

THE WALLED CITY

Beyond the walls echoes the mighty blast of a choir of trumpets, heralding a love-stricken hero without the gate. He has come to woo the princess who is walled within. Jericho, Jericho, remember Jericho, but the walls of the City, which are the walls of her prison, will not fall down. So the grieving lover weeps; weeps that his heart may not beat close to hers, that he must be alone, as if a thousand miles separate them. He remembers happier times, when her eyes told him what could not be said, but they are now unable to be together, for a cruel obstacle stands between them. She belongs to a City that is not of her choosing, though it claims her nonetheless. A mountain range he could ascend. A desert he could cross, yet the walls of a city may not be so easily assailed.

The City gates are barred to the distraught young man, and high towers overlook the approaches. Their grim shadows hang over steep ditches and a moat, while armed sentries parade the battlements. Three high walls and a broad, fast-flowing river block the way to his beloved. His emotions now overwhelm him. Oh shattered dreams ! Oh madness of love ! Why have you brought me to this eternal misery ? The lover laments and is compelled to bow his head in defeat. His soul is tormented by the pain of his frustration, his sleep disturbed by the shock of his passion. The celestial vision of his beautiful lady is obscured by tears of desperate sadness. How her absence wounds his heart ! What can he do to destroy these wretched walls ?

Fear visits the demoralised youth. He believes that some invisible evil is lurking in the dark corners of the City. Now ugly fantasies delude him. He imagines a debauched life inside the walls, which may seduce his beloved. Oh tragedy - that revels, foul lust and wine should corrupt her sweet soul ! But events confound his gloomy thoughts, for he hears the sound of solemn and pious anthems emanating from the City, and the bells of all the churches ring out. He is filled with anguish, lest his sweetheart has married another. He cannot know, for he cannot see over the walls, but merely sits outside and waits. Waits and imagines, imagines and fears. He watches too. Others seem to enter through the city gates with ease, but he dare not pass, for fear that he might lose his freedom. Walls within walls, stones of impenetrable thickness, walls which protect, but also enclose. It is a labyrinth, and the young man's heart is lost therein. He cries - oh break the infernal fortifications, destroy these impregnable defences !

The lover's determination tempts him to scale the walls to look down upon the City. He climbs, hanging by his fingertips from each niche and fissure, until he is able to catch a glimpse of the commotion below. Music is coming from the cathedral and the bells are chiming in happy celebration of the City Guilds, who hold a festival every year to celebrate their craftsmanship. They are processing through the narrow streets, carrying goods of leather, silver and gold, as well as platters filled abundantly with every kind of food. There is singing in exquisite harmony. Alleluia for the gifts of God ! Alleluia ! The voices resound to heaven in thanks and praise. How pleasing it all seems and godly. The unhappy lover sighs that appearances can be so deceiving. What price this joy ? What vileness hides from this virtuous light ?

Doubts arise in his mind, could it be as noble and fine as it all seems ? He longs to be part of these festivities, but he may only look on. He is excluded from all that is taking place. Most of all he fears that his beloved would not wish him to rescue her from so joyful a scene. He forgets that all those within are, like his dearest darling, trapped by dark powers, which are concealed from view. Of his heart's desire, however, there is no sign, and, at this realisation, the hero falls backwards into the freezing waters of the moat beneath, cooling at once his frenzied ardour.

My hope wanes like the moon; the sky is eternally dark. Woe is me that I languish forlorn outside these walls. The weary lover sings with great melancholy, yet how poor the tuning of his lyre, for he is perplexed. How can this be ? He feels so strong, yet remains so weak. How is it that his beloved can be so far from him and yet so near ? He ponders these paradoxes for many days, but cannot fathom their meaning. Is it his fear or hers, which holds up the City's walls, or is malign fate responsible ? He curses the day that he was born. The devil has surely tricked him, and he prepares to leave the sight of the walled City forever. As he gives up his will, Beelzebub's foul oaths rise from the City sewers. A pestilence is abroad, spread quickly by rats and malefactors. Many in the City must die, and grief will be a further plague upon the citizens.

The ardent lover tarries for a moment on the bank of the river, but he cannot depart, as he is mesmerised by the water, which rushes past with ceaseless force. The swirling eddies merge into a larger current, sweeping away all debris. It is his darkest hour, and in his mind he has abandoned his quest, doomed to accept that he will never find true happiness in the arms of his beloved. What is life worth, he asks, that so much love can reap no reward ? The wind answers him with a faint whisper that he does not understand. It tries to tell him that the spirit has descended upon the waters, and that the dove of peace has flown into the City. But the miserable lover does not notice, for he does not look up to the sky.

As he sleeps, he has haunting visions. He sees his princess unable to speak, caged like an animal. Fawners and flatterers surround her, living off her strength and courage, but she is

unable to turn them away. He thinks that he has been crowned King and that he can command the walls to be taken down, and that the corrupt court can be banished. But no one listens to him and he is ignored. Then there is an idyllic scene, where two brooks meet in a fragrant meadow. Both flow into one mighty river, which gushes through a fertile, sunlit valley. The river grows so strong that it carries all in its path. Myriad images pour in, and the hero must drink, drink and drink again, until he is filled with hope.

As dawn breaks, the lover awakens, newly inspired by his dream. He realises that the river is the City's fourth wall, and for those willing to leap into its fast-flowing waters, there are no barriers. So, in a moment of abandon, he throws himself upon the river's mercy. The fresh water restores his tired limbs and exhausted soul. He hears a hymn of praise and begins to sing. At that same moment, from yonder bank, a young woman calls out to him. My fair one, it is I upon whom you have so loyally bestowed your love. Know that by your perseverance my chains are broken. The princess of his soul is released from her bonds into freedom. Suddenly she is nearby, carried right to him by the river's natural force. They have both breached the City's defences and are at last united. Unbidden, the sturdy walls of the City crash to the ground. The devil's curse is broken, and all the citizens rejoice at their new found liberty. Meanwhile, the blissful couple are swept downstream out of sight of the City's shattered walls.

Jericho, Jericho, thy walls have tumbled, but the lovers thou parted have reached a new Jerusalem !

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