

Locus Solus



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Raymond Roussel

Locus Solus

Raymond Roussel

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Locus Solus

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THAT THURSDAY in early April my learned friend Martial Canterel had invited me, along with several other close friends of his, to visit the huge park surrounding his beautiful villa at Montmorency.

Locus Solus, as the property is called, is a quiet retreat where Canterel enjoys the pursuit of his various fertile labours with a perfectly tranquil mind. In this *solitary place*, he is adequately sheltered from the turmoil of Paris – and yet is able to reach the capital within a quarter of an hour whenever his research requires a session in some specialist library or when the moment comes for him to make some sensational announcement to the scientific world at a prodigiously packed conference.

Canterel spends almost the entire year at Locus Solus, surrounded by disciples full of passionate admiration for his continual discoveries, who lend their enthusiastic support to the completion of his work. The villa contains several rooms fitted out as luxurious model laboratories, run by numerous assistants. Here the professor devotes his entire life to science – for he is a bachelor with no commitments, whose large fortune at once removes any material difficulties incurred by the various targets he sets himself in the course of his strenuous labours.

Three o'clock had just struck. It was a fine day and the sun was sparkling in a nearly flawless sky. Canterel received us not far from his villa, in the open air, beneath some ancient trees whose shade enveloped a comfortable little arrangement of cane chairs.

When the last guest had arrived, the professor moved off at the head of our group, which obediently followed him. Canterel was a tall man, dark-complexioned, with an open countenance, regular features, a small moustache and keen eyes lit up by his marvellous intellect: all in all he bore his forty-four years remarkably well. A warm, persuasive voice lent great charm to his engaging delivery, the seductiveness and precision of which made him a master of the spoken word.

We had been advancing up a steeply sloping path for a while. Halfway up, we caught sight of a curiously ancient statue standing in

a fairly deep stone niche beside the path; it seemed to be composed of dry, hardened, blackish earth and represented – not without charm – a naked, smiling child. His arms were stretched forwards as though to offer something – both hands open towards the ceiling of the recess. A small, dead and extremely decayed plant was standing in the middle of his right hand, where it had once taken root.

Canterel, continuing absent-mindedly on his way, was obliged to answer our unanimous questions.

“That is the *santonica* Federal which ibn Batuta saw in the heart of Timbuktu,” he said, pointing to the statue – the origin of which he thereupon disclosed.

* * *

The professor had been an intimate friend of Echenoz, the famous traveller who had reached Timbuktu in the course of an African expedition made in his early youth.

Before setting out, Echenoz had delved into all the literature on the regions that attracted him and had reread several times one narrative in particular by the Arab theologian ibn Batuta, considered the greatest explorer of the fourteenth century after Marco Polo. Towards the end of a life fertile in noteworthy geographical discoveries, when he might well have rested peacefully upon his laurels, ibn Batuta had ventured one more distant exploration and seen mysterious Timbuktu.

Echenoz had singled out the following episode in his reading.

When ibn Batuta entered Timbuktu alone, the town was shrouded in silence and dismay. At that time the throne was occupied by a woman, Queen Duhl-Serul, who was barely twenty years old and had not yet chosen a husband. Duhl-Serul occasionally suffered from violent attacks of amenorrhoea which brought on apoplectic attacks that affected her brain and induced fits of raving insanity.

These disorders caused grave harm to the inhabitants, since the queen, who wielded absolute authority, was inclined at such times to issue insane commands and mete out death sentences in ever-growing numbers without reason. A revolution might well have broken out. However, apart from these moments of aberration, Duhl-Serul governed her people with the greatest wisdom and benevolence; rarely had they known so happy a reign. Rather than launch into the unknown

by deposing their sovereign, they patiently endured such short-lived calamities, compensated by long periods of prosperity.

Until then, not one of the Queen's doctors had been able to check the disease.

Now at the moment when ibn Batuta arrived, Duhl-Serul was struck by a more violent attack than any that had gone before. Time and time again, at a word from her, large numbers of innocent people had to be executed and whole harvests burnt. Stricken with terror and famine, the inhabitants waited from one day to the next for the fit to end; but incomprehensibly it continued, creating an intolerable situation.

A kind of fetish used to stand in the main square of Timbuktu, which according to popular belief possessed great power. It was the statue of a child made entirely of dark-coloured earth, erected long before under curious circumstances, during the reign of Duhl-Serul's ancestor King Forukko. Possessing the mild and sensible qualities displayed in normal times by Duhl-Serul and passing laws and taking personal responsibility, Forukko had brought a high level of prosperity to his country. An enlightened agronomist, he personally supervised cultivation and introduced many fruitful improvements in the antiquated methods of planting and harvesting.

The neighbouring tribes were amazed by this state of affairs and allied themselves with Forukko in order to profit by his decrees and counsels, each preserving its autonomy and the right to resume full independence whenever they wished. It was a pact of friendship rather than of submission, which bound its members moreover to combine together against a common foe whenever necessary.

Amid the wild rejoicing which followed the solemn announcement of the vast unification that had been accomplished, the decision was taken to create, by way of a commemorative emblem fit to immortalize the illustrious event, a statue made entirely of earth from the soil of the various united tribes. Each people sent its share of loam, chosen to symbolize the state of bountiful abundance ushered in by the protection of Forukko. When all the humus had been mixed and kneaded together, a famous sculptor, whose choice of subject was ingenious, used it to construct a graceful, smiling child who was indeed the common offspring of the numerous tribes now merged into one family, and seemed to make their established bonds still firmer. On account of its origin, this work, set in the main square of Timbuktu, received a name which, translated

into a modern tongue, would be rendered as “The Federal”. Modelled with charming skill, the naked child, with the backs of his hands turned flat towards the ground and arms outstretched as though to make an invisible offering, evoked by his symbolic gesture the gift of wealth and felicity promised by the idea he represented. This statue soon dried and hardened to become a permanently solid structure.

Just as everyone had hoped, a golden age began for the united peoples, who attributed their good fortune to the Federal and ardently worshipped this all-powerful image which so readily answered their innumerable prayers. In the reign of Duhl-Serul the tribal association still existed and the Federal inspired the same fanatical devotion.

As the sovereign’s present madness became steadily worse, the people decided to visit the earthen statue en masse and implore it to remove the scourge at once.

Ibn Batuta witnessed and described the great procession led by priests and dignitaries, which wended its way to the Federal to offer up long and fervent supplications to it, according to special rites. That very evening a terrible hurricane swept over the land, a kind of devastating tornado which rapidly traversed Timbuktu without damaging the Federal, sheltered as it was by surrounding buildings. In the days that followed, frequent downpours were produced as an effect of this disturbance of the elements.

Nevertheless the queen’s acute insanity intensified, hourly occasioning fresh calamities. The people were already despairing of the Federal when one morning, rooted in the palm of its right hand, the image displayed a small plant on the point of blossoming. Everyone, without hesitation, took this to be a remedy miraculously offered by the revered child to cure Duhl-Serul’s affliction.

Thanks to the alternation of rain and blazing sunshine, the plant grew rapidly and brought forth tiny flowers of a pale yellow colour which, as soon as they were dry, were carefully collected and administered to the sovereign, then at the height of her derangement.

The long-overdue phenomenon took place instantly and Duhl-Serul at last obtained relief; she recovered her sanity and became once more benevolent and just.

Wild with joy, the people gave thanks to the Federal in an impressive ceremony, and, being anxious to forestall any subsequent fits, they resolved to cultivate the plant by watering it regularly, leaving it, out

of superstitious reverence, in the statue's hand and not daring to sow its seeds elsewhere. This mysterious flower, unknown in the land until then, permitted of only one explanation: a seed, carried through the air from some distant region by the hurricane, had fallen into the idol's right hand where it had ripened in the loam regenerated by the rain. It was widely believed that the omnipotent Federal had himself unleashed the cyclone, brought the seed into his own hand and induced each germinative shower.

This was the explorer Echenoz's favourite passage in ibn Batuta's narrative and, once in Timbuktu, he made enquiries about the Federal. As a schism had arisen between the united tribes, the fetish, now deprived of all significance, had been banished from the main square and relegated to the status of a mere curiosity amongst the relics of the temple, where it had long been forgotten. Echenoz asked to see it. The famous plant was still standing in the hand of the smiling and undamaged child; though dry and stunted now, it had once – as the explorer managed to learn – dispelled each of Duhl-Serul's attacks for several years, until she was completely cured. Echenoz, who possessed the smattering of botany demanded by his profession, recognized the ancient horticultural debris as a stump of *artemisia maritima* – and remembered that the dried flowers of this radiant did indeed constitute a very potent emmenagogue, when taken in minute quantities in the form of a yellowish medicine called santonica. And in fact this remedy, being available only from a single, meagre source, had always been administered to Duhl-Serul in weak doses.

Thinking that, in view of its present state of neglect, the Federal might well be purchasable, Echenoz offered a generous price which was at once accepted, then brought the remarkable statue back to Europe where its history aroused Canterel's intense curiosity.

Echenoz had died not long before, bequeathing the Federal to his friend as a memento of his interest in this ancient African fetish.

* * *

Our eyes, fixed on the symbolic child which, like the ancient plant, now had for us an air of the utmost fascination, were soon drawn to three rectangular high reliefs, cut into the very stone, in the base of

the upright block from which the niche had been hollowed. The three subtly tinted works stretched out horizontally before us, one above the other, between the ground and the top of the platform upon which the Federal stood. They had become very worn in places and gave the impression of fabulous antiquity, as did the entire block of stone.

The first relief represented an enraptured young woman standing on a grassy plain. Her arms were laden with flowers she had picked and she was gazing at the word "NOW" traced in the sky by the slender cirrus clouds gently curved by the wind. Though faded, the variety of delicate hues had endured throughout, and were still vivid on the clouds suffused with rosy crepuscular light.

Lower down, the second sculpted scene showed the same mysterious girl seated in a sumptuous hall, extracting a one-eyed puppet dressed in pink from a gap in the seam of a richly embroidered blue cushion.

The third scene, nearest the ground, presented a one-eyed man arrayed in pink, the very image of the puppet, pointing out a fair-sized block of green veined marble to several bystanders. The upper surface of this block had a gold ingot half-embedded in it, and bore the word "Ego" very lightly engraved with a flourish and a date. In the background was a short tunnel with a closed iron gate inside, which seemed to lead into some enormous cavern scooped out of the side of a marmoreal green mountain. Some colours in the last two works retained a degree of freshness – particularly the blue, pink, green and gold.

On being questioned, Canterel gave us some particulars about this sculptural trilogy. About seven years earlier the professor had heard of the formation of a society to uncover the Breton town of Gloannic, which had been destroyed and buried by a terrible cyclone in the fifteenth century. Without any thought of gain, he had taken out a large number of shares, solely in order to support an ambitious project which he thought likely to produce fascinating results.

Through their representatives, the largest museums of Europe and America were soon arguing over the numerous precious objects which, as a result of skilful excavations conducted in the right spots, immediately started running the gauntlet of public auction in Paris.

One evening Canterel, who was present when each new consignment of antiquities arrived, noticed three painted reliefs adorning the front of the base of a large, empty niche that had recently been unearthed,

and suddenly remembered the following Armorican legend which is included in the Arthurian Cycle.

Long ago, at his capital, Gloannic, Kourmelen, King of Kerlaguëzo – a wild region at the extreme western tip of France – felt that his health, which had long been precarious, was rapidly failing, though he was still young.

For five years Kourmelen had been a widower: Queen Pleveneuc had died giving birth to her first child, the little Princess Hello. Her fond father had several envious brothers who were intriguing for the throne, and was afraid that after his death, which was certainly near at hand, Hello, who by the law of the land was to be his only successor, would be exposed to many conspiracies on account of her tender years.

Kourmelen's heavy golden crown, devoid of jewels, redeemed its plainness by its great antiquity. Known as "The Load", it had encircled the brow of each sovereign of Kerlaguëzo from time immemorial, and had ultimately become the very essence of the absolute monarchy: without it no prince could have reigned a single day. This ardent fetishism was capable of overruling legitimate claims, and consequently the people would have recognized as their lord a pretender clever enough to get hold of this object, which was prudently secured in a safe place, guarded by sentinels.

In remote times, one of Kourmelen's ancestors, Jouël the Great, had founded the kingdom of Kerlaguëzo and its capital, and he had been the first to wear the Load, made at his command. Jouël died nearly a hundred years old; deified in legend and transformed into a star in the heavens, he continued to watch over his people. Every inhabitant knew how to pick him out amongst the constellations, to address vows and prayers to him.

Wasted by his cares, Kourmelen put his trust in the supernatural power of his illustrious forebear and implored him to send some beneficent inspiration in a dream. Since the revered crown was indispensable to all enthronements, he had long considered sealing it up in some mysterious hiding place beyond his brothers' reach, in order to deprive them of the least hope of success. But once Hello was old enough to defy her enemies it would be necessary for her to recover the antique band of gold in order to proclaim herself queen – and prudence forbade him to tell her the spot he had chosen, since secrets may easily be drawn from a child by force or

guile. Obligated to take someone into his confidence, the King remained in a state of indecision, overwhelmed by the gravity of the problem.

Jouël heard his descendant's prayer and visited him in a dream to impart a wise plan of conduct. From then on, Kourmelen did nothing but follow the instructions he had received. He had his crown melted down into an undistinguished, oblong ingot and visited Morne-Vert, an enchanted mountain made famous in the past by one of Jouël's studious journeys.

Towards the end of his life, while he was travelling through his kingdom out of concern for his people's welfare and in order to ascertain the honesty of his governors, Jouël had pitched camp one evening in a lonely region with which he was unfamiliar. The royal tent had been erected at the foot of Morne-Vert, a chaotic mountain remarkable for its sea-green colour and the glitter of its finely veined marble. Out of curiosity, while his party were preparing for the night, Jouël attempted to climb it, repeatedly striking the uniformly resistant ground with an iron-tipped rod, as though to divine its nature. One particular blow startled him by producing a faint subterranean resonance. Halting, he delivered some heavy knocks at various suspect points in the locality and noticed a muffled echo which spread through the mountainside, indicating the presence of a cavern of considerable size. Feeling that this might provide an agreeable shelter for the night, which promised to be a cold one, Jouël ascended no further, but had his men look for a fissure giving access to the unexpected cave.

Thwarted by the failure of all their investigations, the King considered the possibility of a buried opening and ordered the base of the mountain, which was covered by fine gravel, to be cleared beneath the spot where the echo was.

Several makeshift workmen, equipped with whatever tools came to hand, almost at once laid bare the top of an arch which they cleared so that a man might just pass through.

Jouël entered the narrow corridor torch, in hand and soon discovered a magnificent cavern all of green marble, studded, through some curious geological phenomenon, with huge nuggets of gold. These alone were worth an incalculable fortune, which might well be increased tenfold by those undoubtedly concealed in the mass of the mountain.

Amazed, Jouël decided to set this fabulous wealth aside, out of reach of the greedy, for the eventuality of a period of ruin and misfortune,