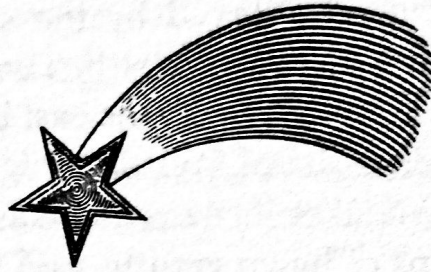


Chapter One

In Which We Learn of the Village of Wall,
and of the Curious Thing That Occurs There
Every Nine Years



There was once a young man who wished to gain his Heart's Desire.

And while that is, as beginnings go, not entirely novel (for every tale about every young man there ever was or will be could start in a similar manner) there was much about this young man and what happened to him that was unusual, although even he never knew the whole of it.

The tale started, as many tales have started, in Wall.

The town of Wall stands today as it has stood for six hundred years, on a high jut of granite amidst a small forest woodland. The houses of Wall are square and old, built of grey stone, with dark slate roofs and high chimneys; taking advantage of every inch of space on the rock, the houses lean into each other, are built one upon the next, with here and there a bush or tree growing out of the side of a building.

There is one road from Wall, a winding track rising sharply up from the forest, where it is lined with rocks and small stones. Followed far enough south, out of the forest,

the track becomes a real road, paved with asphalt; followed further the road gets larger, is packed at all hours with cars and lorries rushing from city to city. Eventually the road takes you to London, but London is a whole night's drive from Wall.

The inhabitants of Wall are a taciturn breed, falling into two distinct types: the native Wall-folk, as grey and tall and stocky as the granite outcrop their town was built upon; and the others, who have made Wall their home over the years, and their descendants.

Below Wall on the west is the forest; to the south is a treacherously placid lake served by the streams that drop from the hills behind Wall to the north. There are fields upon the hills, on which sheep graze. To the east is more woodland.

Immediately to the east of Wall is a high grey rock wall, from which the town takes its name. This wall is old, built of rough, square lumps of hewn granite, and it comes from the woods and goes back to the woods once more.

There is only one break in the wall; an opening about six feet in width, a little to the north of the village.

Through the gap in the wall can be seen a large green meadow; beyond the meadow, a stream; and beyond the stream there are trees. From time to time shapes and figures can be seen, amongst the trees, in the distance. Huge shapes and odd shapes and small, glimmering things which flash and glitter and are gone. Although it is perfectly good meadowland, none of the villagers has ever grazed animals on the meadow on the other side of the wall. Nor have they used it for growing crops.

Instead, for hundreds, perhaps for thousands of years, they have posted guards on each side of the opening on the wall, and done their best to put it out of their minds.

Even today, two townsmen stand on either side of the opening, night and day, taking eight-hour shifts. They carry hefty wooden cudgels. They flank the opening on the town side.

Their main function is to prevent the town's children from going through the opening, into the meadow and beyond. Occasionally they are called upon to discourage a solitary rambler, or one of the few visitors to the town, from going through the gateway.

The children they discourage simply with displays of the cudgel. Where ramblers and visitors are concerned, they are more inventive, only using physical force as a last resort if tales of new-planted grass, or a dangerous bull on the loose, are not sufficient.

Very rarely someone comes to Wall knowing what they are looking for, and these people they will sometimes allow through. There is a look in the eyes, and once seen it cannot be mistaken.

There have been no cases of smuggling across the wall in all the Twentieth Century, that the townsfolk know of, and they pride themselves on this.

The guard is relaxed once every nine years, on May Day, when a fair comes to the meadow.

The events that follow transpired many years ago. Queen Victoria was on the throne of England, but she was not yet the black-clad widow of Windsor: she had apples in her cheeks and the spring in her step, and Lord Melbourne often had cause to upbraid, gently, the young queen for her flightiness. She was, as yet, unmarried, although she was very much in love.

Mr Charles Dickens was serializing his novel *Oliver Twist*; Mr Draper had just taken the first photograph of the moon, freezing her pale face on cold paper; Mr Morse had recently announced a way of transmitting messages down metal wires.

Had you mentioned magic or Faerie to any of them, they would have smiled at you disdainfully, except, perhaps for

Mr Dickens, at the time a young man, and beardless. He would have looked at you wistfully.

People were coming to the British Isles that spring. They came in ones, and they came in twos, and they landed at Dover or in London or in Liverpool: men and women with skins as pale as paper, skins as dark as volcanic rock, skins the colour of cinnamon, speaking in a multitude of tongues. They arrived all through April, and they travelled by steam train, by horse, by caravan or cart, and many of them walked. At that time Dunstan Thorn was eighteen, and he was not a romantic.

He had nut-brown hair, and nut-brown eyes, and nut-brown freckles. He was middling tall, and slow of speech. He had an easy smile, which illuminated his face from within, and he dreamed, when he daydreamed in his father's meadow, of leaving the village of Wall and all its unpredictable charm, and going to London, or Edinburgh, or Dublin, or some great town where nothing was dependent on which way the wind was blowing. He worked on his father's farm and owned nothing save a small cottage in a far field given to him by his parents.

Visitors were coming to Wall that April for the fair, and Dunstan resented them. Mr Bromios's inn, the *Seventh Magpie*, normally a warren of empty rooms, had filled a week earlier, and now the strangers had begun to take rooms in the farms and private houses, paying for their lodgings with strange coins, with herbs and spices, and even with gemstones.

As the day of the fair approached the atmosphere of anticipation mounted. People were waking earlier, counting days, counting minutes. The guards on the gate, at the sides of the wall, were restive and nervous. Figures and shadows moved in the trees at the edge of the meadow.

In the *Seventh Magpie*, Bridget Comfrey, who was widely regarded as the most beautiful pot-girl in living memory, was provoking friction between Tommy Forester, with whom she

had been seen to step out over the previous year, and a huge man with dark eyes and a small, chittering monkey. The man spoke little English, but he smiled expressively whenever Bridget came by.

In the pub's taproom the regulars sat in awkward proximity to the visitors, speaking so:

'It's only every nine years.'

'They say in the old days it was every year, at mid-summer.'

'Ask Mister Bromios. He'll know.'

Mr Bromios was tall, and his skin was olive; his black hair was curled tightly on his head; his eyes were green. As the girls of the village became women they took notice of Mr Bromios, but he did not return their notice. It was said he had come to the village quite some time ago, a visitor. But he had stayed in the village; and his wine was good, so the locals agreed.

A loud argument broke out in the public lounge between Tommy Forester and the dark-eyed man, whose name appeared to be Alum Bey.

'Stop them! In the name of Heaven! Stop them!' shouted Bridget. 'They're going out the back to fight over me!' And she tossed her head, prettily, so that the light of the oil lamps caught her perfect golden curls.

Nobody moved to stop the men, although a number of people, villagers and newcomers alike, went outside to spectate.

Tommy Forester removed his shirt and raised his fists in front of him. The stranger laughed, and spat on the grass, and then he seized Tommy's right hand and sent him flying onto the ground, chin-first. Tommy clambered to his feet and ran at the stranger. He landed a glancing blow on the man's cheek, before finding himself face-down in the dirt, his face being slammed into the mud, with the wind knocked out of him. Alum Bey sat on top of him and chuckled, and said something in Arabic.

That quickly, and that easily, the fight was over. Alum Bey climbed off Tommy Forester and he strutted over to Bridget Comfrey, bowed low to her, and grinned with gleaming teeth.

Bridget ignored him, and ran to Tommy. 'Why, whatever has he done to you, my sweet?' she asked, and mopped the mud from his face with her apron and called him all manner of endearments.

Alum Bey went, with the spectators, back into the public rooms of the inn, and he graciously bought Tommy Forester a bottle of Mr Bromios's Chablis when Tommy returned. Neither of them was quite certain who had won, who had lost.

Dunstan Thorn was not in the *Seventh Magpie* that evening: he was a practical lad, who had, for the last six months, been courting Daisy Hempstock, a young woman of similar practicality. They would walk, on fair evenings, around the village, and discuss the theory of crop rotation, and the weather, and other such sensible matters; and on these walks, upon which they were invariably accompanied by Daisy's mother and younger sister walking a healthy six paces behind, they would, from time to time, stare at each other lovingly.

At the door to the Hempstocks' Dunstan would pause, and bow, and take his farewell.

And Daisy Hempstock would walk into her house, and remove her bonnet, and say, 'I *do* so wish Mister Thorn would make up his mind to propose. I am sure Papa would not be averse to it.'

'Indeed, I am sure that he would not,' said Daisy's mama on this evening, as she said on every such evening, and she removed her own bonnet and her gloves and led her daughters to the drawing room, in which a very tall gentleman with a very long black beard was sitting, sorting through his pack. Daisy, and her mama, and her sister, bobbed curtseys to the gentleman (who spoke little English,

and had arrived a few days before). The temporary lodger, in his turn, stood and bowed to them, then returned to his pack of wooden oddments, sorting, arranging and polishing.

It was chilly that April, with the awkward changeability of English spring.

The visitors came up the narrow road through the forest from the south; they filled the spare-rooms, they bunked out in cow byres and barns. Some of them raised coloured tents, and some lived in their own caravans drawn by huge