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THE LONG WALL

by Wilfred Owen Morley

It was just a high stone wall in Maine. It was not different from any other save for one queer thing — it had but one side and no matter how you tried, you could not get over it.

MICHAEL rolled down one of the front windows and knocked his pipe speculatively against the frame, sending little chips of faded blue paint flying. "Are you quite sure," he remarked, "that we should have turned left at that sign?"

"Wouldn't swear to it," mumbled Crosby. He sidled the car to a stop. "Let's rest awhile, anyway. Roust out the maps, and we'll take bearings after a sandwich or two."

They emerged onto the tufty grass, shaking off muscle cramps of various sizes and shapes. No breath of air was stirring. Above them the sky was spotted with motionless clouds, minus birds of any kind. No scurrying animal life showed itself on any side. They masticated assorted sandwiches between yawns and let the sunlight drench them as it saw fit.

Crosby shied a pebble across the well-packed road at the high wall gracing its other side. "Quite a thing, eh?" he ventured.

"Yeah." The two examined the edifice at leisure. As far as they could see in either direction it extended, unbroken, unmarked. Ten feet, all of that, it rose, dull and grey, the stone of it well weathered. There were no distinguishing signs, no places where grass, vines or trees eclipsed it. Behind them and far ahead, it ran parallel to the sandy road until the far horizons swallowed it up.

"Must be miles long," Crosby whispered, wondering why he dropped his voice. He paused as if to pick it up again. "When did we hit it?"

"After we made the turn. Some time after. In fact," added Michael slowly, "I don't believe we came upon it until a moment or so before we stopped. I was looking at both sides of the road, and who could miss that? I didn't notice it until just before I asked you about the turn."

Crosby turned and stared at the wall as if expecting the structure to explain itself. "It's odd," he stated. "A wall like this should be marked on the map; it should have some sort of reputation, too, don't you think? Signs saying 'You are now ten miles from the famous Long Wall' and so on."

"Who built it? Why should an immense thing like this be constructed out in the heart of the wilds? This territory doesn't look as if it's ever been settled. Maybe it was cleared once, but I'll bet that's all. We must be at least thirty miles from the nearest town."

"More than that, Michael added. "Have you noticed how quiet it's been since we made that turn?" He strode over to the wall, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Look, Clyde. It seems to be made of just one piece. I can't find any sign of separate stones in it at all."

The other joined him. "Where did it start?"

"I don't remember, though I'd say offhand not more than half a mile back. Perhaps less."

Crosby drew out his watch abstractly. "12:30. What say we take a little walk before going on? Half an hour's exercise."

"Good idea. I have a yen to hike around this affair. Look,

you start down that way and I'll head on. We'll meet after awhile and then try to figure out how big this thing is."

Crosby ruffled his hair, a far-away look in his eyes. "It may be longer than we think."

"Then say we walk for fifteen minutes, each following it in the opposite direction. At 12:45 we stop, and, if the other isn't in sight, we turn around and come back to the car."

MICHAEL started briskly down the road, whistling thoughtfully between his teeth. There were a lot of things about all this that didn't fit in. First of all it was ten feet in height. Why? Perhaps there was nothing wrong with that — after all, he didn't know what the approved height of a wall might be, yet it did *seem* overtall. Call that point one then, even if it might turn out to be okay. Point two: how was it made? You could not figure out how it had been put together. He ran his hand over it. Yes, it felt like stone. But there was no sign of any breaks in it; no separate stones or mortar; no cavities; no appreciable irregularities. Very well, then. Point two: composition.

What was it that was odd about the top of it, now? He let his eye run along its shelf. Nothing there, nothing at all. Ah, that was it. There was no sign of anything at all behind it. No house, trees, bushes, or vines. Nothing leaning over. When they got back to the car, they must walk away from the wall until they could see what kind of land might be on that



Illustration by Hall

other side. Point three, then, was upkeep. For, obviously, the gardener, or whoever it was, had to keep on his toes to prevent anything, vine or whatnot, from marring the unbroken, clean appearance of the wall. Was there a fourth point? Yes, there was. Life, or rather the absence of it. They hadn't seen a bird or

small animal for how long? They hadn't been annoyed by insects of any kind during lunch. And Maine, in this time of the year, was swarming with insects of all varieties. No swamp-draining of any kind was likely to prevail here. Of course, the fact that they didn't seem to be near water of any kind might account for

the lack of mosquitoes. But there should have been flies, ants, grasshoppers, beetles, daddy-long-legs, and all manner of just bugs.

He stopped to look around bewilderedly. Nothing but grass. A large expanse of open field lay to the right of him, blending finally into wooded hills near the horizon; to the left of him, the wall.

He lit a cigarette and strode on, crumpling the empty package, tossing it against the base of the wall. At length he saw something up ahead, on the other side of the road. As he approached, he made out the outlines of a car, parked over to one side.

His fifteen minutes were up, he noticed, as he flipped the butt away. Well, why not go the rest of the way to that car, see if the occupants knew anything more about the wall than he did. Perhaps they, too, were puzzled. Crosby was nowhere in sight, so the wall must certainly be longer than they expected. Some day, he thought, they must come back and make a thorough tour of it.

His aplomb burst into shreds when he saw, upon coming closer, that it was their own roadster. How in hell could he possibly have gone around the wall, made a complete circuit? Dammit, he had been walking straight, straight ahead and there had been no sharp turns or slow curves. He was positive of that. Yet, here was their car, up ahead of him when it should have been behind. And there, by Jove, was Crosby, coming up from behind him with an equally amazed expression on his face.

"Where did *you* come from?" demanded Crosby.

Michael's stare was incredulous. "What happened?"

"I hoofed it for fifteen minutes, then started back. And all of a sudden, I see you up ahead of me. One instant there was nothing at all in front of me except the car. The next, I see you between me and the car."

Michael gaped at him in si-

lence for an instant, then turned, making a gesture with his hand. "Come on. We'll both try it. Get your watch out and keep your eye on it. What's the time now?"

"12:50 to the tick."

"Good. We'll see if this happens again, and if it does, exactly how long it takes."

They strode on in silence, Michael taking out his pipe and stuffing it as they did so. One must not try to think this out now; one must observe. Observe carefully, meticulously. Would it happen again?

The stillness about the place began to crawl under his skin, yet he didn't want to break it. There was nothing to be said at a time like this. He shuffled along the sandy road meditatively, started looking carefully at the base of the wall. Ah, there it was.

"Keep an extra careful eye out now," he whispered. "If it's going to happen again, it will happen now — or rather, soon. What's the time?"

"It was just 1:03 when we passed the empty cigarette package."

Michael's eyes were fixed up ahead. There was nothing but empty road, reaching up to the rim of vision, and the expanse of field to the right. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing —

There!

"Time!" he gasped. "What's the time?"

"1:08 exactly."

He grasped Crosby's arm as they both halted. "Look up there."

Almost at the horizon was a dark speck over to the right of the road. And — what else was it? Why, the horizon was near. An average person can see a good many miles on a clear day, particularly on an almost-flat terrain like this. Yet, he knew from past experience that their car, for that is what the speck was, was not more than a quarter-mile away.

THAD WING struck a match on his shoe and applied it to the oversized

bowl of his corncob, surveying the two travelers as he did so. "What," he asked, "did ye do when ye found that ye couldn't walk *around* the wall, Mr. — Mr. — excuse me, I didn't rightly ketch yer last name."

"Michael," he grinned. "I'm Gerry Michael and this is Clyde Crosby."

"Oh yes, pleased ter meetcher, Mr. Michael. And you, Mr. Crosby, would ye be any relative of that feller who sings?"

Crosby chuckled. "None at all."

Wing nodded pleasantly. "Good thing," he commented. "Them crooners is all right so long as they remain a small tribe. But as I wuz sayin', what did you fellers do when ye found ye couldn't git *around* that wall?"

"Next thing we did was to see if we could find out what was on the other side. We walked back into the field over by the side of the wall until we could see over it."

"And what did ye see?"

Michael looked downcast. "Nothing. That is, nothing worth the effort. It was just an open field, running into wooded hills. Exactly like the side we were standing on.

"We both felt disappointed, and I think we would have gone on if it hadn't been for something that happened accidentally." He turned to Crosby. "Suppose you tell him, Clyde."

"It wasn't much of anything," said Crosby. "I slipped on something and went down on my knees. When I got up, I looked to see what it was, and found a little colored rubber ball. The colors had pretty well faded, but there was a definite design to it. Well, I picked it up and threw it away, the way anyone would. I watched it and I distinctly saw it go *over* the wall. Just about cleared it so that it should have fallen just a little bit on the other side.

"But when we got back to the car, my eye caught something

across the road. I went over to it and picked it up. It was a rubber ball. *The same rubber ball I had just seen go over the long wall.*"

"I might add," put in Michael, "that I was watching the wall all the time as we walked back toward our car. If anything had come back over that wall, I would have seen it."

"That," continued Crosby, "was just the start. I picked up the ball again, and just tossed it over the wall. You saw me do that, didn't you Gerry?"

Michael nodded.

"So I turned around, ready to get in the car, and *there was that ball on the wrong side of the wall again.*"

Crosby drank a glass of water hastily. "I was about to throw it with all my strength, this time, but Gerry stopped me. He suggested we take one of the paper plates we'd used for lunch and skim that over, then look for it on this side. Just to make sure, we marked it in blue pencil. I told Gerry to do it this time, so he hefted it over, and we both saw it sail neatly over the wall and out of sight. Then we turned around and started looking for it.

"We found it in less than 30 seconds.

"That made us both feel pretty sore. Either something pretty horrible was going on, or our senses were deceiving us, or someone was playing a joke on us. We decided to go over the wall ourselves. I'm smaller than Gerry, so I climbed up on his shoulders and pulled myself on to the top of the wall. I stood there for a moment, looking in all directions. It looked just the same over there, except that, of course, there was no car parked by the opposite side of the road — in fact, there was no road on the other side of the wall.

"I balanced myself right, then made a jump, landing very nicely. And the first thing I saw when I straightened up was *our car*. A second later, Gerry was telling me I'd jumped over on the

wrong side."

"Excuse me if I interrupt, Clyde," broke in Michael, at this point. "I was watching Crosby from the ground. He stood there, looking around him, as he said, and his back was to me as he prepared himself and jumped. I clearly saw ~~he~~ over the wall. Yet, an instant later, I turned around, and then he was behind me. And I didn't hear any impact of his landing."

"I did," said Crosby.

"We tried it once or twice more," continued Michael, "then finally we quit. Partly because we were disgusted, and partly because we were beginning to be scared. It frightened me and I'm not ashamed to admit it."

WING KNOCKED the ashes out of his pipe. "I'll tell ye," he said slowly, "what I can about that there wall, and it ain't very much now. That wall has been there fer as long as I can remember, and as long as my father can remember, and it was there when his father came and settled the land here. This ain't a very old town, mister. I calculate it began to be settled not more'n a few years before my grandfather came here, after the War of the Rebellion. We all come from Connecticut, but that's beside the point. Anyway, you can see that the wall's been there fer at least a hundred years, and maybe lots more because they ain't nobody who knows anything about it before around the 1840's or late 30's when they first cleared the land in these parts.

"I recall that my father told me about it and grandfather told him. 'Theys lots of things, son,' he said to me, 'which may seem peculiar to you, but so long as they ain't hurtin you, don't you bother about them. Just leave 'em alone.' And that's the way all of us around here look at that wall. It's there and that's all there is to it. Ain't never hurt anyone yet and it don't look as if it ever will unless some fool

goes and bashes his head into it, and then it wouldn't be the wall's fault. People don't come on it very often, and when they do, most of the time they don't notice anything wrong with it, except that maybe they'll be sort of curious as to what it's doin' way out here.

"So I ain't tryin to tell you what you ought to do, Mr. Michael and Mr. Crosby, but since ye asked me about it, I say forget about it and leave it alone. Theys lots of things to fight against that are hurtin' people and ye don't need to find somethin inoffensive like a wall."

"Has anyone ever tried to do anything about it?" asked Crosby.

"No one, 'ceptin' Ben Gaylen. He was the son of old Jim Gaylen — well, it's no use t'go into that because you, bein' strangers wouldn't know Jim Gaylen from Adam. He always was a bookish sort of lad — this was before my time — and he was determined to find out all about that there wall. He didn't. He went mad. I seen him onct myself, in the asylum, and it made me sick. So I'm repeatin', ye'll do well to ferget about that wall."

"**W**ILL," began Crosby, "if I didn't know you better, I'd call you a damn liar. Are you positive you couldn't see the wall once you got off the ground?"

Bentley nodded. "There's no two ways about it, Clyde. That wall's the damndest thing I ever came across. I fly over this way pretty regularly, and I thought there was something wrong when you called me up and told me about it. You couldn't help but notice a wall like that after awhile.

"But the fact is — and it's just about as easy to believe as what you found from experimentin' — that you can't see that wall from a plane. And I've flown pretty low over this part at times. You saw how low I was a few minutes ago."

Michael nodded. "Did you get the pictures?"

"Sure did. We'll have them developed right off the bat."

"Well," said Michael, "I guess we're ready. Got the flags, Clyde?"

Crosby nodded. "Okay then. We'll go up and you set those three flags in a triangle. As soon as I spot them with the binoculars, we'll get into position, then I'll jump. You'll see whether or not I come down *behind* the wall."

Crosby fixed his helmet, climbed in, and waved. The autogyro sputtered a moment, then eased up gracefully as he watched. Quickly Michael set the three large red flags in a triangle and waited.

There wasn't any wind this day, so it shouldn't be too difficult to make the jump right. It would be annoying if Crosby landed on the nearer side of the wall — but then, they'd merely try again. Well, they had all day; they'd make it or know the reason why.

He fixed his glasses on the autogyro. Ah, they were about ready, he thought. Bentley was hovering. There! There went Crosby twisting and tumbling with a grin on his face as usual. For an instant he saw only a hurtling black speck, then a great white mushroom sprouted out of it and the abrupt fall was halted.

Slowly, almost agonizingly slow, Crosby came down. It was clear, now that he would land behind the wall. There could be no doubt of that. And, if he couldn't get over, Will could always land behind the wall and fly him out.

Michael cheered wildly as he saw the drifting shape float down on the other side of the wall out of sight, saw the white web of the parachute slowly hauled down. Then, with a sudden stab of premonition, he turned around — and clutched at the nearest flag for support.

Crosby was behind him.

“WE’VE FOUND,” summed up Michael, “through careful experimentation, that we cannot go *around* the wall — you go for a certain distance then you find yourself, abruptly, back where you started; we cannot go *over* the wall — you jump over, and parachute down, and you find yourself on this same side, even though an observer can clearly see you go over. So, we’re going to try to go *through* the wall.”

“That seems to clarify matters well enough,” commented Bentley.

“What about the pictures?”

Bentley made a wry face. “Not one came out.”

“Why not try,” suggested Crosby, “digging a hole under it and coming out the other side?”

“I was going to suggest that,” remarked Bentley. “That’s why I brought along these long handled spades. A wall like that shouldn’t have a very deep foundation. Not so deep that you couldn’t easily tunnel under it. Want to try it first?”

The others nodded. “I’ve no desire,” put in Michael, “to mar this thing with blasts if I can possibly satisfy my curiosity any other way.”

The three picked up their tools and fell to. The ground, once broken was not difficult for digging and in about three quarters of an hour they had a good sized pit extending far under the wall. Bentley, who was in the lead, yelled suddenly.

“Hey, I’ve broken through. C’mere and look.”

The others gathered about him. There could be no doubt about it. They had broken into a tunnel similar to the one they were digging. A tiny patch of darkness lay ahead, beyond which a shaft of light could be seen. Eagerly they pressed forward, climbed up the other opening.

Bentley began to laugh hysterically. For a moment, they stood unbelieving, then realization struck them. They were back

where they started; their car waited on the other side of the road.

“I’M ALL right now,” insisted Bentley. “It just seemed so damned funny when I came out of the hole and saw it.”

“So now?” asked Crosby.

“We blast.”

“Do you think it will do any good? Suppose we do blow a hole right through the damned wall? Won’t we find, when we go through it, that we’re right back here?”

“We blast,” said Michael quietly.

He nodded to Bentley who picked up a drill and held it firm while Crosby smote it heavily and accurately with the hammer. The reaction, they noted was no more or less than what one would expect from ordinary fence stone. They took turns in holding the drill and swinging the hammers.

“Okay,” said Bentley quietly. “We’re ready to blast.”

The others watched in silence as he prepared the dynamite and set the fuses. Then the three of them ran to a safe distance.

The explosion was neither more nor less than they expected.

“Reactions perfectly normal,” stated Michael. He led the three over to the wall. A large section of it had been blown out, leaving a deep cavity. Fragments of stone were on all sides and several large chunks they dragged out and threw aside. The wall now had a mark upon it, a hole of particularly dark darkness.

Crosby poked a spade handle into it. “It’s awfully deep,” he ventured.

“Got a flashlight?” asked Michael.

“In the car.”

He returned after a moment, bearing a rope. “This doesn’t make sense,” he admitted, “but then neither does anything else about the wall, so I’m not taking chances. Three pulls on this rope will mean I want you to help me back.”

Silently he fastened the rope around his waist, turned on the flashlight and crawled into the hole. The others stared after him, trying to comprehend the peculiar blackness and apparent depth of the cavity. Numbly they watched the rope play its way out, then came the three warning tugs. They started pulling until at last the familiar form of Michael came into sight.

Yes, it was Michael. Only something in him had died and they knew he would be like that for the rest of his days. When he spoke, it was in a sort of hushed whisper, and they didn’t have to be told twice to start picking up the chunks of rock and shoving them in the cavity.

THE NEXT DAY they came back with cement and made a finished job of sealing it.

The only thing he would tell them was that he dropped the flashlight and it went out, *but the light kept on going*. He could see the shaft of light from the extinguished flash drifting slowly away into the unending blackness, a shaft of it etched against utter black.

Somehow, they knew he was not telling all, that he would never tell all.

Michael can be seen these days and you’ll find him normal enough if you can overlook a few eccentricities and you aren’t too sensitive. By the latter, is meant — well, it’s hard to explain. You either get it when you see him or you don’t. But you must never turn out a light in his presence, and it is best to speak in reasonably loud, clear tones. He is likely to start screaming if you whisper.

And sometimes he awakes in a cold sweat, gasping about a shaft of light *drifting* away into utter blackness, *drifting* away from its source: an extinguished handlamp.

And somewhere in Maine stands a long, high wall, marred only by a single spot where, as can be seen, someone tried to break through . . .