



Stardust

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SONG

Go, and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me, where all past years are,
Or who cleft the Devil's foot,
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy's stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind.
If thou be'est born to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand days and nights,

Till age snow white hairs on thee,
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And swear
Nowhere
Lives a woman true, and fair.
If thou find'st one, let me know,
Such a pilgrimage were sweet,
Yet do not, I would not go,
Though at next door we might meet,
Though she were true when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter,
Yet she
Will be
False, ere I come, to two, or three.

—John Donne, 1572-1631

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 trucks 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 meadow-land, 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 a 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 color of cinnamon, speaking in a multitude of tongues. They arrived all through April, and they traveled 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, cluttering

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 midsummer."

"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 onto 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 facedown 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 colored tents, some of them arrived in their own caravans drawn by huge grey horses or by small, shaggy ponies.

In the forest there was a carpet of bluebells. On the morning of April the 29th Dunstan Thorn drew guard duty on the gap in the wall, with Tommy Forester. They stood on each side of the gap in the wall, and they waited.

Dunstan had done guard duty many times before, but hitherto his task had consisted of simply standing, and, on occasion, shooing away children.

Today he felt important: he held a wooden cudgel, and as each stranger to the village came up to the break in the wall, Dunstan or Tommy would say "Tomorrow, tomorrow. No one's coming through today, good sirs."

And the strangers would retreat a little way, and stare through the break in the wall at the unassuming meadow beyond it, at the unexceptional trees that dotted the meadow, at the rather dull forest behind it. Some of them attempted to strike up conversations with Dunstan or Tommy, but the young men, proud of their status as guards, declined to converse, contenting themselves by raising their heads, tightening their lips, and generally looking important.

At lunchtime, Daisy Hempstock brought by a small pot of shepherd's

pie for them both, and Bridget Comfrey brought them each a mug of spiced ale.

And, at twilight, another two able-bodied young men of the village arrived to relieve them, carrying a lantern each, and Tommy and Dunstan walked down to the inn where Mr. Bromios gave each of them a mug of his best ale—and his best ale was very fine indeed—as their reward for doing guard duty. There was a buzz of excitement in the inn, now crowded beyond believing. It was filled with visitors to the village from every nation in the world, or so it seemed to Dunstan who had no sense of distance beyond the woods that surrounded the village of Wall, so he regarded the tall gentleman in the black top hat at the table beside him, all the way up from London, with as much awe as he regarded the taller ebony-colored gentleman in the white one-piece robe with whom he was dining. Dunstan knew that it was rude to stare, and that, as a villager of Wall, he had every right to feel superior to all of the "furriners." But he could smell unfamiliar spices on the air, and hear men and women speaking to each other in a hundred tongues, and he gawked and gazed unashamedly.

The man in the black silk top hat noticed that Dunstan was staring at him, and motioned the lad over to him. "D'you like treacle pudden'?" he asked abruptly, by way of introduction. "Mutanabbi was called away, and

there's more pudden' here than a man can manage on his own."

Dunstan nodded. The treacle pudding was steaming invitingly on its plate.

"Well then," said his new friend, "help yourself." He passed Dunstan a clean china bowl and a spoon. Dunstan needed no further encouragement, and he began to demolish the pudding.

"Now, young 'un," said the tall gentleman in the black silk top hat to Dunstan, once their bowls and the pudding-plate were quite empty, "it'd seem the inn has no more rooms; also that every room in the village has already been let." "Is that so?" said Dunstan, unsurprised. "That it is," said the gentleman in the top hat. "And what I was wondering was, would you know of a house that might have a room?"

Dunstan shrugged. "All the rooms have gone by now," he said. "I remember that when I was a boy of nine, my mother and my father sent me to sleep out in the rafters of the cow byre for a week, and let my room to a lady from the Orient, and her family and servants. She left me a kite, as a thank you, and I flew it from the meadow until one day it snapped its string and flew away into the sky."

"Where do you live now?" asked the gentleman in the top hat.

"I have a cottage on the edge of my father's land," Dunstan replied. "It

was our shepherd's cottage, until he died, two years ago last lammas-tide, and my parents gave it to me."

"Take me to it," said the gentleman in the hat, and it did not occur to Dunstan to refuse him.

The spring moon was high and bright, and the night was clear. They walked down from the village to the forest beneath it, and they walked the whole way past the Thorn family farm (where the gentleman in the top hat was startled by a cow, sleeping in the meadow, which snorted as it dreamed) until they reached Dunstan's cottage.

It had one room and a fireplace. The stranger nodded. "I like this well enough," he said. "Come, Dunstan Thorn, I'll rent it from you for the next three days."

"What'll you give me for it?"

"A golden sovereign, a silver sixpence, a copper penny, and a fresh shiny farthing," said the man.

Now a golden sovereign for two nights was more than a fair rent, in the days when a farm-worker might hope to make fifteen pounds in a good year. Still, Dunstan hesitated. "If you're here for the market," he told the tall man, "then it's miracles and wonders you'll be trading."

The tall man nodded. "So, it would be miracles and wonders that you

would be after, is it?" He looked around Dunstan's one-room cottage again.

It began to rain then, a gentle pattering on the thatch above them.

"Oh, very well," said the tall gentleman, a trifle testily, "a miracle, a wonder. Tomorrow, you shall attain your Heart's Desire. Now, here is your money," and he took it from Dunstan's ear, with one easy gesture. Dunstan touched it to the iron nail on the cottage door, checking for faerie gold, then he bowed low to the gentleman, and walked off into the rain. He tied the money up in his handkerchief.

Dunstan walked to the cow byre in the pelting rain. He climbed into the hayloft and was soon asleep.

He was aware, in the night, of thunder and of lightning, although he did not wake; and then in the small hours of the morning he was woken by someone treading, awkwardly, on his feet.

"Sorry," said a voice. "That is to say, 'scuse me." "Who's that? Who's there?" said Dunstan. "Just me," said the voice. "I'm here for the market. I was sleeping in a hollow tree for the night, but the lightnin' toppled it, cracked it like an egg it did and smashed it like a twig, and the rain got down my neck, and it threatened to get into my baggage, and there's things in there must be kept dry as dust, and I'd kept it safe as houses on all my travelings here, though it was wet as..."

"Water?" suggested Dunstan.

"Ever-so," continued the voice in the darkness. "So I was wonderin'," it continued, "if you'd mind me stayin' here under your roof as I'm not very big, and I'd not disturb you or nothing."

"Just don't tread on me," sighed Dunstan. It was then that a flash of lightning illuminated the byre, and in the light, Dunstan saw something small and hairy in the corner, wearing a large floppy hat. And then, darkness.

"I hope I'm not disturbin' you," said the voice, which certainly sounded rather hairy, now Dunstan thought about it. "You aren't," said Dunstan, who was very tired. "That's good," said the hairy voice, "because I wouldn't want to disturb you."

"Please," begged Dunstan, "let me sleep. *Please.*"

There was a snuffling noise, which was replaced by a gentle snoring.

Dunstan rolled over in the hay. The person, whoever, whatever it was, farted, scratched itself, and began to snore once more.

Dunstan listened to the rain on the byre roof, and thought about Daisy Hempstock, and in his thoughts they were walking together, and six steps behind them walked a tall man with a top hat and a small, furry creature whose face Dunstan could not see. They were off to see his Heart's Desire...

There was bright sunlight on his face, and the cow byre was empty. He washed his face, and walked up to the farmhouse.

He put on his very best jacket, and his very best shirt, and his very best britches. He scraped the mud from his boots with his pocketknife. Then he walked into the farm kitchen, and kissed his mother on the cheek, and helped himself to a cottage loaf and a large pat of fresh-churned butter.

And then, with his money tied up in his fine Sunday cambric handkerchief, he walked up to the village of Wall and bade good morning to the guards on the gate.

Through the gap in the wall he could see colored tents being raised, stalls being erected, colored flags, and people walking back and forth.

"We're not to let anyone through until midday," said the guard.

Dunstan shrugged, and went to the pub, where he pondered what he would buy with his savings (the shiny half-crown he had saved, and the lucky sixpence, with a hole drilled through it, on a leather thong around his neck) and with the additional pocket handkerchief filled with coins. He had, for the moment, quite forgotten there had been anything else promised the night before. At the stroke of midday Dunstan strode up to the wall and, nervously, as if he were breaking the greatest of taboos, he walked through beside, as he realized, the gentleman in the black silk top hat, who nodded

to him.

"Ah. My landlord. And how are you today, sir?"

"Very well," said Dunstan.

"Walk with me," said the tall man. "Let us walk together."

They walked across the meadow, toward the tents.

"Have you been here before?" asked the tall man.

"I went to the last market, nine years ago. I was only a boy," admitted Dunstan.

"Well," said his tenant, "remember to be polite, and take no gifts.

Remember that you're a guest. And now, I shall give you the last part of the rent that I owe you. For I swore an oath. And my gifts last a long time. You and your firstborn child and his or her firstborn child... It's a gift that will last as long as I live."

"And what would that be, sir?"

"Your Heart's Desire, remember," said the gentleman in the top hat.

"Your Heart's Desire."

Dunstan bowed, and they walked on toward the fair.

"Eyes, eyes! New eyes for old!" shouted a tiny woman in front of a table covered with bottles and jars filled with eyes of every kind and color.

"Instruments of music from a hundred lands!" "Penny whistles!

Tuppenny hums! Threepenny choral anthems!"

"Try your luck! Step right up! Answer a simple riddle and win a wind-flower!"

"Everlasting lavender! Bluebell cloth!" "Bottled dreams, a shilling a bottle!" "Coats of night! Coats of twilight! Coats of dusk!" "Swords of fortune! Wands of power! Rings of eternity! Cards of grace! Roll-up, roll-up, step this way!" "Salves and ointments, philtres and nostrums!" Dunstan paused in front of a stall covered with tiny crystal ornaments; he examined the miniature animals, pondering getting one for Daisy Hempstock. He picked up a crystal cat, no bigger than his thumb. Sagely it blinked at him, and he dropped it, shocked; it righted itself in midair and, like a real cat, fell on its four paws. Then it stalked over to the corner of the stall and began to wash itself.

Dunstan walked on, through the thronged market. It was bustling with people; all the strangers who had come to Wall in the previous weeks were there, and many of the inhabitants of the town of Wall as well. Mr. Bromios had set up a wine-tent and was selling wines and pasties to the village folk, who were often tempted by the foods being sold by the folk from Beyond the Wall but had been told by their grandparents, who had got it from *their* grandparents, that it was deeply, utterly wrong to eat fairy food, to eat fairy