JOHN COWPER POWYS

THE BRAZEN HEAD
Dedicated to

GILBERT TURNER, F.L.A.
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I

THE STONE CIRCLE

It did not take Lil-Umbra long with her fifteen-year-old legs and her slender figure to scamper down the quarter-of-a-mile avenue of over-arching elms that led due eastward from the Fortress of Roque, where she lived, to the ancient circle of Druidic stones that had come to be known as “Castrum Sanctum”. Once only did she pause: and that was because something about the manner in which all the smaller twigs at the end of one of the branches clutched at each other and then let each other go arrested her attention. It made her think of a young man called Raymond de Laon: but she could not have explained to anyone, just why it did.

The avenue sloped down all the way from the Fortress of Roque to the camp, but before it reached the latter, which was a grassy enclosure littered with broken stones, the smoothness of its gradual descent was checked and impeded, or, if you were bold enough to take them in a flying leap, accelerated, by a couple of rather high and very massive marble steps.

Lil-Umbra had already made up her mind, after seeing each of her brothers come down with a disturbing if not a disastrous collapse, that such wild jumps were beyond what was expected even from a maid “of true Abyssum spirit”, as she had once heard herself described by her father to her mother. So she turned half round as she clambered down each of these two steps, touching with the tips of the fingers of one hand the slippery marble and giving a little tap on the ground with the toe of the foot that first came down, to make sure she wouldn’t slip or slide. Once safely on the level grass of the Castrum Sanctum she ran with a quick bounding step to three tall perpendicular stones which stood side by side in the centre of the enclosure.

During the whole of that January there had scarcely been one night of thaw, and as this was the dawn of the twenty-ninth and in a couple of days it would be the first of February, the day which was her father’s birthday, she had a particular reason of her own for approaching at this early hour those three upright stones.

It was Lil-Umbra’s special desire to see the sun rise that morning while the waning moon was still visible in the sky, but she never would have dared to dodge both Nurse Rampant and the Nurse’s assistant, old Mother Guggery, not to speak of Lady Val, her own devoted mother, if she hadn’t made an appointment to meet a person, not only respected by them all, but one who was intimately lodged in Sir Mort Abyssum’s trust and confidence.

This was none other than a gigantic Tartar whose life Sir Mort had saved when they both were surrounded in a half-crusading, half-plundering skirmish in Dalmatia, by an overpowering group of reckless Arab spearmen; and who in desperate gratitude had become his devoted slave for life.

Both the man’s parents had been now for a long time dead. Giants of his size were very rare among Mongolian Tartars but, all the same, Peleg inherited his gigantic stature and strength from his Tartar mother, while his name Peleg showed that his
father was a Jew, and indeed the original Peleg, too many thousands of years ago to be numbered in centuries, was none other than the grandson of Salah who was the grandson of Shem who was the son of Noah.

But it was certainly no thought of Noah or any other Hebrew patriarch that drew from Lil-Umbra her cry of excited delight the moment she saw Peleg crouching behind one tall Druidic stone in that broken circle. She scampered up to him at once and when she found he was asleep she had no compunction about snatching at his sleeve and jerking it up and down to waken him.

Had the rounded rim of the suddenly-risen Sun not become at that moment a living presence in the very place where, only a pulse-beat before, there had been nothing but the deepening of a wide golden glow diffused over the whole horizon, it is likely enough that Peleg might have received a bewildering shock from Lil-Umbra's leap into the enchanted pool of his dreams.

She certainly plunged in with a splash and the way she shook the giant's sleeve was enough to have jerked any ordinary mystery-loving Mongolian out of the happiest phantasmagoria of delectable dreams.

But the sight of that red rim, all the redder from the patches of snow on the slope of the ridge and the nakedness of the tree-trunks between which it appeared, conveyed to the man in a flash the whole situation. The first move he made was to alter with scrupulous care the position of the colossal iron mace which was his habitual companion and which was surmounted by a round ball as big as any ordinary man's head entirely covered by iron spikes. This weapon, which had been lying across his knees as he slept, with his back to the tallest stone of that forlorn remnant of a Druidic Circle, he now laid carefully on the frozen grass at his side and welcomed his master's daughter with a grave smile.

That little lady, delighted at having so successfully thrust her slight warmly-clad boreal body between the ancestral pillars of the mystic avenue to her friend's oriental dream-dome, didn't restrain herself in the least, now that he was awake, from pelting him with a shower of questions, confessions, declarations, and suggestions.

But it was not long before the gigantic Oriental and the young European were equally under the spell of that magnetic red orb which did not take many minutes to be half-way over the ridge that formed the eastern horizon of the Manor of Roque.

The Manor had only been in Sir Mort's hands for a little over twenty years; but that had been quite long enough for himself and Lady Val, and their sons Tilton and John who were approaching twenty and their daughter Lil-Umbra, who would be sixteen in a month, to have grown intimately familiar with the fitful moods of the seasons in this part of Wessex, and with the particular enchantments worked upon this landscape by the Sun and the Moon in their variable seasons.

All five of them, the parents equally with their children, had established between themselves and both these heavenly bodies those private, individual, and even secretive personal relations that most human beings on this earth, whether old or young, though with very different degrees of intensity, instinctively reach.

"Well, here I am, Peleg!" gasped the young girl. "And O! how red the Sun is! It's almost frighteningly red, isn't it—rather like the Sun in that window in the Priory chapel—you know the window I mean?—that they say is a picture of the Last Day, when both Sun and Moon are to be soaked in blood. What things they do tell us,
Peleg! I don’t believe a word of it; do you? I bet you don’t, any more than I do! It’s getting too much what these priests and monks tell us! Has John talked to you about what they’ve done to his master Friar Bacon, the learnedest man in the kingdom? Shut him up, they have, because he won’t believe their lies; and when he wants books and things—things he has to have if he’s to work at his inventions—they do their best to stop him from getting them!

“Do you know what came into my head the other day, Peleg? And it was because of that that I wanted you to show me the Moon this morning—no! wait a second——” and the girl laid her hand on the back of the tightening and stiffening fingers by which the man was preparing to heave himself up from the ground—“It came into my head that perhaps even my father didn’t really believe in all the things they try to make us swallow—and I can tell you myself of one person who doesn’t, and that’s Raymond de Laon of Cone Castle over there”—and she waved her hand, the one that wasn’t being used to prevent his getting up, in a direction to the left of the now blazing Sun—“Raymond doesn’t even believe that Pontius Pilate wrote ‘King of the Jews’ upon the Cross—and think, Peleg, how exciting it would be if I were more like Father in my secret thoughts than like Mother or Nurse or old Guggery or Prior Bog. What do you yourself think about all these things?”

The giant Tartar evidently thought that if he could get to his feet and convey this eager sceptic to a small eminence, only about three hundred yards away, the sight of the waning Moon, which he had himself just seen from that particular vantage-ground, would turn her mind away—at least on this particular occasion—from Pontius Pilate and the Crucifixion. He therefore proceeded to heave himself to his feet, murmuring as he took Lil-Umbra’s hand tenderly but firmly in his own, “’Twere to see the Moon it was that you came, little lady, weren’t it? To see the Moon from where your old Peleg do know every look of her, and every look of the belly and horns of her, aye! do know to a sliver which way her horns do point when she be rocking and floating like a ship without a mast and without a sail, a ship that’s got lost in a sea of air, a ship that can do naught but watch that air change into an ocean of black darkness.”

Muttering this musical monody to the Moon as if the Moon could hear every word of it, though neither Lil-Umbra nor himself could yet catch the faintest sign of her, Peleg led his companion down declivity after declivity filled with dead bracken-stalks and flowerless gorse-bushes, and across a few small rivulets that the girl could easily jump, and through one extremely unpleasant strip of boggy marshland, across which she allowed him to carry her, till they reached at last the place he had in his mind, which was a stone seat, made not by man but by nature, and a seat so prophetical that it might well have been the throne of a great paleolithic astrologer.

Upon this throne of stone they both sank down; and there was a deep silence between them. While this silence was lasting on and on, and while both these two beings, this middle-aged giant whose Jewish blood had endowed him with a more intellectual brain than people realized, and whose Mongolian instincts had from the start provided that brain with a reservoir of thick, rich, massive, sensuous impressions, and this high-strung, wrought-up, magnetically vibrant little daughter of Sir Mort and Lady Valentia, were giving themselves up, in the same absolute abandonment, to the spell thrown out by this faint, incredibly fragile waning moon, there had arrived at the Fortress of the Manor of Roque an unexpected company of visitors.
Now it happened that by some inexplicable telepathic power the gigantic Mongol
became aware of this unexpected intrusion; and it was a deeply troubling question to
him whether to communicate to Lil-Umbra or not this sudden interruption. It was in
psychic matters of this sort that Sir Mort completely underrated Peleg. It had always
been the physical tremendousness of the Tartar’s strength he needed.

He had never concerned himself very much with what went on in the man’s private
thoughts. One curious thing just then about the feelings of Peleg and Lil-Umbra as
they yielded together so utterly to the sorcery of the Moon, while the giant wondered if
it would be wise or not to speak of his new knowledge, was the way they were
dominated by an irresistible inhibition against turning round to look at the Sun!

They both felt in some obscure half-conscious way that it would be dangerous and
unlucky to turn towards that now fully risen luminary whose warmth they could
distinctly feel at the back of their necks. Naturally the warmer the air grew and the
more light there was in the sky the paler became the moon at which they were staring.

And the more the presence of the young girl at his side wrought this magic effect
upon Peleg’s attitude to the cosmos in general and to the landscape in particular, so the
more divine did the Moon appear to him.

After a quick glance sideways at his companion as if to make sure of her sympathy
but also secretly to ascertain if she were sharing his weird feeling that unexpected
things were happening at the Fortress, he began to address the Moon in words more
intimate and personal than Lil-Umbra had ever heard before used either to the Sun or
to the Moon.

“O great Goddess,” he prayed, “grant us, we beseech thee, an influence, a virtue, a
secret, a touch, a mystery, from the heart of that which continueth, forever! In a few
years I shall be an old man. In a few years this maiden will be a proud and beautiful
woman and very likely the mother of children. Out of the heart of the Unknown thou
hast come upon us, O great Goddess, and into the heart of the Unknown thou wilt soon
pass from us. Heal us, therefore, O Goddess, of the hurts and wounds in our souls that
ache and bleed today because of the false doctrines about gods and men that have been
inflicted upon us, false doctrines about all things in heaven and earth!

“Have they not taken on themselves, these priests of pain, these ministers of blood,
to invent signs and tokens and symbols and sacraments out of privation and
deprivation, out of suppression and frustration, out of denial and negation? Have they
not thus defied the revelations made by thy blessed mystery, and turned to nothing the
secret of thy holy rapture, of thy sacred madness, of thy entranced, thy transporting
ecstasy? Make them give us back the pulse of our life, great Goddess, give us back the
beat of our heart, give us back the dance of our blood!”

Lil-Umbra remained silent for a couple of minutes with her face uplifted and her
head turned sideways towards the colossal profile of the Tartar giant. There were
several rooks and a few crows above their heads, sometimes flapping their great wings
in disturbed agitation, and sometimes sailing with rhythmic risings and fallings, up and
down between sky and earth.

“If I look at the Sun now,” cried Lil-Umbra eagerly, “it won’t make the Moon
angry, will it, Peleg? I can feel it on my neck and I do so want to look straight at it!”

The giant smiled gravely. “Of course, my dear child! Let’s both of us have a good
stare at the old Life-Sustainer!”
When they had both turned their heads an inch towards the east, Peleg said quietly: “You’d never believe, would you, that the Life-Lord could shake off all that bloodiness so quickly and be as he is now, nothing but blazing gold.”

It was at this point—perhaps under the influence of the advancing Sun, perhaps under the influence of the receding Moon—that Lil-Umbra felt an overpowering necessity to pour out from her own deepest soul a torrent of youthful revolt against the whole routine of maternal restraint and the whole authority of her old Nurse Rampant and of the still older Mother Guggery, Nurse Rampant’s assistant. What especially she felt impelled to rebel against was the dullness and routine of so much oatmeal and barley-bread and rye-bread and so much vegetable-pottage in place of the rich meats and the intoxicating wines enjoyed by grown-up people; and the sudden inspiration seized her to do this under cover of the rumoured wickedness of Baron Maldung and Lady Lilt and their daughter Lilith, of the Castle known as Lost Towers, which rose out of a swampy expanse of flat treeless country, due north of both the Fortress and the Forest of Roque.

“May I ask you something, Peleg, something that’s been on my mind, for a long time?”

“Of course, little lady, of course! I like to hear a child’s secrets; and when that child is the daughter of my master——Go on, my dear, go on for Heaven’s sake!”

And then Lil-Umbra did indeed go on. In fact she let herself go with a desperate rush of words. “Why does God allow such wicked people as that family in Lost Towers”—and she made a little gesture with her head and one of her shoulders towards the north—“to be blasphemous about such an important thing as the food we’re given to eat? Mother Guggery swore to me that Sir Maldung and Lady Lilt taught their daughter Lilith that all animals were holy angels, and that all fruits and nuts and raisins, and all plants and grasses, and every kind of grain, and all trees and shrubs and bushes and hedges, and all ferns and mosses and lichens and seaweeds, were devils incarnate. I begged Mother Guggery to tell me more: and do you know what she said! She said that Lady Lilt had a special reverence for animals’ mouths, and also for the two other holes that all animals, just like us human beings, have at the other end of them.

“Mother Guggery said that Lady Lilt would run screaming up and down all the stairs and through all the passages and anterooms and corridors of the entire Castle of Lost Towers whenever she saw one of Sir Maldung’s dogs with its tongue hanging out. ‘Someone has hurt that angel of a dog!’ she would cry. And Guggery says that whenever Sir Maldung feels bad from eating too much oatmeal or barley-meal or bread-pudding, and begs her to let him kill a rabbit for a change, she refuses to go to bed with him until he has walked to the furthest northern border of the forest, where there’s a marshy swamp with rushes growing so thick that they hide every sign of the water.

“When once he’s there, Mother Guggery says, he has to make a vow to animals and birds and fishes and reptiles and worms and insects that he will eat nothing but what’s made out of the bodies of these vegetation-demons; yes! nothing but what’s made of wheat, made of barley, made of oats; yes! made of every root that exists which isn’t poisonous! That’s what Mother Guggery told me.

“Lady Lilt swore, that she wouldn’t sleep with him till he’d uttered his vow at the
forest’s end that he wouldn’t eat anything except this devilish vegetation.

“No! She wouldn’t let him touch her till he’d sworn his faithful oath to eat nothing but grain and fruit and seeds and leaves and buds and stalks and peelings and parings and roots and bulbs and everything of that kind in the world that isn’t poisonous, and that he’ll bite them up and crunch them up and munch them up, and roll them round in his mouth and chew, chew, chew them, and reduce them to messly mush, till he has taught them, yes! taught them utterly and thoroughly, to be what they are and what in their effrontery they think they are, and what in their devilish violence they actually suppose they were created to be, that is to say these shrinking, stinking, crawling, sprawling, climbing, binding, twining, sprouting and outing, knotting and rotting, sliding and hiding, shivering and quivering, tangling and strangling, burrowing and billowing, racing and facing, threading and spreading and doing all this in the pure unspoilt, original paradise of the blessed inanimates and the holy elements, where men and beasts and birds and fish and reptiles and worms and insects lived happily on the sacred flesh of one another between rocks and water, and between earth and sky before this loathsome multitude—such were the words Mother Guggery told me the Lady used—of vegetation-devils with their horrible juices ensorcerized saps, skins without flesh, pulps without bones, that originally came out of some infernal crack in the floor of the ocean!

“Lady Lilt said she wouldn’t sleep with him again till he’d sworn his oath by the edge of that marsh at the forest’s end that he would teach these vegetable monstrosities to be what they were by grinding them between his teeth, squeezing them between his tongue and his palate, sucking and squashing them between his healthy natural animal jaws, wringing their insides out, draining their inmost juices to the last distillation—so Mother Guggery told me the Lady said—till all their demonic greenery-sap and all the devilish sappy greenery of their entire selves had been completely dissolved and disposed of in the good sound moving bodies of creatures with hungry bellies and with legs and arms and scales and fur and feathers and with the life-breathing bodies of wholesome earth-worms and the motions and melodies of exquisite insects!

“Such,” concluded Lil-Umbra with a gasp, “such were the very words Mother Guggery swore Lady Lilt used.”

There was something in the exhausted gasp with which the girl ended this torrent of fantastic rodomontade that made the giant at her side seriously troubled as to what he ought to do. The climax of her elaborate litany as to what Guggery said and the Lady did really seemed to have brought Lil-Umbra to the verge of a complete collapse. Her dainty little head was now resting against Peleg’s side like a wood-anemone against the trunk of a solitary sycamore.

“O my dear child!” groaned the huge Mongol: “I tell you it scares me like Hell to hear you talk in that way! It gives me the feeling that some evil influence has come over you. Dear God! but I wish to Heaven you had never asked that old bitch Guggery to talk about it at all! On my life it seemed to me as I listened to you just now that you’d got the exact intonation of Lady Lilt! I hate her; and I think she hates me. She’s one of those strange ladies who are up to anything in the way of dangerous magic games! Think of her considering all the grain we eat, whether wheat, barley, oats, or rye, as horrible demons! It’s pure craziness, child!”

With an almost indignant jerk he pulled her to her feet. Then, as they both stood
with their backs to the paleolithic throne, they had the golden blaze of the now fully risen sun irradiating both the man’s enormity and the girl’s delicacy.

“I like looking at the waning Moon,” murmured Lil-Umbra, “a lot better than facing the rising Sun! But, Peleg, when I said I wanted you to show me both of them together, I thought I should see them side by side. Aren’t they ever side by side, for us to compare them with each other, one so timid, so escaping, so slipping away, and the other so bursting and bubbling with blazing gold?”

The Mongolian giant looked down at her with a very queer look, a look that she recognized and in every fibre of her being wholly accepted, but which she could not have interpreted to anyone in human words, whether such words were written or spoken.

“O most dear and most simple of little ladies!” the giant burst out. “Don’t you see that the whole idea of this mad world is to be found in opposites! Everything, I tell you, my dear little lady, is a Double Opposite.”

They both were forced to turn their eyes away from the full blaze of the Sun; but though Peleg turned his head as well as his eyes, so that he saw—but at that moment he saw it without seeing it—a small feathery wisp of white cloud resting against one of the horns of the waning Moon, Lil-Umbra kept her head unmoved while with lowered eyes she stared at her own clasped hands.

“I don’t understand,” she said now, though with some hesitation, for she hated to appear stupid in this man’s sight, “how a thing can be a Double Opposite.”

The Tartar giant did see the Moon now, towards which his head was turned, and he saw it with his intelligence as well as with his senses; and not only so, for he felt as if with his outstretched fingers he could touch the inside edge of that fading boat-shaped rim while his head and neck, for both were bare, felt a distinctly pleasurable sensation from the warmth of the Sun’s increasing radiance.

“I’ll soon show you how it is, little lady of my master,” he said gravely. “Take ourselves. Take me for example. The first of my two Opposites is in myself, that is to say, my greedy-grasping body on one side and my obedient, faithful and well-behaved soul on the other side. But the second of my two Opposites is my whole self, body and soul together, as opposed to entire Creation or the total universe of which I am a living part.”

Lil-Umbra’s head, with its light soft, silky hair bound up so tightly with broad bands of blue satin that the compact shape of the small skull beneath them, such as any imaginable head-dress would have totally disfigured, was emphasized rather than nullified, lifted itself with an abrupt jerk.

“Oh! of course I see! I see entirely! There’s a bad Lil-Umbra, ready to tease things and torment things, and pinch things and pull things to bits and to eat too many pears and sing and hum and drum when Mother is nervous or Father’s tired. And there’s a good Lil-Umbra feeling sorry for Mother and wanting to do everything I can to please Father. And there’s me in myself, both bad and good, both Opposites joined in one, who have, as my Opposite now, the entire universe! O I see, I see! I see the whole thing now! I carry two Opposites about with me wherever I go; but I myself am a perpetual living Opposite to the entire world, so that I really am, just as you said just now everything was, a double pair of Opposites!

“And now do tell me this, Peleg. Raymond de Laon swore to me the other day,
when I went with Mother to Cone Castle and both Sir William and the Baron were away, that he had made up his mind to think out a philosophy for himself, quite different from that of the Stoics or the Epicureans, quite different from that of any of the ancient Greek thinkers, and most different of all from any of our modern theologians.

“Now, Peleg, tell me and tell me seriously, for this is very important to me, and may have an effect upon my whole life: Is Raymond educated enough, is he clever enough, does he in fact know enough, has he travelled enough, is he honest enough in questions like this, to have the right, without making an absolute fool of himself, to work out a philosophy of his own, a philosophy that could be proclaimed in one of their university theses and even be posted up, like they do, on the doors of great debating-halls to be criticized by the doctors of philosophy in Oxford and Paris?”

Peleg surveyed his youthful questioner with a very grave face. There were implications in all this that were not a little disturbing to him. Paleg wasn’t ignorant of the fact that this young Raymond de Laon was a relative of Baron Boncor of Cone Castle and that the Baron had begged him to remain with him for a while to initiate his simple-minded and honest young son into the ways of the world.

The old and ailing and mentally-shaken King Henry had been persuaded by an influential group at court to try to bind to the royal cause this powerful West Country family by knighting for some superficial and conventional reason the young William Boncor, who was, in Peleg’s opinion, though a thoroughly good and nice young fellow, as wholly devoid of any particularly original or outstanding quality as he was devoid of any dangerous vice.

Thus Peleg began to feel a certain nervous apprehension; for the possibility of his master’s little daughter falling in love with a clever young popinjay of the new generation was a shock to him. So it was in a tone that was new to her that he now spoke.

“I had not realized,” he began, “that you and young Raymond de Laon were such friends. I knew you saw a great deal of Lord and Lady Boncor of Cone, but I never guessed you or your brothers had seen much of this young relative from abroad. Your father I know has great respect for them all at Cone: but that you and young de Laon were friends I never dreamed.”

He stopped and surveyed his companion with a steady stare. “If I could only be sure,” he said slowly, “that this young man has had the right teachers, I would be happier about it. Tell me, little lady,” he went on. “Has your young friend actually had lessons from Friar Bacon at the Priory? They say that by taking a hare or two, or a badger, or even half-a-dozen wild geese, to Prior Bog’s kitchen, people can get themselves smuggled into the Friar’s cell. But I reckon they have to be pretty learned people even if it’s only in Greek Grammar.

“I heard someone in those kitchens say that you had to know quite a lot of the ‘Sentences’ of Peter Lombard, or at least be acquainted with the Commentary on them by Albertus Magnus before you’d have a chance, even if you had a hare in one pocket and a rabbit in another, of getting a lesson from the great man.”

Lil-Umbra gave vent to an exultant laugh, a laugh that rang out, rich and clear and resonant, towards the point in space whence the Moon was now retreating into the recesses of interminable remoteness; while the Hebraic Tartar, puzzled at her
amusement, stared helplessly into the dazzling portion of the sky where the air like a huge celestial sponge had soaked up the burning rays of the Father of Life and Light and was diffusing them over the land and water of the whole Western world.

“But, Peleg,” Lil-Umbra cried, “don’t forget that John has been taught by Friar Bacon since he was no older than I am. It’s a terrific secret, of course, and everybody, including John himself, always speaks of his studies in Oxford at Regent’s House, and of course he would again work at Oxford if Friar Bacon were back as he was before Bonaventura became General of the Order and had the Friar removed from Oxford and shut up, first in Paris, and then at Bumset under Bog. They say in Loam village that the reason my father keeps it so secret is that Bonaventura would be angry as Hell if he knew.

“But of course Bumset Priory is in the village of Loam, which has always belonged to our Manor; so it wouldn’t be easy for Prior Bog to keep John out even if he wanted to, and you know what old Bog is, ready to serve as they say every master who comes along if he brings enough French wine. Father hasn’t told a soul about John’s going there so often. Sometimes I think even Mother doesn’t know! If she does, she’s a better keeper of things dark than anyone in the whole world!

“But I think she does know. I can’t imagine Father not telling her when he must know that John tells Tilton and me everything about it.”

Lil-Umbra could see that her bold divulging of this long and intimate association between her brother John and the notorious Friar Bacon was no small shock to her companion. The Tartar jerked back his head from the Sun-ray and gave it a rather strained twist sideways, a twist that enabled him to follow, as the girl had been doing, the retreat into space of that silvery Moon, but, instead of keeping his gaze there, he now suddenly lowered his head and turned his whole attention upon the murderous spikes of that iron mace he held on his lap, hugging it almost affectionately between his thighs, while with both his hands he abstractedly toyed with those appalling spikes, pressing his thumb against their vicious points in careful and calculated succession.

What he was feeling in his mind was a black void of desperate loneliness. He had been of late congratulating himself on having a really deep and unique pact, unspoken and inarticulate, but none the less massively consolidated, with his master Sir Mort, but this revelation from the man’s daughter of a secret as important as this—and a secret connected with Sir Mort’s own son—gave the gigantic Mongol the feeling that he was not even yet a really intimate member of this family and that he had better take what comfort he could as he used to do as an orphan in Dalmatia by imagining himself alone in space like the star Aldebaran.

But the wheel of his fate selected that moment to touch one of those mysterious “opposites” concerning which he had just been talking. And it was brought about, by one of those secret chains of events that are often so confounding when they emerge out of the underground mole-runs of cause and effect into the twilight of consciousness, that some small token, either the sight at such a moment of an intensely glittering gleam where a particular Sun-ray struck a special spot on the spiky ball he was holding, or the reappearance of a tiny wisp of white cloud, totally forgotten until he recalled it now, that he had seen only a minute or two ago in contact with the retreating Moon, roused in the depths of the tragic loneliness into which he had been plunged a darting flame of a possible redemption of everything.
This came like the leap of a shining fish out of a black pool, and the form it took was the form of a girl not much older than Lil-Umbra herself. But though of like age with the young creature now leaning so trustingly against him, the redemptive vision that rushed into his mind was that of a strangely appealing Jewish maid. Before the bloody day on which Sir Mort had earned his everlasting adhesion Peleg had met in this maid the ideal love of his whole life. She was certainly beautiful; but it was in a strange, very rare degree, and with a beauty that seemed perpetually re-created by some mysterious sorcery in herself. Her name was Ghosta, and on first setting eyes on her Peleg had experienced a thrill of unutterable pride at having in his own veins the blood of Israel.

Yes, this youthful virgin of his own race became from the moment he saw her the supreme light of his life. But it had been in vain that he had rushed round the battlefield and the camp trying desperately to find her again. They had met: they had looked into each other’s eyes: they had loved: and then the girl had vanished. And when all was over, and he had become for life the free slave of the House of Roque, it was as if she had been carried off on a cloud.

Like himself she must, he supposed, have been willingly or unwillingly carried off by some Anglo-Norman crusader to a castle in the north of Africa or on the borders of Palestine or in Gascony or Sicily or Piedmont or somewhere in England or Ireland or Scotland or Wales or peradventure on the shores of the Bosphorus.

But there now shot into the heart of the smouldering crater of his desperation a weird and unaccountable hope, based on something as slight as that wisp of cloud on the Moon or that dazzling Sun-gleam on the ball of spikes, but something from whose fluttering motion, like a will-of-the-wisp crossing a death-swamp, there arose a suggestion of salvation.

The mysterious Friar Bacon, now a prisoner of Prior Bog of Bumset, possessed a queer servant who was never known by any other name than that of “Miles”, an appellation which, being interpreted, might be said to mean an extremely private, reserved, original, exceptional, but also an extremely professional soldier: and it had recently happened that, while Peleg was delivering a message to Prior Bog of Bumset, this same Miles had made a casual allusion which for Peleg had been like the sudden appearance, above a scoriac plain and under a dull, grey, monotonous, and devitalized sky, of a miraculous waterspout.

For a second he felt as if he were himself being changed, like Lot’s wife, into a pillar of salt; but at the next moment both these mirages of sensation—himself as the pillar of salt, and the wild, mad, hope-against-hope chance that Miles was referring to Ghosta—melted into each other and floated away into space like a triumphantly burst bubble.

What Miles had alluded to in passing, without attributing any especial interest to it, was the fact that one of the Priory servants who helped Master Tuck the chief cook had declared that the said Master Tuck had recently purchased at the price of ten silver Jewish shekels a Jewish woman who had been brought over among the followers of some crusader from Mesopotamia.

Of course there was only one chance in ten thousand that this Jewish woman was his lost Ghosta; but at least it was not impossible. O if she were! If she only were! Such a chance, if it really came true, would reduce to a grain of black dust every
despair he’d ever felt!

“Did you groan then, Peleg?” Lil-Umbra suddenly enquired, “or did you crush
down in your heart a shout of joy? I’m sure you made a very important noise. I make
important noises myself sometimes when I just have to do something but don’t want
anybody else to know!”

“Little lady——” he began; but stopped abruptly.

“Yes, Peleg: were you going to tell me just then your very, very greatest secret?”

“What makes you say that, little lady?”

“Because I heard you make a noise in the bottom of your heart like Father makes
when Mother asks him what’s the matter with him! I know perfectly well what’s the
matter with him. He’s got something on his mind that he wants to take out of the place
where it hurts and carry away to some great desert-plain or mountain-side where he
can turn it over and over and over in his mind and nobody be a bit the wiser!”

“He’ll be the wiser himself, won’t he, little lady?”

“Oh yes! But nobody else will know! That’s the great thing; nobody else to know
what we’ve got down at the very bottom of us! But tell me this, Peleg. Why do you
keep twisting your head round towards the Moon? And then start staring so straight
into the blaze of the Sun? And then hang your head low down and fix your eyes on a
root or a stone or a molehill or on one of those funny clumps of grey lichen?—and
then, after that, as if you wanted to end up with something more exciting than anything
on earth, why do you lift your chin up and stop looking at anything but the sky, just the
sky alone, as if you expected some angel to come flying down towards you?”

The Tartar giant lowered his head and gazed earnestly at the young girl.

“I’ll tell you exactly, little lady, why I look at things as you say, and in such a
definite order, beginning with the Sun and ending with the universal air. As I look at
each of these things in turn I make the motion of my mind that I make when Sir Mort,
your Dad, is worshipping and I am with him in church, or on the march, or at a sacred
shrine, or at some gathering of the crusaders. All of us in the whole world, little lady,
worship in our own way and as we worship do something to the Thing we’re
worshipping; and we do this according to our different natures. Having an animal
nature what I imagine myself doing to all the Deities I worship is eating them.”

Lil-Umbra gave a cry of delight and clapped her hands. “Of course,” went on Peleg,
“don’t ask you to believe that I really and truly eat the Moon or the Sun or the Earth
or the Air. I only mean that I ‘make the motino’ of eating each of these things, and
then afterwards imagine that I’m getting the comfortable and delicious feeling of
having eaten them! In short, to tell you the real truth, little lady, I pretend to myself
I’m eating these things, and play at eating them as little boys play at cutting off heads
and arms and legs in imaginary tournaments!

“I admit, dear heart, when it comes to the Air it’s not easy to pretend to myself that
I’m eating it. But a person can pretend almost anything: and that’s all I ask, the right to
pretend I’m eating air.”

“O Peleg! Peleg!” cried Lil-Umbra, in a frenzy of delight. “I’ll do exactly what you
do when I’m sick to death of Religion. Oh yes, I will! And I’ll ask John to ask Friar
Bacon what his opinion is of this method of worshipping. But shall I tell you a great
secret, Peleg? From what I’ve seen Father do when I’ve been watching him and he
doesn’t know anyone is watching him, I believe he has a funny way of worshipping,
just as you have. But Roger Bacon thinks the best way to worship is to invent things! John says Roger Bacon is now inventing a Brazen Head, that one day when he's finished with it will utter oracles very, very helpful to us and to our country. That's an exciting way to worship, isn't it? To invent a talking Brazen Head!"

As she spoke the girl smiled radiantly at the giant; but the mention of John brought back upon Peleg all the old cloud of deadly gloom. The thought that no one had told him anything about John having become a personal pupil of Friar Bacon, and that every single one of them, including Sir Mort, Lady Val, the elder boy Tilton, John himself, and even this little Lil-Umbra, had deliberately concealed from him this important piece of news—which wasn't only family news but was also political, ecclesiastical, and international news—was a crushing blow.

What it meant was—so he told himself—that he was not the feudal retainer of the house of Abyssum that he had begun to assume he was, but just a hired man who had to fight for them, eat for them, and sleep for them, and whose sustenance was his wage. So once again his terribly imaginative desperation returned; and he felt as if this secretiveness towards him of the family he served was enough in itself to cast him into outer darkness and to turn him into one of those lost souls he was always hearing about from the pious Christians around him who loved to remind each other of the possibility for their enemies of what they called “the Second Death”. That very expression “the Second Death” came back with appalling vividness at this moment; and Peleg felt as if he were clinging desperately to one of the horns of that waning Moon that was now vanishing in space, while an unspeakably horrible monster of colossal size resembling an enormous cuttlefish dragged and dragged at him to pull him down to that same bottomless chasm in the floor of the ocean out of which, according to the blasphemous notion of the Baron Maldung and Lady Lilt, the whole vegetable world and all the grain upon which we live emerged at the beginning like one multiform devil with green sap for blood.

The wretchedness of Peleg’s mind at that moment and the ghastly mood into which he had fallen was revealed at this point by a positively heart-rending sigh from the very depths of his being, the sort of sigh that a prisoner who has betrayed his best friend in the hope of saving his own life might have been heard uttering when he suddenly became aware that he has been fooled by his enemies and that his betrayal of his best friend will not save his own life.

“Peleg, Peleg,” whispered the little maid at his side, “your heart is crying! Tell your Lil-Umbra what is the matter! Have you suddenly thought that the Pope might decide to start a crusade to cut off all Mongolian mothers from the face of the earth?”

The giant gasped, choked, turned his head, and spat. “Not quite as bad as that, dear child,” he murmured. Then he rose slowly to his feet, and taking one of her hands in one of his, as a great wafture of ocean-foam from a broken wave might enclose a little shell, that has been lying on the sand, “I’ll tell it all to you another time,” he murmured, “but just now we must go back; for Sir Mort’s sure to be wanting me, and Lady Val will be wondering what’s happened to you.”

Lil-Umbra followed obediently; but she couldn’t help noticing that the long shadows as she now ascended the avenue gave the trees a completely different look from what they had when she descended; nor was she unaware that those mysterious movements at the top of the branches, that had put such strange thoughts into her head
before the sun rose, had now completely passed away, and that the smallest twig against the sky was now as motionless as the largest branch close to the earth.
THE FORTRESS OF ROQUE

The door-keeper of the Fortress of Roque was an extremely simple-minded, middle-aged man called Cortex, whose childless wife, Bundy, ten years older than her husband, but with a considerably quicker brain, helped him at his unpredictable, incalculable job. The Fortress’s entrance consisted of double doors of colossal thickness that were only closed at night. For these hours of darkness they were fastened by a couple of huge iron bars, strong enough to have barricaded the Skaian Gate of Ilium itself.

These doors opened directly into an entrance-hall that could have sheltered half a hundred men-at-arms if they had been able to pile up their armour in a secluded courtyard that was available on the inner side of this vast reception room.

While Peleg and Lil-Umbra were watching the Sun advance and the Moon retreat from their nature-made throne of stone, an interesting messenger was being interviewed at the great gate of the Fortress of Roque. This was a devil-may-care soldier of fortune called Spardo, who was a bastard son of Ottocar, King of Bohemia, and who was never tired of boasting of his regal begetting.

In order to extend his own predatory explorations, which already had carried him to Byzantium and to most of the ports on the northern shores of Africa, this plausible rogue had recently constituted himself a sort of supernumerary guide, amateur factotum, and diplomatic outrider to a European group of courtly travellers, a few of whom were bound for Oxford, but the rest were wealthy pilgrims, anxious to visit the more famous shrines in all parts of these islands.

Along with the others, however, were a certain number who at the moment were following with fanatical devotion wherever he went, as the same sort of crowd undoubtedly used to follow St. Francis and probably used to follow Jesus, the saintly “general”, as he was appointed to be, of the Order of Franciscan Friars, known to all Europe as Saint Bonaventura. This was the Order that Roger Bacon had rather incautiously joined when his family had completely ruined itself in its service of the King against the Barons; and it was anything but fortunate for him when Bonaventura was made the Head of the Order.

It had been no other than St. Francis himself who had given to Jean de Fidanza the name of Bonaventura, by which he was known throughout the whole world; and it was Saint Francis who had started him upon his career of notorious sanctity.

As for this Spardo, he was a tall slender person of about thirty, with a carefully trimmed red beard and large roving blue eyes. He was now holding by the bridle an odd-looking grey horse, which at first sight might have given the impression that it had two heads.

This surprising effect was due to some organic deformity in the poor creature’s neck, a deformity which excited the curiosity not only of human beings but also of other animals. As this tall, slender, comical-looking Spardo advanced towards the
great gates of Roque leading this equally slender grey horse by its bridle, the man’s
gaze seemed to be focussed on the horse’s deformity, which the horse seemed to be
deliberately covering with a strange self-induced film, and to be doing this with so
obstinate a determination that the simple-minded Master Cortex, as he watched the
two of them approaching, received the queer impression that the lean beast was
desperately struggling to answer the man’s gaze through the deformity at which the
man was staring, just as if that repellant excrescence possessed something
responding to an eye.

“I have come,” began Spardo, addressing the bewildered gatekeeper, “to enquire
whether a special group of noblemen and ladies, who feel a natural reluctance to add
themselves to the crowd who are taking advantage of the hospitality of Prior Bog,
especially as they will be more than ready before they depart to offer as their quota to
the doubtless already rich Treasury of the Fortress such pieces of gold and shekels of
silver as may fittingly commemorate the occasion, might perhaps be welcomed by this
noble and ancient Fortress of Roque and allowed to rest here for a few hours?”

At this point the man stopped to take breath; and both he and the deformed animal
he was leading turned their heads a little, as if to catch upon the air some faint
premonition of approaching riders.

“I can see at once, master,” Spardo went on, “that you’ve got a long experience of
life in these high circles and in these difficult times, so that you must forgive me if I
don’t stop to explain what might bewilder any ordinary person. But this particular
group of travellers, you understand, are on a journey to Oxford and London; and it
would be a most blessed relief and comfort to them if your renowned Sir Mort
Abyssum and your noble and beautiful Lady Valentia would allow them to rest here
for a short space and be refreshed by the famous hospitality of this princely House.”

The door-keeper, though anything but a quick-witted individual, was one of those
mortals whose sympathy with animals is strong and instinctive, although totally
inarticulate. There was therefore a wordless exchange of ideas going forward at this
moment between Master Cortex and the grey horse on the absorbing topic, of intense
interest to them both, of this mysterious deformity in the creature’s neck.

So occupied indeed were both the door-keeper and the horse in the exchange of
wordless communications about this weird growth in the latter’s neck that the former
soon ceased to listen to what Spardo was saying to him. It must have been after more
than five minutes of this concentrated examination of the phenomenal shape which
this strange growth on the horse’s neck was gradually assuming, that the door-keeper
suddenly leapt to his feet and began shouting: “Bundy! Bundy! Bundy! come quick!
Here’s a horse that’s going to have two heads! For God’s sake come quick, Bundy, and
look! It’s going to have a man’s head as well as its own! Quick! Quick! Bundy! come
quick!”

The fellow’s appeal didn’t go unanswered. He had kept it up after leaving the horse
altogether and throwing all his strength into pushing the great double gate of Roque
wide open enough to admit half a dozen horses, when his wise old spouse emerged
from her retreat and shuffling up to the animal’s side began at once stroking it
tenderly. “Kyre! Kyre! Kyre!” she chanted in a curious kind of gloating ecstasy, as she
rubbed the knuckles of one hand up and down over the crown of the creature’s
forehead, above its large, blurred, weary, and far-away-staring eyes, while with the
ringers of her other hand she gently stroked its thick mane.

Her repetition of the word “Kyre” had an odd effect on the man Spardo. He had been educated in a monastery where they knew a little classical Greek as well as theological Greek; so that to hear this old lady repeat these two syllables which might mean “O Lord!” and also might mean “Hail!” and to see her obvious assumption that in either case the word would please the deformed creature, impressed to the depths of his being the man who was leading it, for he handed its bridle to the doorkeeper, came round by the animal’s tail and bowed low before Bundy, who was a grey-haired old woman with an extremely long face not altogether unlike the face of a horse.

“Spardo is my name, mistress,” he said, “and it’s Spardo who now salutes you and does homage to you, and does so more deeply than you can possibly know. I don’t suppose you’ve ever had the son of a king as your familiar friend; but you’ve got one now, and if I know anything of women you’ll find me even better suited to your taste than the master here.”

What the lady thus addressed felt in her secret mind, as she listened to this fantastic progeny of the King of Bohemia, it would be impossible for any male chronicler to describe—but it was clear that the rogue didn’t displease her; for though she didn’t blot out from her attention the massive jaw, the small eyes, and the narrow, sucked-in mouth of her mate—which latter feature resembled one of those straight lines which certain melodramatic chroniclers tend to throw in between a blow and a cry, or between a cry and a crash—she drew a little closer. Soon indeed she was touching the side of the horse with a fascinated interest in the extraordinary growth in its neck. As for Spardo, his movements were spectacular. He seemed as unable to keep still as a white butterfly in a vegetable garden.

What he was doing now was rolling his blue eyes so queerly in his head that while one of them seemed to be caressing with besotted unction the deformity in his horse, the other seemed to be lingering with no less maudlin tenderness on the elongated and almost equally equine countenance of the old lady.

Then quite suddenly, and with the organic outburst of that sort of irresistible impulse that creates a psychic stir in the whole surrounding atmosphere of any particular spot, he sank down on one knee in front of her, his thin red beard brushing the knee that was not on the ground like a bird’s tail that goes on flicking a branch below the one on which it has settled. While the woman’s husband regarded him with blank astonishment, he began deliberately imitating the tone in which she made such a natural sing-song out of the syllables that may have been either “Kyre” or “Kaire”.

“O noblest of wise women!” he cried, clutching at her petticoats so that she couldn’t draw away from him, “you have no idea how near the truth you are when you chant that word. Haven’t you noticed what that swelling in his neck really is?”

He now leapt to his feet and touched the horse’s deformity with a solemn reverence as if it were something absolutely sacred. As for Mistress Bundy, she hurriedly let both her hands fall to her sides. Then she lifted them up a little, and proceeded to wipe them very very carefully with her apron. “It’s the improperly-shaped beginning of a man’s head, you cleverest of all ladies! That’s what it’s intended to be and that’s what it will be. It will be a centaur, that’s to say, a horse with a man’s head!”

At the sound of the word “Centaur” the compressed mouth of the door-keeper went through a faint relaxation. In his boyhood he had attended Saint Aldhelm’s School at