

DC COMICS
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NEIL GAIMAN AND CHARLES VESS'

STARDUST



BEING · A · ROMANCE · WITHIN · THE · REALMS · OF · FAERIE



Goe, and catche a falling starre,
Get with child a mandrake roote,
Tell me, where all past yeares are,
Or who cleft the Divels foot,
Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,
Or to keep off envies stinging,
And finde
What winde
Serves to advance an honest minde.

If thou beest borne to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand daies and nights,
Till age snow white haire on thee,
Thou, when thou return'st, will tell mee
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And swear
No where
Lives a woman true, and faire.

If thou findst one, let mee know,
Such a Pilgrimage were sweet,
Yet doe not, I would not goe,
Though at next doore wee might meet,
Though shee were true, when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter,
Yet shee
Will bee
False, ere I come, to two, or three.

JOHN DONNE "A Song"
(1572-1631)





CHAPTER

I

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 on the next, with, here and there, a bush or tree growing out of the side of a building.

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

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 rambler and visitors are concerned, they are more inventive, only resorting to 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.

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, but she was far from being 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 a photograph of the moon, freezing her pale face for the first time on cold paper; Mr. Morse had just announced a way of transmitting messages down metal wires.

