

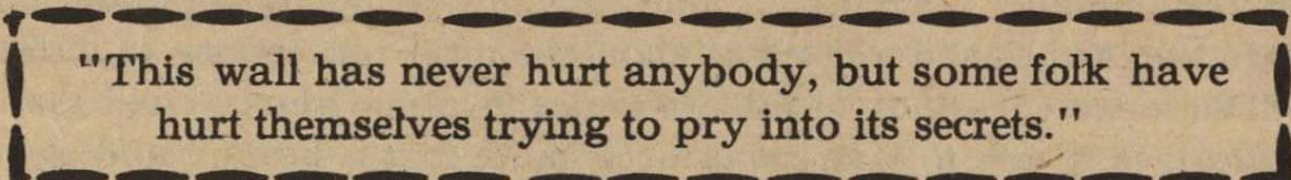
Settler's Wall

by Robert A. W. Lowndes

with "The Long Wall", the original story, reproduced at the end

WHILE I AM NOT the most tidy of persons when it comes to some of my effects—books and records are in order, but every time I open a drawer of my desk, I groan and vow to put things in shape next week—I do like to see things worked out thoroughly, and that is why I have been reluctant to tell this story, even in the guise of fiction. I was not there at the finale, nor was anyone else; no living person actually saw what happened; the only evidence is some photographs, and while the camera may not lie, some first-class liars are very adept at working with cameras.

It happened in 1934, when my cousin, Arthur Gordon, was spending a summer in the CCC camp at Flagstaff, Maine. The Great Depression may have passed its nadir by then, but it was far from over, and I had been fortunate enough to get into a publishing venture with a high school acquaintance, Will Richards. If it did not make us rich, at least it kept us ahead of the Big Bad Wolf; our *Advertiser* covered the Stamford—Norwalk area, and we had reached the point where we would have to decide whether to expand further or see if we could settle down



"This wall has never hurt anybody, but some folk have hurt themselves trying to pry into its secrets."

An earlier and shorter version of this story was published as *The Long Wall*, by Wilfred Owen Morley in the March 1942 issue of *STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES* and is copyright 1941 by Albing Publications.

comfortably in our present slot. The immediate decision was to take a brief vacation and let the question ferment in our subconscious for a time. And why not, Will asked, drive up to Maine, see Arthur and get a look at what the CCC was doing up there, and then roam a bit before heading back?

Why not indeed? We did it, transporting a fair number of Arthur's colleagues back toward their camps or toward their homes, depending upon whether they were going on leave or returning, and found the 178th Company at Flagstaff to be a very good deal for a young fellow who was willing to do an honest day's work, and conform to a reasonable amount of discipline. It wasn't army-degree discipline, but nonetheless, the reserve army and navy officers who commanded the camps could make life uncomfortable for the fellow who tried to buck the system, or just wouldn't make the effort to fit in. The already-delinquent youth (I don't recall whether that term was used then) didn't last; he went out with a DD (Dishonorable Discharge) rather soon. But I could see that there were many, who might have crossed the line into delinquency otherwise, for whom this was exactly the opportunity they so urgently needed; and they were taking it.

There were no provisions at the camp itself for overnight visitors, but we found friendly and adequate accommodations near the village of Flagstaff, and the coolness of early morning found us on the way to Skowhegan. Just where we had planned to go after reaching the town, I no longer recall—Will said something about acquaintances up here—nor does it matter, because we did not reach Skowhegan that day. In 1934 road signs throughout New England existed, of course, but they were sparse compared to 1968; and while I have not been back to Maine, I wouldn't be astonished to find that area considerably changed.

Mrs. Wing gave us directions, which amounted to looking for some sort of barn "down the rud a mite", where we should keep to the right, and then another landmark a mile beyond that, where we would make a turn, etc. Arthur had warned us about the local conceptions of distance, and there were various of his associates in camp who averred that the standard of a mile in Maine was the distance that a healthy and startled pony could run before it dropped; everything, everything mind you, was "down the rud a mite". And we'd be on dirt roads for quite a time.

Eventually, we came to a sign (predicted) and later on we came to a branching in the road, which had been left a surprise to us. Exactly one car had passed us, and we had passed all of three habitations—very decent looking farmhouses. July in Maine, Arthur said, makes you

forget things like the fact that when he arrived in camp near the end of April, there were still four-foot snowbanks to be seen.

Although we were on vacation, and we weren't really going anywhere, I was beginning to get the feeling that we ought to stop at the next house and see if we could get our bearings. I rolled down the side window, knocked my pipe speculatively against the frame, chipping off still more of the faded blue paint, and wondered aloud if we had made the correct turn.

Will Richards looked at his wristwatch. "Obviously, Clyde, we didn't. By now we'd be on some sort of improved road, and close to Skow if not there." He sidled the car to a stop. "Let's rest awhile, rouse out the maps, and take our bearings after a sandwich or two."

There wasn't a breath of air stirring as we emerged onto the tufty grass, and the clouds in the sky seemed to have been painted there. It was a dry heat, though, and the only real discomfort was the cramps one got from driving along dirt roads in a vintage 1927 Ford. The tea in the thermos bottle was cool enough, and Mrs. Wing's sandwiches both tasty and moist enough.

Will picked up a pebble and threw it across the road, where it bounced off the high wall on the left side. "That's quite a thing, isn't it?"

And right then, I had the oddest feeling. I had seen this wall and yet not really noticed it, even though it extended as far as we could see in either direction. There were no markings on it visible from across the road; and when we got around to examining it close up, we found none still. Our guess that it was ten feet high turned out to be correct; and there it rose, dull, gray and well weathered. Within the range of our vision, there was not a single distinguishing sign; at no point did grass eclipse it, or vines, or trees. In fact, the grass ended just about a foot away from it, in as straight a line as one could imagine, and the well-packed earth between the end of the grass and the wall itself was perfectly clean. Not a leaf—well, of course; there were no trees anywhere near—not a pebble (the one Will had thrown, must have bounced back into the grass; I hadn't thought he'd thrown it that hard). We stood in front of it and turned our heads first to the left and then to the right; the wall ran parallel to the road, straighter than the road, and we could not see the end of it in either direction.

"It must be miles long," Will said softly, then, as if wondering why he had dropped his voice so, he cleared his throat to pick it up again. "Did you notice when we hit it?"

I shook my head. "Wait," I said. "It was right after we went over

that bump in the road. Or was it a hole? Anyway, I felt a jolt, and I'm sure the wall began just a little beyond that."

"You know, something like this ought to be marked on the map. Or at least there ought to be some sort of sign saying, 'You are now two miles from the famous Long Wall', or something like that. And you'd think that Mrs. Wing or Arthur or someone would have mentioned it."

I looked out over the open meadow to the right of the road, which eventually ran into wooded hills near the horizon. There was no sign of human habitation or occupancy visible. In the distance, I could see birds in the sky, but around us there had been no signs of life at all: not an ant, not a spider, not a fly, not a yellowjack, not a beetle, not a snake.

"And who built it and why?" Will was going on. "A ten foot high wall this length just doesn't get built ten-twenty miles from nowhere, for no reason at all. You know, it doesn't really look as if there's been anyone living around here for an awful long time. I guess maybe the land was cleared once, since it isn't all forest now-- or maybe there were natural meadows here to begin with. Have to ask a Naturalist about that some time but I suppose it has a lot to do with the way the soil quality can shift here and there. I'll bet we're miles from the nearest house of any kind."

I was listening, but not only to Will. "Have you noticed how quiet it's been since we came upon this wall?" I walked right up to it-- we'd been standing at a respectful distance--and scrutinized it the way a sleuth is supposed to examine evidence, magnifying glass or no magnifying glass. "You know, it looks as if it's made of one piece. I don't see a sign of separate stones; this is not stucco or concrete-- and it can't be metal."

Will joined me and laid his hand upon the surface. "Feels like stone, all right. But it ought to be a little hotter. . . . Clyde, put your palm on it like this."

I followed his lead, and nodded. "Not quite smooth, but even so you'd think it would have picked up more heat on a day like this."

"Well-- it's about 12:30. What say we take a little walk before going on. Half hour's exercise."

I am not a devotee of exercise for its own sake, but I'll walk twenty miles with a minimum of complaint-- well, three-- if there's what appears to me to be a good reason for it. And my curiosity was aroused almost to the point where it matched my ever-present desire to see the new issue

of my favorite science fiction magazines, even if it meant a hike to a nearby town—usually Darien. (Up to very recently this had often been a necessity, when subscriptions ran out and I didn't have the renewal price; and gas couldn't be wasted just so I could pick up a new issue the day it appeared on the stands.) I said to Will, "Look, you start down that way and I'll go this way; I want to walk around this thing. We'll meet after awhile."

Will looked at me in silence, since this was the first indication he'd ever had that I was willing to indulge in any sort of physical exertion that wasn't positively necessary. "It may be longer than you think. A lot longer."

"Well, then let's walk in different directions for fifteen minutes. At 12:45 we stop, turn and see if the other is in sight, then head back toward the car."

So I started briskly (briskly for me, anyway) down the road, whistling between my teeth. Why was this wall ten feet high? How had it been made? Nothing about it changed in any way as I strode along; it still looked and felt like stone, and there were still no breaks or joins anywhere in it, no cavities, no irregularities, and nothing growing near enough to it to touch it in any way.

And what was behind it? I could see nothing but the sky above. What about the upkeep? How had it been kept so clear? I examined the line of grass that ended a foot from the wall and was sure that this was not kept that way by a gardener; there were no signs of cutting; no, it grew that way. Soil differences again? Soil differences following a perfectly straight line, parallel to a perfectly straight wall? Then why hadn't the road been made straight?

And why hadn't we been bothered by insects during lunch time? Mrs. Wing's jelly sandwiches certainly should have roused up the yellow jacks. At least one grasshopper should have come into sight, not to mention butterflies; and the grass was the sort of grass where one found daddy-long-legs; and flies . . . I shook my head, lit up the last cigarette in the pack I was carrying (I'm omniverous when it comes to tobacco), and crumpled up the empty package, tossing it against the base of the wall. A moment later, I went back to look at it; the crumpled package was in the grass, not lying on the bare strip.

I continued and then saw something up ahead, on the other side of the road. A few minutes later, it was identifiable as a parked car. Someone had been driving not too far ahead of us, obviously, and had also stopped, very possibly to examine this wall, I thought. A second thought

told me that this conclusion was unwarranted, requiring that the party ahead also be a tourist; it might just as easily be a native of the district to whom the wall was a commonplace. But if that were the case, then perhaps we could get some information. I looked at my watch. 12:45; I turned and peered carefully behind me, but Will wasn't in sight. Well, it would do no harm to go a bit farther and see who was there up ahead.

Up to this point, there had been peculiarities, things that made one wonder, things which you would tell someone to elicit a whistle or a smile of disbelief at your attempt at a tall tale, but all of them, anomalous as they were, of the sort of piece which one could look back upon years later with a sort of pleasure. You would feel that there must be, there certainly was, some sort of entirely natural explanation, even if it included some rather bizarre human behavior and motivation. But there was nothing thus far that really threatened anyone, omitting the type of nervous wreck who feels threatened by just about anything unusual.

It was at this point, I say, that the wall ceased to be strange, unusual, amusing, fantastic, etc., and became shocking.

For the car up ahead was our own 1927 Ford, with badly chipped blue paint, parked over by the side just as we had left it. And when I turned around, to look behind me, there was Will Richards coming up, with an equally amazed expression on his face.

"Where did *you* come from?" I asked, then paused as I realized that we were speaking simultaneously.

He had walked for fifteen minutes in the direction opposite to my course; had stopped at 12:45, turned, seen nothing, started back, still seeing nothing between him and the car—then, suddenly, I was there.

I tried to say something about this being a two pipe problem, but my heart wasn't in it. Nonetheless, I knew I had to rest, and a little tobacco would offer tranquilization, since we had no other sort handy. We were torn between the desire to get into the car and drive away at top speed, and the feeling that we had to know more. I have often wondered if it would have been worse had we driven away, if we wouldn't have been virtually compelled to return. Well, there's no answering that; but somehow I've never been able to feel that it would have been *better* had we taken a different course.

What we did, of course, after a rest period, was to try again; only this time, we walked together, in the same direction, the one I had taken which left the car behind us. We started out at exactly 1:15, and it was 1:24 when we passed the crumpled cigarette package. We looked at it then

continued, our eyes shifting from the wall to the road up ahead; the stillness, the absence of insect life was beginning to become a positive irritation.

"Watch closely, now," Will said. "If it's going to happen again, it should happen very soon. What's the time?"

"1:26", I said. We did not increase our pace, and Will let me set it; I kept as closely as I could to the stride I had used before, suppressing the urge to go faster with an effort. I kept my eyes fixed on the road ahead, on the right side of the road. There was nothing visible except the road itself, nothing but the meadow to the right, the wall to the left . . . nothing . . . nothing . . .

There!

"Time!" gasped Will. "What's the time?" He seemed to have forgotten that his own watch ran better than mine.

"1:33 exactly," I said, my eyes reluctantly moving from the dark speck over to the right of the road ahead of us. We both knew what it was. We were right.

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TO SAY THAT THERE WERE more Wings around this part of the country than there are Smiths in the Manhattan telephone directory is to exaggerate, but not to give a false impression, really. The one at whose house we found accommodations for the night was named Thad, and he was a distant relative of the one we had spent last night with. The missus was away for a spell, he said, but he could handle things. I didn't see much physical resemblance, but he was like his relative in old-fashioned courtesy and friendliness. His comment upon the fact that we looked as if we'd had a rough time was put in just the right manner which indicated he'd listen with interest and sympathy if we wanted to talk, but not take offense if we didn't.

So after a hearty New England supper, we accepted his invitation to sit awhile on the porch, where the insect life was by no means lacking. But both Will and I wanted to talk so badly, we barely noticed.

I'm not going to try to reproduce anyone's enunciation of the local dialect. Not only does it make for tiresome reading after a sentence or two, it's like a marking in a music score which the composer hesitates to put in for fear it will be exaggerated, finally does, and then finds that his fears are generally realized. I tried to do it, anyway, and had to throw some pages away because it just isn't right. "You" comes out

"ye"; "catch", "ketch"; "your" "yer"; "now" "naow", etc. — but reading it back aloud, relying on memory as well as I could, I realized that I hadn't gotten it right. Let it pass. That should give you a general idea.

Thad Wing eased us into the subject by telling us some of the local gossip, pungent and bawdy quite a bit of it, and after a while, we started to talk about the wall, at which point he asked how it was we didn't see the sign indicating that that was a private road at the turnoff, which should have brought us on to the asphalt road to Skowhegan. I told him that there wasn't any such sign; we'd both been looking for a landmark (we actually found it after we got back onto the right road, Wing's place being the first we came to thereafter) and certainly would have seen it had it been there. He allowed that it might have been blown away last week, when there was a very high wind. Will continued up to the point where we'd found our car there by the side of the road ahead of us.

Wing struck a match on his shoe and applied it to the oversize bowl of his corn cob. "What did you do when you found you couldn't walk around the wall, Mr. Richards?"

Will looked at me, then took a swallow of the hard cider with which we had been provided.

"Well," I started out, "the 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 beyond it."

"And what did you see, Mr. Cantrell?"

I sighed. "Nothing. That is, nothing unusual. There was apparently just an open field, running into wooded hills, like the side we were standing on. . . . I guess we would have turned around and gone back then if something hadn't happened."

"I slipped and went down to my knees," Will said. "I'd stepped on a little colored rubber ball. The red of it was faded, but there was a definite design on it that we could still see pretty clearly. I picked it up and threw it over the wall. I watched it—Clyde did, too—and it just barely cleared the wall, but we both saw it go over. It should have fallen just a little bit on the other side. There wasn't much bounce left in it—I don't think it would have bounced hardly at all.

"But when we got back to the car, my eye caught something in the grass across the road. I went over to it and picked it up. It was a rubber ball, and I'd swear it was *the same ball we had just seen drop over that wall.*"

"The markings were the same," I said. "Of course, Mr. Wing, there are lots of little rubber balls made with similar markings. But Will and

I had both walked along this way and even if the colors were faded, I just don't see how we could have missed noticing it there. The grass wasn't high enough to conceal it. It was just a little ahead of our car, on the grass in front of the wall—I couldn't have missed seeing it before . . . I couldn't."

"And I was looking at the wall all the time we were walking back to the car," Will added. "If someone on the other side had tossed it back, I'd have seen it coming over. . . . But that was just the start. I picked the ball up again and threw it over, high. You saw me do that, didn't you, Clyde?"

I nodded. "And there was no wind. It couldn't have blown back," I said.

"No . . . the air was perfectly still. . . . Well, I threw it over as I said, and turned around—and *there was the ball on the grass just a little beyond the car!*"

He paused and we both looked at Wing, expecting some sort of reaction of disbelief. But he nodded and rocked a little in his chair.

"Settler's wall is very unsettling," he said. "We're used to it, but it bothers people coming from outside. That's why the major's father put that sign up, back around the time Cleveland was running for re-election. Missed, he did—but made it next time. Oh . . . the sign's been replaced a few times, but we've tried to keep it there. Gets knocked down every once in a while, and this will be the second time it's just blown away. Next time I see the major, I'll have to tell him."

Will was deep in thought. "Settler," he said. "Major Settler. Now where have I heard that name before?"

"Well . . . he was a major before your time, Mr. Richards, and hasn't done anything to get himself in the papers since the scrap we had in Cuba when Teddy Roosevelt got things going." Wing rubbed the grizzle on his chin which passed for a beard. "Unless maybe you went to college a few years ago and came across his nephew then. Reckon you'd have had to, because Dave's name wasn't Settler."

"Wasn't . . ."

"Dave got himself drowned in a lake a spell back. Darn shame, too." Wing broke off in a way that suggested there was something more he could tell if he had a mind to.

"There was a Dave Fenner, who was a fraternity brother of mine at Columbia, in 1930 and 1931," Will said. "One of the reasons why I decided to come to Maine was that I hoped to look him up."

I sat there staring. It's amazing how you can know people, even work with them in close quarters for months, sometimes years, and not know them. Will had never mentioned going to Columbia, not even going to college for that matter. Something of what was going through my head must have penetrated to him, for he grinned rather lopsidedly at me.

"Yes, Clyde, I'm a certified Bachelor of Arts, graduated *summa cum laude* from Columbia in 1931. I'm a real Latin scholar—or I would have been. Can you think of any other specialty more useless in these times? I was a fool not to switch in 1930 to something more practical—that's why I don't like to talk about college. But I did want to see if Dave was around. He'd concentrated on Latin, too, before he transferred to Columbia. I forget where he'd gone before. He didn't talk much about it, but he learned a lot of obscure Latin there."

"I've heard it mentioned," Wing said. "Housatonic? No—that's in Connecticut and a river, not a school. Something like that. It was around Massachusetts Bay, not too far from Marblehead. . . . But I've dragged you away from what you were telling about the wall. Did you try anything else?"

"Yes. I picked up the ball and was going to throw it over again with all my strength, but Clyde stopped me. We took a paper plate we had in the trunk and wrote our names on it. Then he skimmed it over the wall, and it sailed over as neatly as you could ask. Then we turned around and started looking for it behind us. . . . I'd say it took ten seconds to locate it."

Thad Wing poured himself another glass of cider and offered us refills from the jug; we did not refuse. "Most folks give up by that point," he said, "but I got a feeling that you two didn't. You look and talk as if you'd tried something else and got a still worse shock. Am I right?"

"You sure are!" I said. "Will was determined to try to climb over the wall. He worked for the telephone company for awhile as a linesman, and we had special climbing shoes in the car—figured we might tackle a mountain hereabouts—and plenty of rope. So I tied the rope around his waist, then gave him a hand up the wall, and grabbed hold of the rope so that he could climb down the other side, if he didn't want to jump, and give him a start when he wanted to come back.

"He got up to the top—there's enough room to stand there—and stood like a statue for a minute or so. Then he turned around, and his face was whiter than I ever saw it before. He didn't say anything, just nodded and started climbing down the other side while I let the rope

out, keeping it taut. . . . Then . . . the rope seemed to slip out of my hands . . . and . . . "

"And you found that he'd come down on the same side of the wall you were on, only you didn't see him coming," finished Wing. He nodded to Will. "And you, Mr. Richards, I reckon I know what gave you such a turn when you got on top of the wall and looked over to what was beyond it. You saw the same thing you saw on this side. You saw your car on the far side of the road, and I'll bet you saw Mr. Cantrell here looking up at you. . . . You see, it's all been tried before—but the fact of the matter is that *you can't walk around Settler's Wall and you can't go over it*. If you want my opinion—and the major holds to it likewise—there's only one side to that wall, the side you're on."

"But that's impossible!" I protested. "There's no such thing as a wall with only one side."

Wing chuckled. "That's the sort of thing us farmers are supposed to say when we see a giraffe. . . . I'll tell you what I can about the wall. It's been called Settler's Wall as long as anyone can remember, because it's on Settler property. But none of them built it.

"There's been Wings and Settlers here for a long time, and that property had belonged to the major's family since before the War of the Rebellion. Whether a Settler or a Wing was in these parts first doesn't make much difference, I guess. But nobody seems to have seen it much before 1840, or maybe the late 1830's, when they first started to clear the land in these parts.

"My father told me, and it's been passed down for quite a while now, 'There's a lot of things which may seem peculiar, but so long as they aren't hurting you any, or hurting anybody else, don't you bother about them. Leave them alone.' And that's the way it's been around here, that's the way we look at the wall, just about all of us. Settler's Wall has never harmed anybody, but a few folk have hurt themselves getting all het up about it."

"What happened to them?" I asked.

"The wall itself didn't do a thing to them," Wing said. "It just stayed there and paid no attention to them. But they couldn't let well enough alone, they just had to know all about it. A couple of them have gotten themselves brain fever and died of it. And Jim Garlan—he was the son of old Ben—but no use going into that—well, this was around the 80's, and he'd gone to universities in England and Germany; he was determined to solve the secret of the wall." Wing took another deep swallow of hard cider, then stuffed his pipe again.

"What happened to him?"

"Went mad. Didn't talk so that anyone else could make out any sense from it, not even the fancy doctors and professors who came here. It was a funny kind of Latin, they said he was talking, and a couple of the professors were pretty sure that he was quoting from some book, though it wasn't a book any of them had ever read. I think one of them had an inkling, but he wouldn't say anything—I got all this from my grandfather—except that Jim must have gotten access to a book in the British Museum that people weren't supposed to see. But that's all he would say, though my grandfather was sure he knew a lot more, except that the best thing to do about the wall was just to leave it alone.

"I'm sure Dave was more interested in it than was good for him . . . Tell you what, you being an old fraternity brother of his, I reckon the major would like to meet you. If you have time, we could go over there tomorrow, and I think the major would let you look at Dave's notebooks. None of us can read parts of them, because they're in Latin, too, and the only person around here who knows any says that it's too danged corrupt Latin." Thad Wing puffed away at his pipe, and I didn't feel like breaking the silence then.

"And if you want my opinion—because that's all it is, I don't know—I think the reason why Dave left that college in Massachusetts and shifted to New York was because he found out too much and had the sense to stop before he went off his head like Jim Garlan. They had old books locked up at that college, too, and what we could read of Dave's notebooks says that he got to see some of them. Well, the major and I, we both calculated a bit, and we figure that the books Dave was reading in corrupt Latin in 1926 and 1927 was the same books that Jim Garlan found in London. They were real old books, copied out by hand. . . . Dave used to correspond with a writer who lived in Rhode Island, and he'd get long letters from him every now and then. But when he came back from that place, he was a different person. He burned all the correspondence and I think he might have burned the notebooks, too, except perhaps he figured that no one could read them, and there were some things in them—personal things—that he didn't want to lose. Maybe he'd have copied those out and burned the rest if he'd lived. I don't know. One of those things where you have to say that just nobody knows, that's all."

Will turned to me. "What do you say, Clyde? Had enough of it or can you take a little more? Shall we go to see Major Settler?"

I HAVE OFTEN FELT IRRITATED, in reading weird fiction, when the author has taken the trouble to tell me that something is shocking—particularly when he has taken the trouble to present his material clearly—and now on looking back over this manuscript, I see that I have done the same thing myself. Perhaps I've been wrong and misjudged some of my favorite writers; for I see now one use of this term which strikes me as entirely legitimate. And that is why I have left that passage just as I first wrote it. I do not mean that *you* ought to find the matter referred to shocking, or again that you never never would unless I gave you the cue; what I was taking about was the effect that the experience of trying to walk around Settler's Wall had upon Will Richards and me.

It was more than upsetting; it had a profound effect not only on our nervous systems but also on our ability to think and reason with what I like to consider our normal ability. We were in something very much like a hypnotic situation, or at least like being under the spell of a first class stage magician who induces you to look where he wants you to look and thus be completely taken in by his illusions and deceptions. That was part of it; the astute reader has long since thought of something which just did not occur to either of us until the next morning.

Of course it was only a partial release, for it did not begin to explain everything, but it seemed like a major victory to me, when I awoke finally at the sound of the Wing contingent of roosters who, having done their essential duty earlier, were now rehearsing for the next morning; a thought hit my mind as daylight struck my opened eyes.

Will had preceded me to the bathroom. I looked at him carefully, wondering if it had occurred to him, too. But I didn't think it had; he just didn't look as if it had. So I yawned and said to him, "Hey, why don't we just try to get up to the wall from behind? Go around the back way?"

He dropped his razor, which was as much applause as I could ask for. I marched triumphantly down the hall to the bathroom and left him there, thinking that I'd better mark the date on the calendar, since I'd forgotten the last time I'd beaten him to the mental punch.

It was a fine day, and I enjoyed it heartily for all of ten or maybe fifteen minutes, until we went down to the breakfast table, met the neighbor who had come in to help, and, after a bit of desultory conversation,

I mentioned my idea. Thad Wing looked thoughtful and a little sympathetic, then murmured, "It's been tried."

He chewed on his ham for a moment then added. "Jim Garlan was the last to keep on trying and trying, and that was when he began to go queer. There's woods there, not too much different from the woods you see on the other side. . . . What happened was, every time Jim would work his way out of the woods, on to a meadow, and find himself on the other side of the wall, across the road. . . . You don't have to take my word for it, Mr. Cantrell. No law here against seeing for yourself."

The flavor went out of Mrs. Sully's fine Maine breakfast at that point. I knew that the last thing in the world I wanted was to go through that experience myself.

"What I don't understand—along with other things," Will said, "is why we've never heard about the wall before."

"Well . . ." Wing paused for a moment. "Don't want to sound offensive, don't mean any offense neither, but most folks around here just mind their own business. . . . Course it's no fault of yours that the sign was down; I'm sure you wouldn't have taken that road if you'd seen it. But the fact is that since the sign has been up hardly anyone except the major and his family have used the road, and folks just sort of generally agreed not to talk about the wall since Jim Garlan went crazy. Most people around here have never seen it or heard of it. And those of us who have leave it alone and it leaves us alone."

Wing started to talk about something else, I guess to assure us that he didn't mean anything personal and that we hadn't stepped on *his* toes in any way. After breakfast, we got into his buckboard and rode over to the Settler's. Just like that; no telephoning, though Wing had a windup telephone in his kitchen—a three party line affair. He sort of appreciated our adventure, he said, because he hadn't seen the major for a spell, and this gave him a good reason to drop in.

Later, we learned that this period of "a spell" was over two years. Settler and Wing had had a little disagreement and stopped talking to each other, each of them willing to be friends again if the other would just make the first move. So something good came out of our discovery of the wall after all.

Unless you have rubber bones, I do not recommend the buckboard as a desirable means of travel over unimproved roads. It did, however, help to take the edge of the feeling of dull horror that had crept back over me. I was somewhere in between the feeling of wanting to crawl into a cave and go to sleep, hoping to awaken in a different world, where

something like Settler's Wall really couldn't exist, and a morbid fascination which kept me wanting to see this thing through, though to what end I couldn't imagine.

Major Horace Wingate Settler, U.S.A. (ret.) looked the part to perfection. Take the build of Theodore Roosevelt, but remove the glasses; and something of the stoical quietness of Calvin Coolidge—who *could* talk when he had a mind to—but pour in more warmth; a touch of the friendly but firm sincerity of Eisenhower, in situations where his command of self expression has not been shot away, and you have our initial impressions.

He greeted Thad Wing as if he hadn't seen him for a week or so, and they talked a bit after we'd been welcomed and made comfortable upon the porch. After awhile, Wing gave a concise report upon how we'd happened to come across the wall, and our experiences, mentioning that Will had been a classmate of Dave's at Columbia.

The major thawed visibly at that. "Seem to recall Dave mentioning some fraternity brother named Will. Well, if you can read what he wrote in his notebooks, we'd sure like to find out. About the wall, we all reckon. Not mine. I never built it and neither did anyone else. That wall was here when we first came here, and folks around swore at the time they knew nothing about it. You can't find any mention of it, even in Indian legends. It was just there, somewhere around 1840."

I didn't feel like arguing, and neither did Will, I could see. It was obvious to both of us that the major and his forbears had solved the problem of the wall in their own way; they ignored it. The only thing they'd talk about was the unpleasant results of getting too curious.

"Nope, it never hurt anyone who didn't get too close to it, and didn't try to pry too far," the major went on. "Never did anyone a lick of good, either. But you're welcome to look it over in any way you want to except one. Damnation, you can tear it down and cart it away if you can figure out how to do that, so long as you don't do any damage to the rest of the property or make me liable for anything."

"What's the one thing that's ruled out, sir?" I asked.

"Trying to dig under it. That was what drove Jim Garland crazy, and a couple others before him got brain fever and died." He got up showing little traces of age. "Set now, and I'll bring you Dave's notebook. Reckon Thad would like to hear what you can make out of it. No hurt if it's all Chinese to you—nobody else has been able to make much sense out of it."

"You mean," I asked, "that no one has been able to translate anything in it at all?"

"Nope, some have got words and sentences all right. But what they got didn't leave us any better off than before."

He was back a few moments later, during which time Wing told us that the major's cousin's family lived here and took care of the place. We might see them later if the visit took that long. I got the impression that, so long as we behaved ourselves and were of interest, we could stay for days, as Wing's paying guest. When the others had nothing else important to do, they'd visit with us; when they did, we were on our own. The younger ones had daily tasks, but Wing and the major worked when they felt like it-- which was more often than not.

Dave had attended a college in Massachusetts before coming to Columbia. Will had thought he'd started college late, but we found out now that he'd had a breakdown at "that place" and was out for a year or so before continuing. The college to which he had gone at first wasn't named, though I suspected that Wing really did recall the name. But the custom here was to refer to it, if one positively had to mention it at all, only as "that place". The major had closed the iron door upon it.

Settler re-appeared now with a medium sized copybook under his arm. "Never did think much of that place," he started out, "but Dave wanted to do research in Italy and other countries. Had the notion from reading about da Vinci that some of those other old writers came across some useful military ideas that got overlooked, because they were so obscure in the way they wrote things down. He'd need a real foundation in medieval Latin and maybe earlier and figured that place was the only school in the East which had the facilities for him. So I had to allow that it might be worth taking the risk."

He filled up his pipe and lit it carefully. "Wasn't a pacifist, but I could see that he wouldn't make a good soldier for an army career. Heart wasn't in it. He'd do his duty if the war broke out again, but otherwise, no. Sort of disappointed me at first, but then I started thinking. Had lots of time to think after my wife died. That's why those Germans came so close to beating the world. They did research. They worked out new ideas. Can't win a war with old ideas that everybody knows about, no matter how many men you have. May not be so long before the Japanese or the Russians, or even the Germans again, come up with new ideas and make another try. We have to keep ahead of them." He puffed on his pipe. "Education plus imagination. That's what the army needs up at the top. I didn't have the education. Just had notions

and didn't have the sense to keep them to myself. Found myself retired. . . . But figured if Dave learned something important, and we could get someone with a West Point background interested enough, we'd be doing the country a real service."

In the next half hour, while I tried to restrain my impatience, we learned that the League of Nations was on a par with the league of mice which solemnly decided that the way to security was putting a bell on the cat, and that disarmament was the next thing to treason. There were other countries who signed pacts and continued to re-arm secretly, etc., and if we didn't have some new ideas to match them when they were ready to move, etc. Letting the Japanese take over Manchuria should have shown any intelligent person how worthless the League was, and with the kind of government we had now, it was just as well we were out of it, etc. I tried not to glance too often at the notebook in the major's lap, and even to make some intelligent remarks when Wing moved the conversation into the North's state of unpreparedness when anyone could see that the South was going to secede and there would be war.

Eventually, the notebook was in Will's hands, and he was puzzling over the first paragraph in Latin. Finally, he looked up. "It's a quotation," he said, "from a book that Dave identifies only as 'AA'—must be one of the rare ones at . . . that place. I think I can make out what it says." He cleared his throat, and read slowly.

"'There is that which is not of the malignancy of those which serve the elder ones, yet scholars say that it has somewhat of a passive alliance with them. It is in space yet not in space, in time yet not in time, and many and manifold are the prodigies that attend it. It moves not after it comes, nor does it harm any who pay it no heed. Yet cruel is the compulsion it has upon those who come near, and fearful the magic it enacts upon them, that they become locked in its spell which leads to madness. Seek not to go around nor over, lest you be captured, and dig not in there toward that which lies beneath. The spells of . . . I can't make this out . . . ' avail not, nor does any demon impart knowledge of it. It comes in the time of . . . well, something—I cannot grasp the reference . . . 'and goes when the time is departed.

The major let his breath out. "Dang it, that's better than anyone else has been able to do. And you learned that much Latin at Columbia?" The major swore to himself for a moment. "Then Dave never had to go to that place at all!"

Will shook his head. "I've read some other things, sir, which gave me

an idea of what to look for—particularly when you said that Dave had been studying at . . . "

"It's about the wall, all right, wouldn't you say so, Thad?" Wing nodded vigorously. "Of course we were pretty sure it was. But this ties things together. There's been others like it in the past, and this is a sort of warning to leave them alone. . . . Only, it says that once you've started to pry, you find you just can't let it alone—not easily, anyway."

"Like it had captured you and was studying you," Wing said. "You know what those initials 'AA' stand for?"

Will nodded. "I think so. It's a very old book dealing with magic and spells and very strange lore. And it fits in with some pretty awful things that are supposed to have happened. . . . It ties in with that correspondence Dave had with—the man in Rhode Island. He's written some things as fiction but he knows a lot about this book and—that place. . . . I'd have to study the rest of the Latin a long time to get any more, though. This first was a little easy for me, but I could see from skimming over the next passage that it's beyond me. You have to know a fair amount of what is being talked about to make any sense of this sort of Latin."

"Then I guess Dave did get his foundation there," the major agreed. "Would have gone to Italy last year, if . . . " He was silent, and we didn't break the brown study into which he fell for a while. "You can borrow that notebook for as long as you need it," he said. "And if you want to look at the wall a bit more, that's all right with me, so long as you don't dig. Even that author says you shouldn't dig—I'm sure he's talking about the wall. Must be others like it—or there were others like it back whenever it was he wrote. Middle Ages, I guess."

"Older than that," Will said. "This book is a translation from the Arabic."

The major whistled. "Arabic, eh? That goes way back. Those old boys had one helluva civilization when we were still in a pretty barbaric state."

"There's one thing I'd like to try," Will said slowly. "I had another fraternity brother who lives around this area. He was an aviation enthusiast and had a plane of his own the last I heard from him. Taught me a little flying and parachute jumping. I'd like to see if I can come down behind the wall in a parachute."

"Now that would be interesting," allowed Thad Wing.

And the upshot of it all was that Will made a long distance call and managed to contact Frank Bentley. There seemed to be no end of new

things I was learning about my partner on this trip. It was not exactly news to me that Will was interested in flying and had done a little while he was knocking around after graduating from college. But he'd never mentioned parachute jumping. The plans were that I'd stay on with Wing while Will drove over to make arrangements with Frank; Will was going to try to come down behind the wall via parachute. Both Wing and the major were impressed, and I reaped some of the benefit of our advanced status; I was invited to join them fishing the next morning.

I had thought I knew a little about fishing. Wing and the major had a fine morning, and I suppose they chuckled for years afterward about my part of it. If you don't mind, we will shift scenes here and cut directly to that afternoon, when Wing, the major and I gathered in the meadow to await Will's arrival with Frank Bentley in Bentley's autogyro. He'd phoned to let us know when they'd arrive, and what he wanted me to do.

Will looked a little pale when he climbed out, but recovered enough to introduce Frank around. We learned the reason for his distress quickly enough. The wall could not be seen from the plane at all. Looking down, they saw a symmetrical layout of wooded hill, large meadow flat enough for a plane to land, and the road.

"It's about as easy to explain as what we've come up against so far," Will said. "And you saw how low we were when we were going right over the road. I took some pictures. . . . Did you bring the flags, Clyde?"

I nodded, and set them up in a twenty foot triangle. "As soon as you spot them with the binoculars, you get into position and jump," I told him. "We'll all see whether or not you come down behind the wall."

Thad Wing knocked out his pipe and spat, and the major kept a poker face, but it was pretty clear to me what they were both thinking. I was tempted to ask them if anyone had tried this before, but I just couldn't. If it had been tried before and hadn't worked, I didn't want to know that yet. The one thing I could be sure of was that if it had been tried before, the failure had been no more harmful than trying to walk around the wall or climb over it. We took some pictures of the wall from where we stood.

We watched the autogyro ease up gradually. There was no wind, so it shouldn't be too difficult, Will had said, to make the jump right. And if he failed the first time, he could try again.

We all had glasses, and the three of us fixed them on Frank's plane.

There! There went Will, twisting and tumbling; he was a black speck for a moment, then the white of the parachute mushroomed out and the abruptness of the fall stopped.

It seemed agonizingly slow, but after a while it was clear to us that he would land behind the wall. There could be no doubt about it. And if he couldn't get over it to us, then Frank could make a landing on the same side and fly him out. I cut loose with a cheer when I saw that drifting shape float down on the other side of Settler's wall, out of sight; but I cheered alone. Wing and the major had interested expressions on their faces; they waited, for a moment or two, then, as if on command, turned around.

So did I. And I saw why I had cheered alone. Will Richards, parachute and all, was behind us.

The major stood there like a statue for a moment, and then he said one word: "Dynamite." He said it without raising his voice, or using any particular inflection unlike his usual way of talking. But I knew at that moment that he really did have feelings about the wall after all. He hated it.

Frank Bentley was upset. He, too, was sure that Will had come down on the other side, and this was a lot different from just hearing a fantastic story. I was glad that I hadn't asked my question earlier. When Bentley joined us, and Will had struggled out of the harness, the parachute folded, etc., I put it to the major. He nodded. "He's the third," he said. "A friend of Dave's tried twice. No one's been able to get to the other side of that wall at all."

"So you're going to blow it up?" asked Bentley.

Thad Wing shook his head. "Nope, just try to blow a hole *through* it."

It was clear that Wing and the major knew a great deal more about the wall than they had let on. My feeling was that the attempt would show that you couldn't penetrate the surface at all, but the drill that I held seemed to go in easily enough when Bentley struck it with the hammer. Wing prepared the dynamite and set the fuses, three sticks in holes as close together as feasible. The major lit the fuses then we let him lead us to the proper distance. I felt a momentary sense of relief that working with dynamite was not among Will's irritating list of accomplishments and experiences.

The explosion sounded impressive to me, but Thad Wing shook his head. "Not quite right. Didn't sound quite right when the drills were going in, either."

Well, it looked promising enough. There was a good size section blown out, leaving a deep cavity. Fragments of stone—substance—were on all sides; we dragged out several large chunks and threw them aside. The wall now had a definite mark upon it, a hole of particularly deep-looking darkness. But no daylight. We had knocked a hole into the wall, but not through it. Will walked over to the autogryo and came back with a flashlight which he poked into the cavity.

"It goes down," he said. "It goes way down."

We got some rope and Will tied it around his waist, as if he were going to be let down into a well. Somehow, the idea seemed acceptable, just as we found ourselves accepting everything about Settler's wall, bit by bit, even while something inside us was screaming. Bentley and I held on to the rope; three tugs would be the signal to haul Will back.

We saw him go in, saw the momentary gleam of the flashlight, and watched the rope play out. It seemed like hours, but could not have been more than a few minutes at the most, when the tugs came. We all started pulling until Will came into sight. He was very pale, but managed to keep a poker face to match Settler's. "There's no way through the wall, either, Major."

None of the photographs taken from the plane came out, and we never so much as thought of taking some fragments with us.

4

THE NEXT DAY, we said goodbye to Major Settler and Thad Wing, with thanks for their hospitality and co-operation, and Will promised to return the notebooks. He spoke a little more quietly than before, but apparently he had slept all right. I hadn't; I'm not used to sleeping with a light on. Taking it all in all, I wonder if he hasn't recovered better than I have. It is true that he always carries a flashlight with him, won't go into a dark room without turning it on first, but won't switch it off until another light is on, and won't turn off the last light in a room at night under any circumstances. He nearly died a year or so later when there was a power failure, no electricity for nearly forty-eight hours, and we had to rely on candles and oil lamps. The batteries in his flashlight ran out, and I'll never forget the gasp he gave as he saw the light give its warning flicker. He pressed it into my hands, whispered, "Clyde, turn it off and light the lamp," then clapped both hands to his eyes and faced the wall.

Now and then he talks in his sleep about a hole which keeps going

down and down, and he's dropped his flashlight, which goes out. But the light from flashlight isn't off. It's still there, drifting away gradually like smoke. He has this dream every so often, and apparently it is always the same, but he never talks about it when he wakes up. I've never mentioned it to him, and I don't want to ask him any questions. I've tried not to write this story for thirty years . . .

He worked on Dave Hill's notebooks that autumn, but wouldn't discuss them— not yet, was the way he put it. He was waiting for something. He wouldn't tell me what it was. I tried to decipher some of the Latin quotations, but could make nothing of them except that there was something about magic and something about monsters— or maybe it was something monstrous. We had photographs of the wall, showing how it looked before and after the dynamite experiment. And a few months later, Will returned the notebooks to Major Settler with a letter of thanks, saying that they contained a great deal of ancient lore, valuable to a scholar, and very likely of use to someone who wanted to research old Latin manuscripts— especially ones in corrupt Latin— but nothing further that really related to the wall. I didn't accuse him of lying, but I can't help but feel that he was.

5

Early in March 1936, a letter came from Thad Wing, with a photograph enclosed. Wing had not only included his car, with the 1936 license plates clearly visible, but had followed our lead with the photographs we took before dynamiting; we had written our names and the dates on the back. The major and a couple of others endorsed the picture he sent.

It showed the wall, and there were still traces of the hole in it. Traces. Most of it was filled in. And the accompanying letter avowed that neither Major Settler, Wing himself, or anyone else had made any moves toward repairing the wall. All the fragments disappeared.

You can see now why I've been reluctant to tell this story, as interesting as some of the aspects of it are. Settler's wall was not of stone, or any other substance we're familiar with, though it seemed to be more nearly like stone than anything else. And there was some sort of phenomenon connected with it, as a result of which one could neither go around it or over it, nor through it—in fact, it seemed that there just wasn't

any other side at all. I've heard of mobius strips, of course, but it couldn't have been a mobius strip.

Then came the hurricane of 1938. I was in Brooklyn that night and, oddly enough, there was no indication where I was that the storm was anything really unusual. The wind was considerable, and there was a lot of rain. But it wasn't until the next day that I found out how serious it had been.

When I got back to work, a week or so later, Will was away, and a letter from Maine arrived before he returned. I didn't open it, but I felt sure that there was news of the wall in it.

There was. The letter included another authenticated photograph of a long trench beside the road we had traveled. The wall was gone. Some people in the area, Thad Wing wrote, believed there had been a slight earthquake, but seismologists did not agree with them.

That is the end of my story, except for what Will said when he looked at the photograph.

"Of course," he whispered, "of course. It swam away."



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 over tall. 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? Damn, 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 moren 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 something 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 forget 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 experimenting — 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 . . .