet a trance, but I seemed to slide away into restful detachment.

MY SENSES became alert again. Hours had passed, I knew, and there was no vibration. I'd come to a stop, then, on Venus. The journey was over.

I groped through the straps of the hammock. My hand found the lever and pulled it down, then turned it. There was a scream like the grandfather of all Roman candles, and then the panel sprang open. I kicked free of my bonds, and scrambled out.

It was getting on for twilight, or so it seemed, and all around me grew high, luxuriant plants. I did not study them

closely just then, nor did I turn then or later to gaze at the ship that had carried me from my mother planet. I did glance up, at a thickly clouded sky that was full of filtered radiance, and then I gazed across at a silvery stream of water. I took a few steps toward an angular boulder, and sat down.

I knew a greater aloneness than ever. On Earth I had been the only man, but at least I knew the continents and oceans, the plants and animals, and I had had Aarump and other intelligent fellow-beings. Here—what was here?

I wondered for the thousandth time about those long-ago brothers and sisters of mine who had tried to reach Venus, and leave behind the plague-ridden Earth. What had been their fate. . . ?

Or had they ever existed?

The elephants had mistaken Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes, and Robinson Crusoe for real persons in true stories. And there had been so much science fiction; some of it must have come in the way of the elephant-scholars—fancies of H. G. Wells, or Stanley G. Weinbaum, or Eando Binder! And they'd taken that for the truth, had thought people had actually taken flight from catastrophe! I groaned aloud.

Somebody chuckled. I sprang up and whirled around.

A girl had come up from behind a clump of palm-like trees.

She wore brief, becoming garments, that seemed spun out of silver wire. A dark fillet caught her blond hair back from a lively, lovely face. In the hollow of one arm she carried a weapon like a rifle.

When my eyes met hers, she smiled. "Hello, stranger," she greeted me.