

# The Elephant's Ear

By Edward Lucas White

Hannibal, cum in praealti fluminis transitum elephantos non posset compellere . . . jussit ferocissimu in elephantum sub aure vulnerari et eum qui vulnerasset tranato statim flumine procurrere: elephante exasperatus ad persequendum doloris sui auctorem tranavit amnem et reliquis idem audendi fecit exemptum.

Julius Frontinus, STRATEGEMATICON, I, VII, 2.

“Not another man,” said Hannibal, “shall cross that river until those elephants are all safely over. We cannot afford to lose them, and we have none too many men on this side now.”

He glowered at his brother with his domineering preoccupied scowl, his dark face, small as it was between the low browpiece of his severe helmet and his tight curling sable beard, contracted still more in the concentration of his resolve, his black eyes glittering, his eyelids puckered, his brow knitted.

Mago smiled back his big, blond, blond, blue-eyed smile.

“Leave me a third of the cavalry,” he said softly, “and I will hold off the Gauls until to-morrow night; yes, and until noon of day after to-morrow—hold them off without half trying. You won’t lose an elephant.”

“Your one instinct,” his brother retorted, “is to get into risky situations for the mere dare devil delight of seeing how nearly you can go to just missing destruction for nothing and feeling the glow of satisfaction that comes from your dexterity in extricating yourself. We’ll get into tight and scary places enough without manufacturing artificial traps for ourselves. Not another man shall cross till the last elephant is over. We are holding back the savages none too handily now. Listen to that!”

The comparative silence about them, disturbed only by the swish of the wind rocked boughs, the murmur of the sulky river, the guttural calls of the mahouts and the occasional squeal of an elephant, had been accentuated by the far off fringe of intermittent but fairly continuous shouts, short, barking, yelping calls, long drawn, shrill howlings, and at intervals the faint sound of a sustained burst of ferocious yells or exultant cheers. As Hannibal spoke a longer, louder and less distant outbreak made itself heard.

“I could hold them off easily,” Mago repeated. “I could give the mahouts all the rest of to-day and all of to-morrow to work with the beasts.”

“I mean to camp three leagues forward tonight,” said Hannibal, “and I hope to make six leagues to-morrow. We’ve no time to waste. And suppose we needed a rest and you could do what you promise, what guarantee have we that the brutes will be any more tractable in a day or in ten? We don’t know yet what the trouble is.” He turned to the bevy of young nobles who acted as his unofficial staff orderlies.

“Find the head mahout,” he commanded, “and fetch the interpreter.”

Two of the mounted youths galloped off; the rest kept their fretful horses at a respectful distance behind the two generals, who from their knoll overlooked the hopeless confusion of the milling, heaving herd of squealing, recalcitrant elephants, the broad river and the

tangled woods on the further side. The woods gave no token that fifty thousand men had vanished into them since dawn, but the other bank of the river, as far as they could see up and down it, was all ropy, greasy mud, puddled to a paste by the convulsive, frantic struggles of the back-slipping feet of the myriads of men, horses, mules and cattle which had scaled it only by the expenditure of their last fraction of strength. As Hannibal scanned the surface of the river, swirling with sullen eddies, he kept a tight rein on his fidgety little bay. Mago's reins lay on the neck of his tall sorrel, which he sat without visible effort, as comfortable as if he had been on a sofa.

The orderly who had sought the head mahout quickly brought him. He wagged his turban, waved his arms and poured out a stream of excited vocables.

"Where's that interpreter?" Hannibal demanded.

Two more orderlies dashed off, and after an interminable wait, which the Asiatic filled with gesticulations and floods of unintelligible gabble, all three returned together. The interpreter was across the river, beyond present reach.

Hannibal cursed the interpreter.

"That's what you get," said Mago with exasperating sweetness, "for your insistence on importing bogus experts from the other side of the dawn. If you had left the vestibules of the sunrise undisturbed and hadn't ransacked the Ganges Valley for alleged adepts at elephant driving we should all be better off. You should have been able to spend on something worth while the fortune you lavished on obtaining these dandelion-stem-fingered, spindle-shanked exotic incompetents. And if your elephants were in charge of plain, honest Numidians, even if anything went wrong, which is unlikely, we should be able to understand what it was."

"Talk never accomplished anything," said Hannibal. "Can't anybody else understand this man?"

"I have an idea," said Mago, "that I begin to catch the drift of his repetitions. I have picked up some words of these men's tongue. Shall I try?"

"By all means," said his brother impatiently. Mago questioned the man, made him repeat his answers slowly over and over, and reported:

"He says the elephants know they cannot climb the further bank and will not enter the river."

"Do you expect me to believe," Hannibal exclaimed, "that an elephant can judge of the practicability of a bank at that distance?"

"I don't expect anything," Mago retorted; "I'm only telling you what this fellow says as near as I can catch his meaning. Anyhow, you ought to know as much about elephants as I do."

"When we left Carthage," said Hannibal wearily, "I thought I knew all about elephants. Every day since I've learned something new about them. Now I feel I am just on the verge of beginning to learn about them. I am approaching the point where their probable usefulness in battle in Italy seems no longer to outweigh the difficulties of getting them there. If it were not that they are so very useful at just the right situation, if it were not for the universal and unreasonable dread of them among the Romans, I'd abandon the whole herd here and now. As it is we must get them on."

"Why not take them up or down stream beyond where the bank is mauled?" Mago inquired.

“If I understand this man right he says he could have got them over if they had been sent first instead of held till now.”

“You know very well,” said Hannibal severely, “that we cannot now dislodge the natives from either of the vantage points on the river, nor can we now work round either with the force we have left, and they are being reinforced hourly. No, we must cross here.”

He turned to the force of orderlies.

“Scatter!” he ordered. “Find Hannibal at once!”

Hannibal the Scout, the namesake of the great commander, was the most hated and the most feared man in the army, reputed the cruelest man alive and known for the most cool headed, boldest, most reckless, most calculating and most competent man in the whole corps of spies, scouts and skirmishers which he commanded he had been born in the lowest slums of Carthage on the night when all its rabble were feasting at the expense of Hamilcar Barca, who honored with lavish magnificence the birth-anniversary of his heir. After that heir of the great Admiral the slum baby had been named by its mother. Before it was three years old its parents died or abandoned it, and the waif grew up into an amazing precocity of vice. Brought by chance to the Admiral’s notice, the street boy caught his fancy and was taken to Spain. There he developed marvelous capacities of usefulness and had won and held his place as chief scout. He had a knowledge of men such as only slum dwellers acquire, and a store of woodcraft wonderful even for one forest bred and more than miraculous for a former wharf-rat.

Promptly he came, leaning on the neck of his lathered calico pony, his escorts of ragged outcasts half surrounding him, half following. On his right rode his trusted helper, a Spanish tribesman incredibly tall, incredibly lean, long necked, lantern jawed, mounted on a fleabitten pony. The remainder were unsavory rogues; Spanish, Mauretanian and Numidian irregular horsemen and Mauretanian runners—scantily clad, gaunt figures, all cheek bones, collar bones, ribs and staring, skinny joints, but running easily and long-breathed among, alongside of or behind the scampering ponies. Their leader was a dark man—darker than his dark namesake the swarthy commander. He ranged his pony by Hannibal’s horse, listened to his chief’s laconic explanation, questioned the head mahout (he knew something of every language spoken in the motley host), confirmed Mago’s interpretations and asked what was wanted.

“Get them across, and at once,” Hannibal commanded.

The scout was perhaps the only subordinate who did not stand in awe of the redoubtable leader.

“That is always the way,” he snarled; “any difficult and dangerous task is put on me, and no thanks after I do it.”

“Keep your temper,” his General told him. “Can you do it?”

“I can,” the scout replied.

“Then do it and no more talk,” said the General.

“I cannot guarantee to get them all over safely,” the scout warned him. “This is worse than any river they ever swam. I may lose one or ten.”

“Do your best,” said Hannibal. “I give you a free hand.”

“One more point,” said his namesake. “I must have your leave to kill one after I get them over.”

“Kill one!” the General exclaimed indignantly. “Nonsense! What for?”

"I won't say what for," the scout replied. "I know how to get the herd over if you will let me, but I refuse to do it unless I may kill one of those I get across. If you refuse I wash my hands of the job. Get 'em across yourself. You may for all of me, but I help not a particle."

The chief measured with his keen eyes the sulky scout.

He read men instantly.

"Have your own way," he said.

"Pledge it in plain words," the scout insisted. "I'll have no blame through any uncertainties as orders."

"Get the elephants over and kill one afterward if necessary."

"It will be the least valuable of the lot," the scout told him. He spoke to the mahout, who ran beside his pony as he trotted off. Arrived at the herd, Hannibal the Scout asked:

"Which is your most intractable beast?"

"Barranith," the mahout replied.

"Point him out," the scout commanded. The mahout did so.

"Get chains, mallets and stakes and peg him down tight by the river bank, facing across the river," the scout ordered.

Barranith was by no means the largest bull elephant of the herd. A dozen exceeded him in height and weight. But it took the six biggest, hustling him on all sides, to hold him while the dodging, skipping, squeaking mahouts pegged him down tight.

"The instant you displease him he is worse than a wild elephant," the head mahout told Hannibal the Scout as they watched the operation.

When Barranith was secured sufficiently, to the mahout's satisfaction, the scout commanded:

"Now double chain him."

When Barranith, still grumbling, but no longer resisting, had been fastened as they would have fastened a mad elephant, the scout ordered the other elephants taken some fifty yards back from the river and gave orders to feed them slowly.

He questioned Barranith's own mahout.

"What does he like best to eat?"

"Millet cakes and honey," said the Asiatic.

"Got any millet cakes?" the scout queried.

"Yes," said the man.

"Give me three," he commanded.

Then he galloped back to Hannibal and Mago on their knoll. It was about noon and Hannibal was fuming with impatience.

"What now?" he inquired.

"I need some honey," said the scout, "and some pepper. Is there any left of either in the army?"

"My cook has pepper," Mago put in.

"Is he on this side of the river?" his brother demanded.

"I believe so," Mago ruminated doubtfully.

"Send an orderly after him," said Hannibal, "and get that pepper, or go yourself if you like."

Mago sent an orderly.

“And the honey?” the scout persisted.

Mago again came to the rescue.

“My surgeon has a kidskin of strained honey to dress wounds with; but he won’t give it for anything else.”

“Is he on this side of the river?” Hannibal queried again.

“Yes,” said Mago positively.

“Well, get that honey,” his brother ordered. “much do you need?” he asked the scout.

“Enough to fill the hollow of my hand,” he replied.

Orderlies set out in search of the surgeon. Presently one brought the pepper. From the surgeon came a refusal.

“Go get the honey yourself, Mago,” said Hannibal, in his most imperious tones.

Mago, his kindly eyes a-twinkle at the humor of the situation, signaled two of the orderlies with a gentle nod and an easy wave of the hand to each. The three galloped off, and when they returned one of the youths carried a small kid-skin bulging under his arm.

After he had been provided with sufficient pepper and honey Hannibal the Scout left the two generals and their escort on their knoll and cantered down to where Barranith was fastened. He dismounted some distance from the animal, beckoned to the mahout and conferred with him. He took the three fat, moist cakes, smeared honey on two, made with his finger a hole in the third, put in the pepper and plugged the hole with a bit of the cake. Then he told the mahout to stand behind his charge. He went in front of the anchored beast. Putting one of the cakes on the point of his spear he held it toward Barranith. The elephant smelled it, took it and engulfed it in his crimson bag of a mouth with visible satisfaction. The scout approached until he was just out of reach of the trunk and held out another cake. Barranith’s trunk reached for it. But the scout backed off a pace, held the cake up and made as if to throw it. Promptly Barranith curled his trunk high up in the air over his forehead and opened his slack, slobbering cavern of a mouth. The scout threw the cake straight and true, and Barranith’s approval was visible all over his huge bulk. Then the scout backed off another pace and held up the third cake. Again Barranith spread wide his mouth, again the scout threw accurately. Then, as the pepper took effect, the great dun beast made good his claim to the title of “the trumpeter,” tooted, squalled and blared his rage, strained at his shackles and strove to reach his insulter.

“Will he get loose?” the scout called.

The mahout, peering from the bush where he had hidden himself, squeaked out a quavering reply

“Not yet, lord. He is safely held yet.”

The scout slowly drew near again to his victim. The elephant, shaking with fury, tugged at his fastenings and bawled his hatred. The scout eyed him, shifting the grip of his spear.

At that moment Mago, watching from his horse on the knoll by his brother, saw a boy running toward the scout. Recognizing him for the absent interpreter’s son, one of the bare half dozen boys with the expedition, he realized the situation and put spurs to his horse. Both the skulking mahout and the intent scout were unaware equally of the racing boy and of the hurrying general. The scout watched his chance, avoided the swaying trunk and drove his spear point through the long, tattered flap of the elephant’s forward-held left ear. The brute shrieked with pain, impotent rage and outraged pride. As the spear head tore sideways from the bleeding ear the boy yelled out, “You are hurting my

elephant!" dashed past the animal, leaped at the scout and wound his arms and legs about him.

The unforeseen onset pushed him still further from his victim. Hannibal was so staggered by the unexpected attack that he lurched back, and, strong man as he was, could not instantly free his arms from the boy's wiry grip. He cuffed at the lad's head, and then his hand went to his dagger. He would have slit the boy's throat or stabbed him as automatically and unhesitatingly as he would have crushed a loathsome insect. Before he could draw his dirk Mago was on them. Wrenching his horse round almost in its own length, he reined it back on its haunches and seized the boy's left arm.

"Let him go!" he commanded.

His practised lift, reinforced at just the right instant by his horse's onward movement, tore the boy from the scout and laid him helpless across the horse in front of him.

"Be still, you little fool!" he admonished him. "Do you want to be killed for an elephant?" Wheeling round, he cantered back to the knoll with his prisoner.

"Always your everlasting sentimentalism," growled Hannibal. "Why did you have to interfere?"

"I couldn't see a child killed for his folly," Mago retorted. "Give him a chance."

"We've no room for folly and sentiment on this expedition," said Hannibal sourly. "If he ever catches my eye again with any such behavior I'll have him put out of the way instantly. I'll tolerate no such weakmindedness."

"Give him a chance," Mago repeated.

"Tie him up, anyhow," his brother ordered.

While two of the orderlies tied the boy hand and foot the scout resumed his tormenting of Barranith. Trunk and spear, never touching, fenced in the air, the elephant shrilling his indignation. Then a second time the javelin tore through the thin flesh of the flapping ear.

"Be warned, lord," the mahout called from his bush. "His strength is as his rage. Anger him again and he will tear free."

"Is he angry enough?" the scout inquired.

"Too angry already, lord," the mahout replied. "Much too angry already."

"Keep back there," the scout called sharply. "Don't let him see you."

The mahout retreated through the bushes; the scout made a detour about the frenzied elephant and joined the mahout.

They walked to where Hannibal's horse was held by one of his underlings.

"Did he see you?" the scout inquired.

"Perhaps," the mahout answered doubtfully, "certainly he heard me."

"Does he blame you?" Hannibal went on.

"If he does," said the mahout resignedly, "he will assuredly kill me. If he does not kill me you will know that he does not blame me. I think he blames only you."

"Will he remember me?" the scout demanded.

"As long as he lives he will remember you. If you go near him again you are a dead man."

"Will he chase me?" Hannibal pursued.

"That will he," the mahout ejaculated; "to the ends of the world will he pursue."

"How far off am I safe?" the scout continued.

"Only when out of his sight," the mahout affirmed, "and an elephant can see further than men would believe."

“Would he recognize me across the river?” Hannibal concluded.

“Yea,” asserted the mahout, “and twice as far. He will know; he will not forget.”

The head mahout had joined them while they talked. To him the scout turned. He had assumed his intensest air of command.

“Now attend to me!” he ordered. “When I am out of sight quiet this elephant. As soon as you think it safe remove his fetters, except one shackle. Bring up the others and have them lined up three or four to right and left of him, and the rest in the rear of the foremost row. Arrange them so that their formation is deeper than it is wide, and those in the rear can see as little as possible of what is going on ahead of them. Choose for the front row the tallest elephants, and among them those at once promptest to obey and most easily excited. Have the mahouts mounted and ready with their goads. When all is prepared signal to my men on the further bank. When Barranith enters the river urge on the elephants; they will follow.”

“Truly, lord,” said the head mahout, “your words are wise. You surpass us at our own trade.”

The scout swung himself into his saddle, drove his heels into his pony and galloped off up stream, his tatterdemalion escort following in their usual haphazard fashion.

Barranith’s mahout gingerly approached him. The elephant was rocking from side to side, and whining piteously, the big tears streaming from his eyes. He did not grow angry at sight of his driver, but he did not quiet down, either.

From the knoll Hannibal, Mago and their escort surveyed the scene. Behind them the boy had struggled into a sitting posture. He peered between the legs of the horses.

“Let me go,” he begged. “Let me go comfort my elephant.”

“May I cut him loose?” Mago asked Hannibal. “It can do no harm now.

“I’ve a mind to have him speared for a nuisance,” Hannibal growled.

“Oh, give him a chance,” Mago reiterated for the third time. His face wore its kindly, compelling smile. Hannibal grunted an assent. Mago signed to one of the orderlies. He drew his dagger, cut the cords and in an instant the boy was scudding down the hill. He dashed in front of the elephant and began to coo to him, fondle him and pat him. Barranith stopped his woeful noises, ceased his rocking and responded to the boy’s caresses. The mahout left the boy and elephant together and fetched water from the river. He and the boy washed Barranith’s ear. The brute was then sufficiently quieted for the mahout to remove all the chains except one to each hind leg. Barranith was still shedding occasional tears and moaning over the indignity he had suffered, yet he felt himself in the hands of friends and his bad tempered little eyes roved over the prospect without catching sight of anything that irritated him. The elephants were being ranged in rows beside Barranith and behind him. Next him on his right was the tallest elephant, and aloft upon it the head mahout alternately viewed the proceedings of his subordinates and scanned the further bank of the river. Most of the bushes near the bank had been broken and tramped flat in the passage of men and animals. Just opposite two clumps were left at the lip of the steep bank, and beyond them was a gentle slope clear of trees for a dozen yards. The scout’s escort of mounted Numidians and half-naked Mauretanian runners emerged from the woods on the left. The runners were spearmen and swordsmen; the spearmen carried with miraculous ease their amazing twenty-four foot lances, with heads shaped like smilax leaves, three feet long and sharp as razors all round; the swordsmen carried their equally amazing Tingitanian two-handed swords, four feet long, straight, two-edged and

with great cross guards at the hilt. Four approached the two clumps of bushes; two, one swordsman and one spearman, hid in each clump. Then the lean man on the white pony stood up his straightest and waved his hand. His shout reached the head mahout. He looked behind him, swept a glance over the serried elephants, called a question, gave two guttural orders and then in his turn stood up, gestured and shouted.

Two ponies dashed out of the woods, one ridden by a Numidian nondescript, the other, a roan, carrying a figure cloaked to the eyes. They reached the top of the bank between the clumps of scrub, and then the swathed figure swung off the roan pony, shed one cloak after another till he had handed five to his companion, who promptly spurred away, carrying the cloaks and leading the roan pony.

Hannibal the Scout stood unhelmeted and unbooted, bareheaded and barefooted, clad only in his waist cloth, at the top of the bank.

Scarcely had he shed the last cloak when Barranith trumpeted. Hannibal the Scout danced on the edge of the river bank, waved his arms and yelled. Again Barranith trumpeted and all the herd took it up. In the silence following this outburst Mago and Hannibal heard the snap, snap of Barranith's leg chains. Again he trumpeted, again the herd reinforced his defiant outburst. Mago and Hannibal, watching intently, caught a momentary glimpse of Barranith's broad rump silhouetted against the yellow surgings of the river as he tilted down the bank. The herd heaved behind him, he trumpeted a third time and surged forward, the mahouts plying their hooked goads. Down the bank they slid and into the river, till its yellow water was spotted with erect mahouts, each with a trunk held aloft and part of a gray head visible before him and part of an unsubmerged gray back behind him. Hannibal the Scout danced and gesticulated on the bank. Barranith, without any mahout astride his back, swam two lengths before the other elephants. As he reached the bank and began to struggle up it Hannibal the Scout looked over the edge, gave a last teasing yell and then turned and fled for his life. As he turned, as Barranith toiled up the yielding bank, the four Africans, two above and two below began to sneak out of their clumps of bush. When he had his head above the bank, had caught sight of the scout running toward the forest and was making his last spasmodic effort to reach the level above, as they felt sure of his ignoring them, they crawled toward him, clinging to the slippery face of the bluff. Below and behind him they neared him just as he gained sure foothold. Before he could make the first stride of his pursuit Mago and Hannibal, watching from across the river, saw the two big Mauretanian swords flash to right and left of him, saw him sink down like a hamstrung horse, saw the long spears thrust home. The four men scampered away to right and left as the herd behind began to breast the bank, their mahouts yelling and pounding them with the spiky goads.

"Baal be thanked!" said Hannibal, "they will make it."

"Baal nothing," Mago snorted, "Hannibal be thanked! You could have prayed to Baal till next summer and they still be on this side. Your scout did it."

"Like enough he is praying to Baal yet," Hannibal rejoined, "and he will not lose one in the river. None is being swept down."

Mago scanned the turbid surface.

"Look there!" he exclaimed, pointing below the herd, now more than half across. Two heads bobbed in the current. They watched them till they gained the banks. Barranith's mahout was one and the boy the other.



“If that little idiot makes any more fuss I’ll have him thrown back into the river,” said Hannibal savagely.

“Give him a chance,” said Mago for the fourth time.

“Where a boy can swim there can I,” said Hannibal without replying.

“Don’t you venture it,” his brother protested. “If we lose you we are all dead men together. Cross in a boat.”

“Example counts,” snapped Hannibal, “I swim. As for you, off with you. Now is your chance for one of your favorite rear guard actions. Send me all the divisions except your own as promptly as you can. Don’t lose more men than you need lose. Take Gisgo and Hasdrubal. I keep the rest.”

The two young nobles he designated followed Mago away from the river, the rest followed Hannibal toward it.

As the last elephant scaled the further bank Hannibal spurred his horse into the yellow current, his escort beside and behind him. When they topped the further bank nothing living was in sight save a gray faced Hindoo and a sobbing lad sitting huddled by Barranith’s carcass. Hannibal gave but one glance at them and spurred his horse past them into the forest.