

CHAPTER 12 - THE PASSAGE OF THE WALL

'A fair night this, Balbus! All moonlight and no mist! I was posted last evening at the Ostian Gate, and was half choked by the fog.'

'If you were posted last night at the Ostian Gate, you were better placed than you are now. The ramparts here are as lonely as a ruin in the provinces. Nothing behind us but the back of the Pincian Mount; nothing before us but the empty suburbs; nothing at each side of us but brick and stone; nothing at our posts but ourselves. May I be crucified like St. Peter, if I believe that there is another place on the whole round of the walls possessed of such solitary dulness as this!'

'You are a man to find something to complain of, if you were lodged in one of the palaces yonder. The place is solitary enough, it is true; but whether it is dull or not depends on ourselves, its most honourable occupants. I, for one, am determined to promote its joviality by the very praiseworthy exertion of obliging you, my discontented friend, with an inexhaustible series of those stories for which, I may say, without arrogance, I am celebrated throughout the length and breadth of all the barracks of Rome.'

'You may tell as many stories as you please, but do not imagine that I will make one of your audience.'

'You are welcome to attend to me or not, as you choose. Though you do not listen, I shall still relate my stories by way of practice. I will address them to the walls, or to the air, or to the defunct gods and goddesses of antiquity, should they happen at this moment to be hovering over the city in a rage, as some of the unconverted would have us believe; or to our neighbours the Goths, if they are seized with a sudden desire to quite their encampments, and obtain a near view of the fortifications that they are so discreetly unwilling to assault. Or, these materials for a fit and decent auditory failing me, I will tell my stories to the most attentive of all listeners--myself.'

And the sentinel, without further delay, opened his budget of anecdotes, with the easy fluency of a man who possessed a well-placed confidence in the perfection of his capacities for narration. Determined that his saturnine colleague should hear him, though he would not give him his attention, he talked in a raised voice, pacing briskly backwards and forwards over the space of his allotted limits, and laughing with ludicrous regularity and complacency at every jest that he happened to make in the course of his ill-rewarded narrative. He little thought, as he continued to proceed in his tale that its commencement had been welcomed by an unseen hearer, with

emotions widely different from those which had dictated the observations of the unfriendly companion of his watch.

True to his determination, Ulpus, with part of the wages which he had hoarded in Numerian's service, had procured a small lantern from a shop in one of the distant quarters of Rome; and veiling its light in a piece of coarse, thick cloth, had proceeded by the solitary pathway to his second night's labour at the wall. He arrived at the breach, at the commencement of the dialogue above related, and heard with delight the sentinel's noisy resolution to amuse his companion in spite of himself. The louder and the longer the man talked, the less probable was the chance that the Pagan's labours in the interior of the wall would be suspected or overheard.

Softly clearing away the brushwood at the entrance of the hole that he had made the night before, Ulpus crept in as far as he had penetrated on that occasion; and then, with mingled emotions of expectation and apprehension which affected him so powerfully, that he was for the moment hardly master of his actions, he slowly and cautiously uncovered his light.

His first glance was intuitively directed to the cavity that opened beneath him. He saw immediately that it was less important, both in size and depth, than he had imagined it to be. The earth at this particular place had given way beneath the foundations of the wall, which had sunk down, deepening the chasm by their weight, into the yielding ground beneath them. A small spring of water (probably the first cause of the sinking in the earth) had bubbled up into the space in the brick-work, which bit by bit, and year by year, it had gradually undermined. Nor did it remain stagnant at this place. It trickled merrily and quietly onward--a tiny rivulet, emancipated from one prison in the ground only to enter another in the wall, bounded by no grassy banks, brightened by no cheerful light, admired by no human eye, followed in its small course through the inner fissures in the brick by no living thing but a bloated toad, or a solitary lizard: yet wending as happily on its way through darkness and ruin, as its sisters who were basking in the sunlight of the meadows, or leaping in the fresh breezes of the open mountain side.

Raising his eyes from the little spring, Ulpus next directed his attention to the prospect above him.

Immediately over his head, the material of the interior of the wall presented a smooth, flat, hard surface, which seemed capable of resisting the most vigorous attempts at its destruction; but on looking round, he perceived at one side of him and further inwards, an appearance of dark, dimly-defined irregularity, which promised encouragingly for his intended efforts. He

descended into the chasm of the rivulet, crawled up on a heap of crumbling brick-work, and gained a hole above it, which he immediately began to widen, to admit of his passage through. Inch by inch, he enlarged the rift, crept into it, and found himself on a fragment of the bow of one of the foundation arches, which, though partly destroyed, still supported itself, isolated from all connection with the part of the upper wall which it had once sustained, and which had gradually crumbled away into the cavities below.

He looked up. An immense rift soared above him, stretching its tortuous ramifications, at different points, into every part of the wall that was immediately visible. The whole structure seemed, at this place, to have received a sudden and tremendous wrench. But for the support of the sounder fortifications at each side of it, it could not have sustained itself after the shock. The Pagan gazed aloft, into the fearful breaches which yawned above him, with ungovernable awe. His small, fitful light was not sufficient to show him any of their terminations. They looked, as he beheld them in dark relief against the rest of the hollow part of the wall, like mighty serpents twining their desolating path right upward to the ramparts above; and he, himself, as he crouched on his pinnacle with his little light by his side, was reduced by the wild grandeur, the vast, solemn gloom of the obscure, dusky, and fantastic objects around him, to the stature of a pigmy. Could he have been seen from the ramparts high overhead, as he now peered down behind his lantern into the cavities and irregularities below him, he would have looked, with his flickering light, like a mole led by a glow-worm.

He paused to consider his next movements. In a stationary position, the damp coldness of the atmosphere was almost insupportable, but he attained a great advantage by his present stillness: he could listen undisturbed by the noises made by the bricks which crumbled from under him, if he advanced.

Ere long, he heard a thin, winding, long-drawn sound, now louder, now softer; now approaching, now retreating; now verging towards shrillness, now quickly returning to a faint, gentle swell. Suddenly this strange unearthly music was interrupted by a succession of long, deep, rolling sounds, which travelled grandly about the fissures above, like prisoned thunderbolts striving to escape. Utterly ignorant that the first of these noises was occasioned by the night wind winding through the rents in the brick of the outer wall beyond him; and the second, by the echoes produced in the irregular cavities above, by the footfall of the sentries overhead--roused by the influence of the place, and the mystery of his employment, to

a pitch of fanatic exaltation, which for the moment absolutely unsteadied his reason--filled with the frantic enthusiasm of his designs, and the fearful legends of invisible beings and worlds which made the foundation of his worship, Ulpus conceived, as he listened to the sounds around and above, that the gods of antiquity were now in viewless congregation hovering about him, and calling to him in unearthly voices and in an unknown tongue, to proceed upon his daring enterprise, in the full assurance of its near and glorious success.

'Roar and mutter, and make your hurricane music in my ears!' exclaimed the Pagan, raising his withered hands, and addressing in a savage ecstasy his imagined deities. 'Your servant Ulpus stops not on the journey that leads him to your re-peopled shrines! Blood, crime, danger, pain--pride and honour, joy and rest, have I strewn like sacrifices at your altars' feet! Time has whirled past me; youth and manhood have lain long since buried in the hidden Lethe which is the portion of life; age has wreathed his coils over my body's strength, but still I watch by your temples and serve your mighty cause! Your vengeance is near! Monarchs of the world, your triumph is at hand!'

He remained for some time in the same position, looking fixedly up into the trackless darkness above him, drinking in the sounds which--alternately rising and sinking--still floated round him. The trembling gleam of his lantern fell red and wild upon his livid countenance. His shaggy hair floated in the cold breezes that blew by him. At this moment he would have appeared from a distance, like a phantom of fire perishing in a mist of darkness; like a Gnome in adoration in the bowels of the earth; like a forsaken spirit in a solitary purgatory, watching for the advent of a glimpse of beauty, or a breath of air.

At length he aroused himself from his trance, trimmed with careful hand his guiding lantern, and set forward to penetrate the breadth of the great rift he had just entered.

He moved on in an oblique direction several feet, now creeping over the tops of the foundation arches, now skirting the extremities of protrusions in the ruined brick-work, now descending into dark slimy rubbish-choked chasms, until the rift suddenly diminished in all directions.

The atmosphere was warmer in the place he now occupied; he could faintly distinguish patches of dark moss, dotted here and there over the uneven surface of the wall; and once or twice, some blades of long flat grass, that grew from a prominence immediately above his head, were waved in his face

by the wind, which he could now feel blowing through the narrow fissure that he was preparing to enlarge. It was evident that he had by this time advanced to within a few feet of the outer extremity of the wall.

'Numerian wanders after his child through the streets,' muttered the Pagan, as he deposited his lantern by his side, bared his trembling arms, and raised his iron bar, 'the slaves of his neighbour the senator are forth to pursue me. On all sides my enemies are out after me; but, posted here, I mock their strictest search! If they would track me to my hiding-place, they must penetrate the walls of Rome! If they would hunt me down in my lair, they must assail me to-night in the camp of the Goths! Fools! let them look to themselves! I seal the doom of their city, with the last brick that I tear from their defenceless walls!'

He laughed to himself as he thrust his bar boldly into the crevice before him. In some places the bricks yielded easily to his efforts; in others, their resistance was only to be overcome by the exertion of his utmost strength. Resolutely and unceasingly he continued his labours; now wounding his hands against the jagged surfaces presented by the widening fissure; now involuntarily dropping his instrument from ungovernable exhaustion; but, still working bravely on, in defiance of every hindrance that opposed him, until he gained the interior of the new rift.

As he drew his lantern after him into the cavity that he had made, he perceived that, unless it was heightened immediately over him, he could proceed no further, even in a creeping position. Irritated at this unexpected necessity for more violent exertion, desperate in his determination to get through the wall at all hazards on that very night, he recklessly struck his bar upwards with all his strength, instead of gradually and softly loosening the material of the surface that opposed him, as he had done before.

A few moments of this labour had scarcely elapsed, when a considerable portion of the brick-work, consolidated into one firm mass, fell with lightning suddenness from above. It hurled him under it, prostrate on the foundation arch which had been his support; crushed and dislocated his right shoulder; and shivered his lantern into fragments. A groan of irrepressible anguish burst from his lips. He was left in impenetrable darkness.

The mass of brick-work, after it had struck him, rolled a little to one side. By a desperate exertion he extricated himself from under it--only to swoon from the fresh anguish caused to him by the effort.

For a short time he lay insensible in his cold dark solitude. Then, reviving after this first shock, he began to experience in all their severity, the fierce spasms, the dull gnawings, the throbbing torments, that were the miserable consequences of the injury he received. His arm lay motionless by his side--he had neither strength nor resolution to move any one of the other sound limbs in his body. At one moment his deep, sobbing, stifled respirations, syllabled horrible and half-formed curses--at another, his panting breaths suddenly died away within him; and then he could hear the blood dripping slowly from his shoulder, with dismal regularity, into a little pool that it had formed already by his side.

The shrill breezes which wound through the crevices in the wall before him, were now felt only on his wounded limb. They touched its surface like innumerable splinters of thin, sharp ice; they penetrated his flesh like rushing sparks struck out of a sea of molten lead. There were moments, during the first pangs of this agony, when if he had been possessed of a weapon and of the strength to use it, he would have sacrificed his ambition for ever by depriving himself of life.

But this desire to end his torments with his existence lasted not long. Gradually, the anguish in his body awakened a wilder and stronger distemper in his mind, and then the two agonies, physical and mental, rioted over him together in fierce rivalry, divesting him of all thoughts but such as were by their own agency created or aroused.

For some time he lay helpless in his misery, alternately venting by stifled groans the unalleviated torment of his wounds, and lamenting with curses the failure of his enterprise, at the very moment of its apparent success. At length, the pangs that struck through him seemed to grow gradually less frequent; he hardly knew now from what part of his frame they more immediately proceeded. Insensibly, his faculties of thinking and feeling grew blunted; then he remained a little while in a mysterious unrefreshing repose of body and mind; and then his disordered senses, left unguided and unrestrained, became the victims of a sudden and terrible delusion.

The blank darkness around him appeared, after an interval, to be gradually dawning into a dull light, thick and misty, like the reflections on clouds which threaten a thunderstorm at the close of evening. Soon, this atmosphere seemed to be crossed and streaked with a fantastic trellis-work of white, seething vapour. Then the mass of brick-work which had struck him down, grew visible at his side, enlarged to an enormous bulk, and endued with a power of self-motion, by which it mysteriously swelled and shrank, and raised and depressed itself, without quitting for a moment its

position near him. And then, from its dark and toiling surface there rose a long stream of dusky shapes, which twined themselves about the misty trellis-work above, and took the prominent and palpable form of human countenances, marked by every difference of age and distorted by every variety of suffering.

There were infantine faces, wreathed about with grave-worms that hung round them like locks of filthy hair; aged faces, dabbled with gore and slashed with wounds; youthful faces, seamed with livid channels, along which ran unceasing tears; lovely faces, distorted into fixed expressions of raging pain, wild malignity, and despairing gloom. Not one of these countenances exactly resembled the other. Each was distinguished by a revolting character of its own. Yet, however deformed might be their other features, the eyes of all were preserved unimpaired. Speechless and bodiless, they floated in unceasing myriads up to the fantastic trellis-work, which seemed to swell its wild proportions to receive them. There they clustered, in their goblin amphitheatre, and fixed and silently they all glared down, without one exception, on the Pagan's face!

Meanwhile, the walls at the side began to gleam out with a light of their own, making jagged boundaries to the midway scene of phantom faces. Then the rifts in their surfaces widened, and disgorged misshapen figures of priests and idols of the old time, which came forth in every hideous deformity of aspect, mocking at the faces on the trellis-work; while behind and over the whole, soared shapes of gigantic darkness, robed in grim cloudy resemblances of skins such as were worn by the Goths, and wielding through the quivering vapour, mighty and shadow-like weapons of war. From the whole of this ghastly assemblage there rose not the slightest sound. A stillness, as of a dead and ruined world, possessed in all its quarters the appalling scene. The deep echoes of the sentries' footsteps and the faint dirging of the melancholy winds were no more. The blood that had as yet dripped from his wound, made no sound now in the Pagan's ear; even his own agony of terror was as silent as were the visionary demons who had aroused it. Days, years, centuries, seemed to pass, as he lay gazing up, in a trance of horror, into his realm of peopled and ghostly darkness. At last nature yielded under the trial; the phantom prospect suddenly whirled round him with fearful velocity, and his senses sought refuge from the thralldom of their own creation in a deep and welcome swoon.

Time had moved wearily onward, the chiding winds had many times waved the dry locks of his hair to and fro about his brow, as if to bid him awaken and arise, ere he again recovered his consciousness. Once more aroused to the knowledge of his position and the sensation of his wound, he slowly

raised himself upon his uninjured arm, and looked wildly around for the faintest appearance of a gleam of light. But the winding and uneven nature of the track which he had formed to lead him through the wall, effectually prevented the moonbeams, then floating into the outermost of the cavities that he had made, from reaching the place where he now lay. Not a single object was even faintly distinguishable around him. Darkness hemmed him in, in rayless and triumphant obscurity, on every side.

The first agonies of the injury he had received had resolved themselves into one dull, heavy, unchanging sensation of pain. The vision that had overwhelmed his senses was now, in a vast and shadowy form, present only to his memory, filling the darkness with fearful recollections, and not with dismal forms; and urging on him a restless, headlong yearning to effect his escape from the lonely and unhallowed sepulchre, the prison of solitude and death, that his own fatal exertions threatened him with, should he linger much longer in the caverns of the wall.

'I must pass from this darkness into light--I must breathe the air of the sky, or I shall perish in the damps of this vault,' he exclaimed in a hoarse, moaning voice, as he raised himself gradually and painfully into a creeping position; and turning round slowly, commenced his meditated retreat.

His brain still whirled with the emotions that had so lately overwhelmed his mind; his right hand hung helplessly by his side, dragged after him like a prisoner's chain, and lacerated by the uneven surface of the ground over which it was slowly drawn, as--supporting himself on his left arm, and creeping forward a few inches at a time--he set forth on his toilsome journey.

Here, he paused bewildered in the darkness; there, he either checked himself by a convulsive effort from falling headlong into the unknown deeps beneath him, or lost the little ground he had gained in labour and agony, by retracing his way at the bidding of some unexpected obstacle. Now he gnashed his teeth in anguish, now he cursed in despair, now he was breathless with exhaustion; but still, with an obstinacy that had in it something of the heroic, he never failed in his fierce resolution to effect his escape.

Slowly and painfully, moving with the pace and the perseverance of the tortoise, hopeless yet determined as a navigator in a strange sea, he writhed onward and onward upon his unguided course, until he reaped at length the reward of his long suffering, by the sudden discovery of a thin ray of moonlight toiling through a crevice in the murky brickwork before him.

Hardly did the hearts of the Magi when the vision of 'the star in the East' first dawned on their eyes, leap within them with a more vivid transport, than that which animated the heart of Ulpian at the moment when he beheld the inspiring and guiding light.

Yet a little more exertion, a little more patience, a little more anguish; and he stood once again, a ghastly and crippled figure, before the outer cavity in the wall.

It was near daybreak; the moon shone faintly in the dull, grey heaven; a small, vaporous rain was sinking from the shapeless clouds; the waning night showed bleak and cheerless to the earth, but cast no mournful or reproving influence over the Pagan's mind. He looked round on his solitary lurking place, and beheld no human figure in its lonely recesses. He looked up at the ramparts, and saw that the sentinels stood silent and apart, wrapped in their heavy watch-cloaks, and supported on their trusty weapons. It was perfectly apparent that the events of his night of suffering and despair had passed unheeded by the outer world.

He glanced back with a shudder upon his wounded and helpless limb; then his eyes fixed themselves upon the wall. After surveying it with an earnest and defiant gaze, he slowly moved the brushwood with his foot, against the small cavity in its outer surface.

'Days pass, wounds heal, chances change,' muttered the old man, departing from his haunt with slow and uncertain steps. 'In the mines I have borne lashes without a murmur--I have felt my chains widening, with each succeeding day, the ulcers that their teeth of iron first gnawed in my flesh, and have yet lived to loosen my fetters, and to close my sores! Shall this new agony have a power to conquer me greater than the others that are past? I will even yet return in time to overcome the resistance of the wall! My arm is crushed, but my purpose is whole!'