



**John Cowper  
Powys**

—  
**The Brazen  
Head**

Faber Finds

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JOHN COWPER POWYS

THE BRAZEN HEAD

**ff**

*faber and faber*

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Dedicated to

GILBERT TURNER, F.L.A.

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## 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 the 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, to whom many thousands of years ago to be numbered in centuries, was none other than the grandson of Salomon 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 the 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 an 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 enchantment 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, and 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 could 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 a 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 prophetic 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. O 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 entrancingly 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 the 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 the 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 messy 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 live 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—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 fantasticalrodomontade 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 that way! It gives me the feeling that some evil influence has come over you. Dear God! but I wish 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 magical 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 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 been 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 that that were not a little disturbing to him. Peleg 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 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 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 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 the vicious points in careful and calculated succession.

What he was feeling in his mind was a black void of desperate loneliness. He had been 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 “opposite” events 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 ~~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 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 same 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, “I 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 motion’ 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 air. 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 on this method of worshipping. But shall I tell you a great secret, Peleg? From what I’ve seen Father Bacon 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 and 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 skin 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 sound of a 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 greyness 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 Mortimer is 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-arms if they had been able to pile up their armour in a secluded court-yard 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 natural 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 Fidenza the name 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 repelled

excrescence possessed something corresponding 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 Squire 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 fingers 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 the 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 is the improperly-shaped beginning of a man's head, you cleverest of all ladies! That's what it is 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 Sherborne, and there he had heard of the centaur Cheiron and of the lessons in healing which this wise being gave the son of Aesculapius.

The word "Centaur" however meant nothing to Mistress Bundy; and there was therefore not the faintest element in her interest in this creature's neck of anything save the pure fascination of some grotesquely weird or fantastically shocking aspect of a deformity.

Both the woman and Spardo jumped back quickly enough however when the sound of trotting horses became audible. "They are coming!" Spardo cried. "Well! I'll ride and meet them and tell them—for I can see from your manner what you allow me to say—that they may expect, if they behave quietly and don't crowd in with all their armour and if they leave their horses outside, a prince is welcome!"

"O yes, yes, yes!" cried Bundy in great excitement: "Go! go! go! And Cortex will hasten now to tell Lady Val you are all coming! I am sure that both she and Sir Mort would blame us terribly if we let you pass this door and proceed on your way without stopping!"

The son of the King of Bohemia obeyed Mistress Bundy without a word. He swung himself upon the creature he had long ago nicknamed Cheiron and galloped off. There was no wind at that moment moving among the green spruce-firs and the brown larches and the few majestic deeply-indented reddish-barked pines, which were the only trees close to this main entrance to the Fortress of Roqu

an entrance which faced due south and which lacked, for some technical strategic reason when it was first constructed, any smoothly-sloping approach, like the avenue of elms leading eastward from the postern door.

But if there had been such a wind, and if we were permitted to endow it with anything resembling our own impressions about people and things, it would certainly have received a shock of surprise when it noted that before Master Cortex rushed down the passage leading to the interior of the Fortress, and before Mistress Bundy shuffled back to her chamber in the rampart beside the great gate, neither of them gave the other so much as a glance, far less made any attempt to exchange views on the direction towards which events were moving.

Meanwhile within a small ante-room to their bed-chamber Lady Valentia was impatiently awaiting her husband's return from his accustomed early jaunt. Lady Val could see from where she sat both the elderly women, the upright, bony Nurse Rampant, with her formidable clear-cut Norman profile and her tall muscular figure, and Mother Guggery, the nurse's help, with her short legs, well-rounded belly, and her grey curls, so fantastically trimmed with purple ribbons that her head resembled a bird's nest in an aviary full of irises. These two females were hard at work in the inner chamber, sweeping out the dust and making the bed, and while they worked they were keeping up a regular word-dance of enticing scandal which, by an infinitely crafty and long-practised skill, they exchanged in such a way as to reveal absolutely nothing to their mistress with which she wasn't already acquainted or in which either of them could specially preen herself as the revealer.

Thus it was easy enough for Lady Val to give herself up to a certain rather bitter vein of meditation for which she only had the appropriate leisure when, as at this moment, she was waiting for Sir Mort before taking the lead in some exacting social function.

"It's no good," she told herself, "imagining at this late stage what my life might have been if I hadn't married Sir Mort and handed this place over to him with his weird Abyssum blood, for just as I never could understand his parents, so, though I love him from my heart as the father of my two boys and of our darling little Lil-Umbra, I do sometimes feel as if, being as I am the only living descendant and representative, in this ill-mannered and unruly island, of our old and civilized house of Dormequil, I might have done better had I given myself and our historic Manor of Roque to one of our cousins in Brabant, or even to one of our second cousins in Piedmont.

"But perhaps *then* I would have died childless; for with all the proud shrinking of what Mort calls my 'virginal qualms', if I'd given myself to a man of my own nervous sensitivity instead of to my own thick-skinned raper of Sabines, these dear children of mine might never have been born! But O I do wish that Mort had never let John go to that awful Regent's College, as they call it, in Oxford, where this man they call the Doctor Mirabilis got hold of him. The boy's head has been completely turned by this cunning Friar with his devilish sorceries! Thank God that Tilton has a firm head on his dear broad shoulders! He has always been the only really well-balanced, sensible one of our family, and I can only pray he'll more and more take the lead.

"It doesn't seem quite right for a young man as well-born and well-educated as Tilton to work like a mason with his own hands at that little shrine to Our Lady he's building out there: but it shows what a good, firm, steady, reliable mind the dear boy has that he is anxious to serve God in a really practical way, rather than indulge in all these crazy and immoral ideas about inventing ships to fly to the Moon and boats to dive to the bottom of the sea and Heads of Brass to utter oracles. O my little John, my little John, if I, your mother, can't get this nonsense out of your head I can only hope that when you're a man you'll find a woman who'll be able to do what your mother can't!"

At this point Lady Valentia was seized with such a spasm of frustration and with such a sense of a

the weariness and disillusionment that exist in this human world, that she bowed her head over the arm of her chair, and closing her eyes uttered a piteous prayer to her guardian angel that she might go to sleep like those people in fairy-tales and not wake up till her husband was dead and John was a man and Lil-Umbra was happily married.

It was at this moment that Master Cortex, breathing heavily and gasping a little, not only by reason of the speed at which he'd come, but also from apprehension as to the effect of his news, was ushered into that little ante-chamber.

Nurse Rampant and Mother Guggery jostled each other to be the first intermediary between the Euripidean messenger of fate and the lady of the manor; and Mother Guggery being the nearer at the start won the race. With a word and a wave she dismissed the scullery-boy who had ushered Cortex into the lady's presence, and she would have dismissed Cortex too if she could have got his news out of him before doing so; but Lady Val's instinctive tact and instantaneously available domestic wisdom anticipated any such move.

"What is it, Tex?" she enquired; and her choice of the diminutive syllable which Sir Mort always used for his doorkeeper so delighted the professional pride of Mistress Bundy's stolid mate that he couldn't resist giving to both Nurse Rampant and Mother Guggery a grimly sardonic glance, not even including them in one general look but giving them each a separate rebuff, as if he said to the one "You see it's 'Tex' between your mistress and me," and to the other, "You see how well she knows the way they treat door-keepers in King's houses!"

"Did this man you're speaking of," enquired Lady Val, "I mean the one on the horse with two heads, mention how many were coming? Did he know if the saintly Bonaventura was among them?"

Having completely disposed of the two old wives, who were now so riddled with curiosity that nothing but direct dismissal by their mistress would have got rid of them, Cortex answered Lady Val's questions with the utmost honesty.

"The man didn't say how many they were, my lady, nor did he say whether Saint Bonaventura was coming with them. But he certainly said they would be at the great gate in a few minutes; so, as I knew you and Sir Mort, my lady, would wish them to have a taste of cook's good oat-cakes on this morn or morns, I told him that their men would have to take their horses round to the stables themselves, and that if his noble lords were wearing heavy armour it had better be left in the gate-room, as we had \_\_\_\_\_"

"Did the man tell you that Saint Bonaventura was coming with them?" interrupted Lady Val with some degree of impatience.

The Nurse and Mother Guggery looked significantly at each other as Cortex began to explain the length just when and how, in his recent conversation, the name Bonaventura had been introduced:

"Well, Tex," Lady Val announced at last, "you'd better bring them all in here, into our reception passage. Yes! All the lot of them! It won't do to discriminate; 'In for a shepherd's crook, in for a royal sceptre!' as the proverb says. But I wish Peleg and Lil-Umbra would come back! I can't think where Lady Lil has made him carry her. Well! you'd better go back and wait for them at the gate. I must go to the kitchen at once and find out what we've got and what cook will be able to do with what we've got"—she broke off with a little cry and a gesture that might have been of exasperation or might have been of intense relief; and while Cortex with a rather dissatisfied countenance stalked out of the chamber, Lady Val turned to Nurse Rampant.

"I think," she said, "that was the postern-gate. If it was, it must mean that Peleg and Lil-Umbra have come in. I expect you had better take the child to her room at once, Nurse. For I know her Father would want her to look her very best if what Cortex said is true and this company really com

straight from France. Cortex isn't one to exaggerate, and I know there's been talk of this saint Bonaventura becoming a Cardinal, perhaps even Pope, if his glory goes on mounting up at its present rate."

Seldom have three women separated more hurriedly and with expressions more definitely divided between lively excitement, irritable anxiety, and gloating interest than these three did now. But not much time elapsed before Nurse Rampant and Lady Valentia were in sight of each other again, although surrounded now, each of them, by a closely jostling crowd of extravagantly attired lords and ladies.

## THE HOUSE OF ABYSSUM

The reception of guests in this central portion of the Fortress of Roque always took place in a wide and spacious but low-roofed passage, half cloister, half gothic corridor, between the kitchen and the dining-hall. Of these it was the kitchen that was far the more richly decorated, and in its roof, walls, and general aspect, far the more flamboyant, and grotesquely intricate in its ornamentation. The dining-hall was of much simpler and much older construction. In fact it must have reverted to an age only a little later than the withdrawal from Britain of the Roman Legions.

Entering it you felt you were entering what might have been a giant cave in a fairy-tale; and when you were within it, it was as if it had been through primeval forests that you had to thread your way across crossing some Roman road, and losing yourself in mouldering and broken-up vestiges of shadowy romance. It was the spacious cloistered passage between these two impressive constructions, the eastward-looking prehistoric dining-hall, and the westward-looking, intimately gothic and mediaeval kitchen, that was, upon this particular February morning, in the year of grace twelve hundred and seventy-two, when the little daughter of the house accompanied by the Mongolian giant Peleg came through the postern-gate, more crowded than it had been since the day when the Norman bride Llewelyn the Great was entertained here by Lady Val's family.

The crowd by which Lil-Umbra and Peleg were now confronted was indeed a brilliant one and yet was also an extremely confused and motley one. If there were plenty of lords and ladies, there were also plenty of menials and dependents; some of these latter being almost strangers to the place, such as the blue-eyed, wispy-bearded rider of the deformed horse called Cheiron, others, like the Sygeri family, who had been Bailiffs of Roque for two or three generations, being wholly local people.

It was immediately apparent to Lil-Umbra and Peleg, even before Lady Val had been able to make her way through the crowd to reach them, that the chief topic of excited talk among all these people had to do with the coming of the famous Bonaventura, and with the relation between him and the equally famous—though some would say the abominably infamous—Friar Bacon.

The names Bacon and Bonaventura kept rising and falling like a musical refrain from all parts of the crowd. The impression Lil-Umbra first got was that at any moment the philosopher in disgrace and his saintly punisher might suddenly emerge from somewhere behind the scenes and burst into a dramatic dialogue. Then she suddenly became aware that there really was a violent argument between two excitable competitors for public attention approaching them through the crowd, but that this was a dispute between her own brothers.

She could hear her mother's voice indignantly intervening as the two young men pushed their way through the astonished guests with the evident intention of going out through the door by which she and Peleg had come in.

"I know exactly what's happened," she told herself. "Tilton's had his breakfast early, in the kitchen, as he often does, and he's going out to work at his Lady Chapel." And then, as she noticed that both brothers had caught sight of her, "I pray they're not going to drag me into their dispute! If they try to I shall just say that we'd better leave theology to people who're too old for anything else!"

But though both her brothers, and her mother too, had seen her, as she stood there by Peleg's side it was clearly not easy for them to disentangle themselves from the press of people. Lil-Umbra moved

a little closer to her gigantic companion. On this particular morning, when she had seen the advancing Sun and the receding Moon exchanging some mysterious zodiacal password as they separated to pursue their different paths through space and time, it seemed to her as if some special wave of fate had swept this giant, with his Jewish father and his Tartar mother, into her life as a colossal raft, upon which, if she could only cling tightly enough, all would end well.

A sharp-cutting phrase used by her brother John, as he and Tilton shook off the interference of the mother, reached her now like a high-pitched fog-bell in a storm-rocked harbour-mouth; but more agitating to her than John's wild talk was a startling vision she suddenly had of Nurse Rampant hovering behind Lady Val. Her reply to this presence in the background was to twist her ring-finger desperately and tightly round a fold in the Tartar's cloak; and the hard little knot made by this bird-like clutch upon the pliant silk of the man's mantle became, as Lil-Umbra kept striking her other clenched hand upon it, a sort of musical instrument of inspired resistance to constituted authority.

Nor did this quaint combination of gigantic passivity with girlish revolt prove unsuccessful; for Nurse Rampant, who knew both the character of the mother and the character of the daughter better than anyone else in the world, saw so clearly the way things were drifting that she decided to leave Lady Valentia to deal with her three children and their unsocial behaviour as best she could, and turning her back upon them all hurried off to her own quarters.

"If I'm to dress the child," she said to herself, "to please this crowd, they'll have to send her up to me. I'm not going to wait any longer in this crazy hurly-burly!"

Things were indeed getting out of control. Both her brothers were now appealing to Lil-Umbra. Tilton was already finishing what was evidently a sentence he had begun before she had begun to listen to him. "Our learned rulers," Tilton was saying, "are surely appointed by the Church, John, to direct our campaign against Satan, just as much as our secular captains are appointed by the State to organize our campaign against Saracens and Arabians and Turks and all other enemies."

"But what I say," broke in the shrill, high-pitched, rather rasping voice of John, "is that when we come to philosophy, and science, and mechanical invention, we touch a totally different aspect of life from that with which religion is concerned. If you take philosophy for instance," and here John's voice rose to such a penetrating pitch that all sorts of resplendently dressed ladies looked significantly at each other and drew nearer to listen, thinking perhaps that here was one of those dangerous heretics that the great Saint who accompanied them was on his way to suppress, "for instance, in regard to the difference between Mind and Matter, what, I ask you," cried John, beginning to gesticulate like a practised teacher of philosophy, "are we to decide about the Aristotelian view of the Higher Realities compared with Plato's system of Ideas? Or what are we to think about the nature of these immaculate 'Ideas'? Are they perhaps to be considered as Godlike Entities in Themselves, or merely as subjective symbols of——"

"Stop this nonsense, John!" The interruption came from Lady Val. It may easily be believed that Lady Val's indignant outcry had an instantaneous effect upon the already excited, jostling crowd that surrounded them. Everyone heard her words and everyone turned round to look at her; and those who were already absorbed in watching Tilton and John turned from them to their little sister, as if they felt sure that the only female among these precocious youngsters would have some opinion on "the Ideas of Plato" different from any that had ever been promulgated to a puzzled world.

The young girl began to feel as if from every little group of people round them there emanated a violent explosion of human emotion expressed in terms of intensely coloured and passionate gleaming inanimate objects. She had heard that the great "General" of the Franciscan order preaching Friars—this Bonaventura they were all talking about—was furiously fond of preaching



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