

THE BLACK WALL OF JERUSALEM

Ian Watson

SHORTLY after I returned to England, the dreams began. Nightly, a four-legged Angel in bright armor bears me upon his back into domains where I witness marvels and atrocities before we are forced, by a Harpy, by a Buddha-Toad, by a Woman-Whirlwind, to withdraw.

Meanwhile, in Israel, helicopter gunships are rocketing Arab cars and houses-it's the wrong war, the wrong war!

Do I report my dreams to the Knights of the Black Wall back in Jerusalem? Might I be inviting an assassin to visit me? I'm definitely a link, a channel. Can the Black Wall appear in my own country, especially if Jerusalem is incinerated in a Middle Eastern holocaust, woe heaven forbid. Heaven, indeed! *And will those feet in modern times walk upon England's mountains green? And will the Centaur-Angel be on England's pleasant pastures so?* Beyond our world lurk other potent dimensions, parasitical and expansionist, seeking a place in the true sun.

I am being incoherent.

Some time before the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, the Knights Templar expelled from their Order and from the Holy Land a certain Robert de Sourdeval. During the 19th century workmen renovating the Aqsa Mosque on Temple Mount found hidden in its roof space a parchment alluding to the expulsion. Sourdeval's crime remained a mystery until a fragment of the document was offered to an antique dealer in East Jerusalem in the 1950s and came into the possession of a Polish-American garments millionaire who was passionately interested in the "occult" side of history: Kabbalah, Sufism, Masonry, and such.

This document, a copy of a letter written in Latin by Sourdeval to an unknown recipient, is the earliest recorded description of the Black Wall of Jerusalem and of the "demonic" beings beyond it. Two other accounts exist, one in Hebrew by a Rabbi and the other in Arabic by a Sufi, and neither is as lucid.

Why did the Knights Templar expel Sourdeval? That military order of monks was obsessed with Solomon's bygone temple, on the site of which they had established their headquarters, converting the Aqsa Mosque for this purpose. For the Templars, Solomon's Temple was the supreme example of sacred architecture. Its geometrical proportions, deduced from the Bible, offered a key to the fundamentals of space and time, as we would understand them nowadays, and so could reveal the underpinnings of the universe and of life itself. Sourdeval to insist on the existence—even the fleeting and visionary existence—of a realm anywhere in the vicinity which enshrined creatures more demonic than angelic must have been anathema. His testimony must be suppressed.

I'm running ahead of myself. . . .

I was a lecturer in Art History with a particular interest in apocalyptic art, Altdorfer and such. Philip Wilson was also a poet with a minor reputation—the emphasis should be on *w*—and dreamed of blowing people out of the water one day with something major and sustained of the caliber of William Blake. Yet as another William-Butler Yeats-put it, "I sought a theme

sought for it in vain." So far, I had been penning clever poems mainly inspired by ar visions. Did I have no unique vision of my own, and could this be due to my own lack of faith? Yeats managed to find his themes and visions. Might Jerusalem-the bubbling cauldron of religions, the real Jerusalem rather than Blake's resounding verses-prompt me with some suitable and major?

I had a sabbatical term due, and no ties. Trish had walked out on me, and by then I was glad of this. At first her passionate enthusiasms and loathings had been stimulating, but after a while these came to seem like a series of self-indulgent fads, a sort of self-generated hysteria in which I was supposed to concur fully or be abused by her for lack of commitment or sincerity. Ultimately I came to realize that Trish didn't care a hoot about my poetry, in other words she wasn't my real inner self. Fortunately, we had no kids to make a separation messy. Trish was always busy for children, and then she became too busy for me. Yes, I would go to Jerusalem for a week in October, stay longer if I felt inspired. Irish was in a hatred-of-property phase and had swanned off to an ashram in India to be spiritual. She might return to demand a share of the house and my income, but for the moment I had funds and freedom.

The driver of the limousine who whisked me from Lod Airport-I sat up front for a better view-proved to have emigrated from London ten years earlier and was proudly Israeli. Deeply tanned, he wore shorts.

As he turned on to the only true motorway in Israel, linking Tel Aviv with Jerusalem, he used his mobile to phone ahead in Hebrew to the YMCA hotel where I had reserved a room. *Shalom, shalom.*

"They are expecting you, and I have a booking for return to the airport."

I was glad of the air-conditioning in his limo. The brilliance, and the heat! The highway traversed what to my eyes appeared to be a barren wilderness seared by fierce sunshine. After we started climbing through reddish-brown foothills, by the sides of the road battered metal boxes the size of rubbish skips began appearing.

Those, said the ex-Londoner, were relics of the 1948 War of Independence, the wreckage of homemade armored cars which ran an Arab blockade so that *we* could bring food to the besieged Jerusalem-he had not arrived until decades later, nevertheless he was deeply puzzled by this.

Ran the blockade? Oh, no, those boxes had crawled up this incline where our own cars surged smoothly while devils-or at least Arabs-poured fire and brimstone from ambush.

"Many of us died in these convoys. And we're dying still-a car bomb here, a school bus machine-gunned there. And the world's media savage us whenever we aren't whiter than vellum and don't turn the other cheek, you know what I mean? But we carry on. What are we supposed to do? Jump in the sea?"

I nodded awkwardly.

"Mostly life is quite normal here, so you need not worry about safety."

He sounded like a spokesman for the ministry of tourism, or immigration. I wondered whether he kept a gun in the glove pocket of the limo.

These thoughts passed from my mind as, high and still distant, shining white outcrop apartment blocks appeared. The sheer brightness of the buildings coming into view as continued higher and higher! All made of the local stone by law, mark you; even a Hilton Hotel must comply. No wonder people thought of Jerusalem as a celestial city here on Earth. I rose up and up, beholding a succession of white bastions or ramparts of suburbs, like Dante's hell of circles inverted and transformed from negative darkness into luminosity. Those Jews in 1948 in their grim, slow ovens had been conducting an assault, almost, upon heaven itself-betokened by the blinding sky-so as to restore the reign of angels, to raise those up and to pinnacles, thrones, and dominations; and now the angels indeed had dominion, armed with nuclear weapons. I was mixing up my theology a bit, but as my driver would say, *know what I mean?*

The YMCA hotel was much grander than its name implied. Located directly opposite the very swanky King David Hotel, the elegant 1930s building boasted a tall bell tower resembling some stone space rocket poised to launch itself. Palm tree and soaring cypresses graced a garden, white domed Byzantine wings on either side. The arcaded reception lobby was like a Turkish palace. I arranged to join a few other guests next day for a guided tour of the city to get my bearings.

By now it was evening. After depositing my bags I took a copy of the *Jerusalem Post* to a table on the terrace where I ordered lamb chops and a beer-the Goldstar proved to be decidedly malty. I read how a woman corporal had been stabbed to death by an Arab in the Jordan valley, and how the Defense Force had dynamited some Arab houses, and how a member of Knesset's car had been fire-bombed by an underground extremist Jewish group because of a squabble about the location of a grave. The political situation seemed set to explode in a few more months, but meanwhile rich tourists were still debussing across the road.

Next morning I met up with the guide, Alon, a burly laid-back fellow approaching middle age. Perched on his balding head, a small *kippa* skullcap gave useful sun protection. My fellow excursioners were a blond Swedish couple, the Svensens, their rather plain and shy teenage daughter, and Mrs. Dimet, an American widow, a short, urgent birdlike lady with frizzy hair.

Alon impressed on us that we should each buy a bottle of water before we set off to avoid dehydration, then he discreetly inquired into our religious affiliations so that he could guide us most beneficially.

I said I was agnostic; and the Swedes were atheists, the parents being historians at Uppsala University.

"It is dark there half of the year," explained Mrs. Svensen. "We came for the history, not for the light. Natural light, not religious light."

"What else could I be but Jewish?" Mrs. Dimet said. "When God spoke to Abraham, the radiation illuminated all people in the world-but most people lost the light. It is a miracle that I am here in Israel at last! Although I think the Hasidim are a bit crazy. God has to be joking when you wear Polish fur hats and long black coats in this heat."

So none of us were Christians. Judiciously, Alon said, "Usually when I take people round

simply say, 'Here is where Jesus was crucified.' Today I will say, 'Here is where Jesus *said* to be crucified.' " He inclined toward Mrs. Dimet. "You are right about Ultra-Orthodox being crazy. Those fanatics refuse to pay taxes or serve in the army. Some refuse to speak Hebrew because they think Hebrew is sacred. Yet their political power gives them all sorts of privileges." He lowered his voice. "There could be civil war here, Jew fighting Jew fratricidally within the walls at the very same time as resisting the legions outside!" For Romans, read Arabs. Such a specter deeply upset this otherwise easygoing Alon. The Svensen Parents frowned sympathetically.

And so we set off in Alon's black stretch Mercedes. Landmarks more landmarks, then parked near the Wailing Wall. Hundreds of orthodox Jews of assorted sects wearing nineteenth century winter clothing breezed down a sloping plaza in the blazing sunshine to pray at the wall while bobbing their fur-hatted heads repeatedly. Seemingly, the variously attired subdivisions of the ultrafaithful all bitterly resented one another. Handsome young men of the Defense Force, dark-skinned and with gleaming teeth, automatic rifles slung around their shoulders, kept an eye on the comings and goings.

"If you like," said Alon, "you can write a prayer on a piece of paper and put it in a crack in the wall. No one will object."

On the contrary, the devout would completely ignore us, just as they ignored one another. I thought about this and decided *why not?* Tearing a page from my notebook, I scribbled, "My name is *a* theme please?" I folded the paper several times, walked to the wall, and inserted it. My appeal amongst many others. On my return, the Svensens eyed me curiously.

Mrs. Dimet had fled to the women's section to do some praying. Hidden above and beyond the great section of boundary wall was Temple Mount, which alas we would not be able to visit. Occupied as the Mount had been ever since the victories of Islam by highly sanctified Moslem shrines, it was a volatile place. A fortnight ago a Canadian John the Baptist armed with a knife had started preaching inside the Aqsa Mosque. Riots and tear gas and bloodshed ensued; security was being reassessed. While Mrs. Dimet was absent, Alon regaled us with how an extreme Jewish nationalist faction aimed to erase all trace of the Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock and to rebuild Solomon's Temple in all its glory, whereupon the reign of God could commence.

"First they need ritually to slaughter an all-red heifer and burn it. They are breeding heifers specially."

"What is a heifer?" asked Mrs. Svensen.

"A young virgin cow."

"Why do those people want to burn a cow?"

"From its ashes they make a paste to sanctify the new foundations. The heifer has to be perfectly red."

"A well-red cow," observed Svensen drolly.

Confusingly, the Red Heifer Brigade was not among the squabbling ranks of the *Ultra* Orthodox. Those Ultras would not lift a finger to rebuild the Temple because the Messiah would do it for them-everybody else must do everything for the

From the Wailing Wall we walked to the Via Dolorosa, no great distance. How close condensed everything was, all cheek by jowl.

In the courtyard-cum-playground of an Arab primary school, brown-robed Dominicans were gathering for their weekly procession up the flagstoned way trodden by Christ on his way to be crucified.

"Actually, the city surface was three meters lower in the First Century . . ."

Today being a Friday, no Arab schoolkids were present as a dapper monk proclaimed the Stations of the Cross in Italian, microphone in hand and boom box slung over his shoulder. A rotund Asian colleague recited each Station in orotund English. An Arab would lead the march, sporting a red fez ordained by the Ottomans as the symbol of authority to clear a way where otherwise trouble might ensue. Soldiers observed as we set off.

I was astonished at how tightly confined the route was—a cramped bazaar of souks, vendors and food shops. A loping Arab lugging a small barrow of watermelons barely managed to career past a military jeep. Nevertheless, here came a band of American women, the vanguard bearing on their shoulders a half-sized replica cross like a battering ram. Equally brusque with purpose was a devout party of Slavs. After prayers at some tiny nearby mosque, an Imam was leading his flock of twenty or so the opposite way down the Via, while a party of French pilgrims were kneeling to adore a plaque marking one of the Stations. Insufficiently backed up, these rival devotees became a target for rage. Crablike, the Imam advanced, grimacing and flailing his arms, although not actually hitting anyone. "Kack Christians!" he snarled, or something excremental. Lost in devotion, the pilgrims remained oblivious.

Presently the Via dog-legged as though a seismic fault line had shifted it sideways, then became roofed over and we were in an indoor souk. When we reached the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, congestion and jostling of creeds was even more extreme. Orthodox Greeks guarded the claustrophobic pink marble "tomb" of Christ while Copts jealously possessed a stone at the rear, onto which they had grafted a lean-to shrine. An enclosed tooth of shaved-down rock was the whole of Golgotha Hill; hardly any distance away was the site of the Resurrection. The noise in the church, the noise.

"This place is bedlam," said Mrs. Svensen.

"Most of the human race is demented," her husband declared. "Faiths and ideologies are a long history of madness. Here it all comes together."

Mrs. Dimet chirped enthusiastically, "The Law of Return lets everyone Jewish come home. Ethiopians, Yemenis, me, if I choose. First there's the Diaspora, the scattering, and now I see a miracle there's the incoming. It's a blessing."

"We are talking about different things," said Svensen.

Alon pursed his lips. "According to Muhammad, the entire Earth stretched forth from Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem it will be rolled up eventually like a scroll. Because Jerusalem is the axis of the world."

The Old City, jam-packed with superimposed architecture, rival faiths, and races, seemed to be teetering on the brink of critical mass. If only the core of Jerusalem could be unfolded into a dozen different dimensions at right angles to each other. Otherwise, it seemed to me the whole inflated universe might indeed fall inward to some ultimate jostling superheated core.

right here-prior to an apocalyptic explosion from which a new cosmos might erupt, bright nuclear fireball, scattering illumination as God supposedly once had done. I understood his visitor such as that Canadian screwball could succumb to delusions and imagine himself uniquely transfigured. Such a place this was, such a place.

Just then I noticed a Hispanic-looking young woman darting glances this way and Glossy black hair wild and wavy under a minimal headscarf, olive skin, bold yet haunted. She reminded me of Trish, in the way that a negative suggests a print, her dark antithesis ardent, obsessive. This woman wore a long-sleeved cream calico dress and tan leather sandals. As I was admiring her, she buttonholed a young Greek Orthodox priest.

After listening for a few seconds he frowned impatiently and strode away, a lost sight of her, too.

Only to spot her once more while the six of us had stopped for lunch outside a cafe near the Citadel.

Sun furnace from a cloudless sky, reflecting off stone the color of bees' wax. Were we in the Christian or the Armenian quarter just here? Natives of Jerusalem would know to the centimeter. At the next table a couple of paunchy, hairy Greeks in black pillbox hats sipped cinnamon coffee. Pale omelettes arrived for us tourists, humus with pita bread for Alon.

He grinned at us. "In Israel we do not eat humus, we *wipe* it." As he proceeded to demonstrate.

A scrawny tabby kitten hunched nearby, staring at us. In pity, Mrs. Dimet pulled scraps of smoked salmon from her omelette and threw them to the starveling which growled and bolted down the bits of fish.

Another guide was leading a party through the square. Suddenly, the same Hispanic woman detached herself from the group and headed toward us, eyeing Alon's badge which proclaimed his proficiency in English, German, and Yiddish.

"Excuse me, are you a guide?" American accent, but second language from the sound of her name.

"Yes," he conceded, "but I am already hired."

"Please tell me just one thing-can you say where the Black Wall is?"

If this was the first I ever heard of the Black Wall, likewise for Alon!

"I do not know any Black Wall."

"You must!"

Alon shook his head. He looked away. Distractedly, the woman hurried to catch up with her party.

"What was she?" asked Mrs. Dimet.

"Some charismatic, perhaps."

"What would the Black Wall be?" I asked.

"I have no idea. Maybe she is confusing with the Kaaba in Mecca." He pondered. "In Arabic black also means wise. A wise Wall? Maybe she means the Western, ah, the Wailing Wall. We guides need to be careful of such people. This city fosters frenzy in its visitors."

At that moment an unmistakable King David ambled by, colorfully robed and crowned

carrying a little harp.

"Is he a madman, too?" whispered Mrs. Dimet.

"No, he is an Australian. He poses for photos. He has been here for years."

After a tour of the Citadel, Alon drove us to a high promenade from which we could at least gaze from a distance at the golden Dome of the Rock and the Mount of Olives cluttered with gravestones. The sun baked the earth and white buildings as we drank from our water bottles. Next came a drive to the Yad Vashem Holocaust shrine where Mrs. Dimet wept over the simulated stars of the universe twinkled in subterranean darkness, each the soul of a victim, and a recorded voice endlessly intoned the names of dead children.

The Hispanic woman's wall might be no more than a few painted stones in the Old City, currently obscured by a poster concerning a different genocide, the Armenian one. So Mrs. Dimet here was exalted by words and names when the reality was much smaller, the River Jordan instance being more like a big ditch, according to Alon.

As I sat nursing a beer on the terrace of the YMCA hotel that evening, the same woman appeared—so she was staying here, too. Spying me, she came over.

"Excuse me, you were with the guide who would not answer me because I had not introduced him. After I went, what did he tell you?"

"Why don't you sit down?"

She did so.

How beautiful she was. I chose my words carefully.

"He said he didn't know any Black Wall. That black means wise in Arabic. Maybe the Black Wall is a wall of wisdom."

"Yes! It is there in the Old City. I know."

I introduced myself.

"I'm a poet," I said. "I came to Jerusalem to write a poem. There's so much light here and so much darkness, too."

Her name was Isabella Santos. To confide in me, a sympathetic stranger, was a relief, and besides, she was becoming desperate.

She was from Southern California and worked as a checkout operator in a supermarket. Hardly as wild and impetuous as I had imagined. She had always been thrifty. When her church planned a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, at first she had no intention of spending her savings on this.

"Then I had dreams . . ."

Dreams of a city of gleaming stone, ramparts, gateways, towers, domes, churches, mosques and crowded markets, a city through which she would fly like a bird along alleyways crowded with robed monks and ringletted black-clad Jews and brightly-dressed Bedouin women, and always she would come at last, alone by now, to a seamless wall of glossy black mirror or jet in which she would see herself outlined thinly in silvery light as if her faintly reflected body was a doorway. She would press against her reflection, face-to-face and palm-to-palm, till the door would yield, and, although the wall held on to her, she would glimpse what lay behind the looming shadowy vastness beyond.

"I did not tell anyone because they might not have brought me. I thought I would find the Wall easily because it called me. But now I fear it only appears from time to time-and in different places, now here, now there. And we go to Bethlehem tomorrow, then to the Dead Sea, and afterward we are flying back."

"What does lie beyond the Wall, Miss Santos?"

"Strange beings. Glittering beings. They wait. It is as if that gloom holds riddles on checkerboards, transparent, one above another like floors of a building all of dark glass."

I itched to make notes. *The Dream of Isabella Santos*, a narrative poem by Philip Wilton.

"I cannot tell the size of the beings."

"Why are they in darkness?"

"Are they in hell, do you mean? They seem wonderful, but strange. I name one the Sphinx-Angel and another the Centaur-Angel. They are different from anything I know. I sense there is power in them, and knowledge waiting for me."

I sipped some beer. "Why do you think you in particular saw these visions?"

I thought she might not tell me, but then words spilled from her.

"My grandmother, she was a *bruja*. Do you understand?"

Witch, sorceress, wisewoman. Maybe the grandmother chewed peyote in some Mexican village.

"When she died, my parents came to California. They did not want to remember her things. My mother is normal and Catholic."

Some sort of gift, or curse, had skipped a generation. Definitely not your average Baptist delusion. How I conjured with it.

"After I saw pictures of Jerusalem in the brochures our priest handed out, I dreamed. I do not invite the dreams! If I dream tonight-when I was younger, I walked in my sleep. Maybe I will walk to the Black Wall. I am so close here. If you see me, will you follow?"

It was only fifteen minutes on foot to the Old City, down and along and steeply upward. I could hardly imagine a sleepwalker undertaking that journey. Did she imagine that I would be out here half the night in case she drifted out of the front door of the YMCA in a trance?

I proposed, "Why don't you and I go up to the Old City right now and look around? No one will miss you, and so long as we steer clear of the Arab Quarter."

"Oh, *will you?*"

It was as if I had released her from confinement. Despite her obsession she must have been scared to set out on her own while wide awake. The Old City practically closed up at sundown, and Alon had mentioned that women on their own could be harassed by both Arabs and Jews. I, too, felt a bit wary.

We should both have fetched warmer clothing, but someone from her group might distract her and the moment might pass. If we walked briskly . . .

We were in the Jewish Quarter in a tree-graced square which I recognized from the morning that same morning. A stone archway to one side was all that remained of a grand synagogue destroyed during fighting in 1948. What was the name? Ah yes, *Hurva*, Hebrew word for ruin. In the eighteenth century a rabbi and immigrants from Poland had built the original edifice.

creditors enraged at unpaid debts burned it down-to be splendidly rebuilt the following century. A place of ruins twice over. Stars were bright, but there was no moon. I was shivering, as was Miss Santos, but she did not care about the chilliness.

"I feel it! It's near!" She stared around, then pointed toward the ruin. A broad flight of stairs led up to a walled terrace fronting the arch.

We hurried that way and mounted. I recalled information boards inside, but those were barely visible now. Earlier that day, rough stones all around. Tonight, faintly starlit at the top of the emptiness: a wall so black and sheer and smooth.

"Yes, yes. . . !"

As we advanced, a silvery silhouette appeared-of a person. Isabella Santos had no doubts as to who it represented. She ran to it.

How could a woman fuse with a wall and become semitrans-parent! That is what happened. Vaguely I could see through her into a great gulf where figures were arrayed into the distance and above and beneath, just as she had told me-otherwise I would scarcely have known what I was viewing. Since the view was still unclear, I pressed forward-and the door, I mean *she*, Isabella, Miss Santos, opened.

Crying out, and possessed of full solidity again, she drifted away from her silhouette, flailing, afloat in that domain, receding slowly like an astronaut in space whose tether had parted. I staggered back momentarily in case I might follow her.

The figures I could see on those glassy planes were bizarre chimerae, minglings of man, angel and beast-biding their time, motionless like pieces in a game, passive yet potent. The scene was awesome! No gravity existed in that space beyond, but Miss Santos could certainly breathe, for again she shrieked, flapping and kicking in an effort to swim or fly backward while drifting farther.

"Isabella!" I shouted, and her head jerked. The sound of my voice may well have awakened the pieces. A sudden flurry of activity: some of the shining beings traded spaces, up, down, across. All seemed to have come to life.

A smiling, Buddha-like, toad-being opened its mouth. Out flicked a tongue, unrolled like a scroll of seemingly endless

length, toward her, toward her. Surely by now the creature must have unrolled the whole of its insides! The end of the tongue wrapped around her waist and reeled her in as she screamed.

A beautiful winged female with glorious nude breasts, but whose body below the waist was more whirlwind than flesh, reached out. Her arm stretched incredibly, unreeling like a cable, until she snared Isabella by the elbow. A radiant, kingly Eagle-Man kicked out his leg like a Thai boxer-this, too, elongated enormously till its clawed foot caught hold of Isabella at the knee.

The three beings tore Isabella apart.

Blood sprayed and trailed in clouds as each creature pulled part of her toward its personal space.

In horror and terror I sprang back. I was staring at an empty silhouette like the chalk outline of a murder victim on a floor or pavement after the body has been removed. Already

silhouette was shrinking until it sealed itself, and there was only the Black Wall, and more later the Wall became merely the rough shell-wall of the ruined synagogue.

Racked by shock and by shivers, I stumbled through the almost deserted maze of streets had not pushed . . . but Isabella had *wanted* to enter the domain of the beings-no, that was an excuse!

I had seen something so abominable and so amazing. Did Sour-deval or the Sufi or the Rabbi see any such activity on the part of the beings? I might well be the only living witness on Earth. And as to witness, had anyone seen me leave the garden of the YMCA Hotel together with Isabella?

How could I sleep that night? Back in the sanctuary of my room I must have drifted off at last, slumped in a chair fully dressed, for the next thing I knew bright sunlight was behind the curtain and it was 8:30 in the morning.

For a moment I was totally disoriented, then nightmare washed over me like a choking wave-only it was not nightmare but reality, a different and unsuspected reality. A while later I came from

my window I saw a couple of peak-capped men in navy blue uniforms-policemen-striding toward the hotel entrance. Isabella's group leader must already have reported her disappearance. She had no excuse to be absent; the group needed to leave for Bethlehem.

I could not speak to the police-I could tell them nothing. They would arrest me on suspicion of having murdered Isabella and hidden her body. At best I would be sent off to the psychiatric hospital specializing in religious crazies. Reason had fled! What I knew now was astounding and confounding. At the same time I had almost anticipated what had occurred-I had not mused that Jerusalem, this axis of the world, ought to contain hidden dimensions?

Not such as I saw, inhabited by creatures who tore a person apart! As part of some greater mystery beyond my comprehension.

I confess to a cowardly sense of relief when no one accosted me and accused me of being involved with Isabella the night before, and when I saw her party complete with luggage boarding a plane. I supposed they had no choice but to continue without her. What would the police do? Contact morgues and hospitals, liaise with the American embassy, file a missing person report?

Surely poor Isabella from Southern California couldn't have been the only one who sensed the Black Wall from afar. There must have been others. Devotees, explorers of the mystery must exist, and where else but in Jerusalem, unless they had been dragged to their deaths? I dared not go back to Ruin Square yet, even by daylight.

What I did instead was phone the *Jerusalem Post* to place a boxed advertisement in the Classified section: Black Wall, Centaur, Buddha-Toad-How Much Do You Know? Please Contact, Urgently Contact, hotel phone number, etc.

And I added a bit of verse that welled up in me:

*Bright, so bright,
Yet a wall of darkness,
A curtain of night,*

Is in Old Jerusalem.

I killed time by visiting the Israel Museum and the Rockefeller Museum and such.

Next morning my ad looked weirdly eye-catching amongst mundane stuff about cars, home-helps and apartments. The paper contained a missing person story, but the person in question was an Israeli soldier thought to have been kidnapped. People going absent without leave from religious groups might not be uncommon even if the police did release the news.

I did return to the Old City, to wander its alleys in the heat and arrive eventually at Hurva Square, to all appearances a safe enough place to be. Plenty of people were about. Snacks and cafes were open. In the ruin of the synagogue a party of French teenagers were touring, with illustrated information boards, their teacher a gaunt philosophical man in a thin black suit. The far wall looked utterly normal. I ate lunch at a kosher restaurant with a great view from the terrace of the Dome of the Rock, out of bounds, as out of bounds right now as the Black Wall.

When I got back to the hotel, three messages awaited me, consisting of numbers to call. I retired to the privacy of my room to dial out.

A man's voice invited me to join a Multifaith Religious Poetry Circle. A woman declined, saying that she worked for the intelligence service as a code analyst and wanted to know what cypher I was using-I presumed she was cuckoo. However, the third person I called, a man with a Central European accent, said to me, "The Black Wall can appear in different places."

"Where I saw it was in the ruins of Hurva Synagogue."

An intake of breath. "You saw it yourself? Was that by chance?"

"No, it was not by chance."

"We must meet. Where are you?"

The middle-aged man who approached me on the terrace of the YMCA Hotel, black wall visible over his shoulder, was burly, bald, and sun-bronzed. He wore jeans, a blue open-necked shirt, and a lightweight dark blue jacket. His name was Adam Jakubowski, a Pole, an archaeologist. I explained why I was in Israel.

"I have seen the Wall *once* in many years," he said quietly. "You sought it and you actually found it? How did you know?"

I must confide in this man, or else I would get nowhere.

"Will you be very discreet?"

"What is discreet?"

"Private."

"Oh, I will be very private. Mr. Wilson!"

He digested what I related, and then he told me about the Knights Templar and the Black Wall of Sourdeval. The collector to whom Sourde-val's letter was sold was Adam Jakubowski's great-uncle.

"Hebrew, he understood. He paid scholars to translate documents from Latin and Arabic. The Black Wall became a fascination to him, so he hired an agent in Jerusalem who found a few modern witnesses who were very frightened by their experience. My great-uncle vi-

here several times. On the last occasion he did see the wall and what was beyond. By the he said, an affinity had grown."

An affinity. Such as had led Isabella Santos here.

Had Jakubowski and his great-uncle also given rise to silhouette-doorways in the pe substance of the Wall?

Indeed. Jakubowski proceeded to speak about shadows. And *shadow-traders*. To strength and stability to a building in the past, animals or even people would be sacrificed alternative was to lure a person to the site and to measure the shadow they cast-the pe would die within a year. A shadow could even be trapped elsewhere and measured.

"Shadow-traders were people who would sell to architects the outlines of other pe shadows."

In Jakubowski's opinion an analogy existed. What was cast upon the Wall, not by sun but by some emanation from within the Wall itself, was akin to a shadow-into which spectator could fit himself. At that point, the spectator was poised precariously between reality and that other reality.

"The Black Wall may have been able to appear ever since Solomon built the ori temple."

"What *game* are the beings playing?"

"A game of power, I think. Power must be a big part of it."

"And what *are* they?"

Jakubowski spread his hands.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

About a hundred people in Israel and in other countries knew of the Black Wall. A brotherhood existed, dedicated to discovering its secrets, a sort of modern Knights Templar. They actually called themselves the KBW, Knights of the Black Wall. The title had been hi great-uncle's idea. Was this pretentious, or profoundly thrilling and appropriate?

"Are there any sisters in this brotherhood?"

"Oh, a few. Your Miss Santos would have belonged, had she not ..." He grimaced. "Thanks to her and your report we have vital new data. You belong with us, Mr. Wilson. brings access to greater understanding-certain responsibilities, too."

"Responsibilities ?"

"You yourself mentioned secrecy. Silence."

To find my theme in Jerusalem, just as I'd hoped, and to be censored? Never to write or publish a great breakthrough poem on the subject? Obviously this was a trivial, selfish thought in the circumstances, compared with the enormous implications-but still I felt a hackle rise.

"I don't recall applying to join your KGB."

"KBW. Your advertisement was an application, wasn't it? Or else, why am I here? I had heard no sound any dark note at this early stage in our relationship." He broke off and smiled ruefully. "I'm no diplomat, am I? Let me show you something."

After a glance around, he burrowed in his satchel. Producing a flip-folder of photographs, he displayed one. I gasped. *For the photo showed darkness, faint planes, distant glittering denizens*. A camera had captured part of the domain behind the Black Wall!

"Who took this?"

"Myself. Quite recently." He tapped the satchel. "For a long time I carried a came

expectation. Hard proof, Mr. Wilson, hard proof!"

The photo was certainly proof to me, although an uninformed viewer would have difficulty interpreting what he saw.

"I have spoken of affinity," Jakubowski went on. "An image is an affinity, and here we it in our hand."

"Do you mean this photo can serve as," I imagined a security swipe card, "a so access?"

He showed me another photo, a very grainy but closer? up image of the Sphinx-being.

"This is an enlargement enhanced by computer. I'm not speaking lightly when I say that greater understanding is possible, Maybe even," and he lowered his voice, "a kind of expedition. Though, in view of the fate of Miss Santos-

Quite.

KGB, KBW . . . I recalled the crazy woman on the phone.

"What does the Israeli security service know about the Black Wall?"

"We have two members high in Shabak and one in Mossad, but the organiza themselves do not know."

I told him about the woman.

"She is certainly not one of us, but I would appreciate the phone number."

So that she should be checked out, just in case she knew anything?

"So you do have influence with this Shab, what is it?"

"Shabak. You might know of it as Shin Beth."

I shook my head.

Turned out that Shabak was internal security, and Mossad, as most people know, external intelligence. I began to sense that discretion about the Black Wall might enforceable, not simply a request but a requirement.

Jakubowski must have read my expression.

"I don't want to use heavy words, but this business is moment-uous, maybe of ter importance to the world, perhaps to all human life, do you see?"

I nodded. What I wanted to see was more of the photographs, but here was too public.

"How long can you stay in Israel, Mr. Wilson?"

"I don't have any commitments till early January but my entry permit is just 1 month."

"If you give me the bit of paper, that can be altered easily. I would like you to stay he long as possible. Not, I hasten to add, at your own expense-in addition to my great-un endowment, funds come from some of our members who can well afford it. Do you lik remain in a hotel or would you prefer a small apartment? We will arrange a social life for And tours, visits. You will not just be twiddling your thumbs."

"Sounds fine to me."

An apartment? I wanted a break from domestic chores, shopping and cleaning et cetera. hotel room had a desk, a view of the frontage, decent enough lighting. It would do. Probably more expensive than an apartment, come to think of it.

So began my life in Israel. I suppose it was not *fully* life in Israel since I never need

shop for groceries, say, in the kaleidoscopic cornucopia of the Mahane Yehuda Market. A bomb went off there, killing an old woman and injuring about twenty people.

Our more senior Shabak member was tubby, bearded Avner Dotan. Speciality, electronics and intelligence. He tapped into the police investigation of the disappearance of Isabella Santos and the police were informally discouraged from proceeding any further. I suppose this served to assure the KBW that Isabella was not a figment of my poet's imagination. We had a brief memorial service for her in the Hurva ruins, conducted by a New Yorker, Rabbi Ben-Zion Feinstein. My new acquaintances comprised a broad spectrum of people; however, I numbered no one who was ordained in any Christian denomination. Rabbi Ben was so reformed that he could embrace in his prayers a Roman Catholic granddaughter of a Mexican witch. I still felt so guilty about Isabella's hideous death. We were honoring a victim of the Wall- might there be more victims?

Cut to a meeting at the home of Avner Dotan afterward. We were considering several angles of approach-camera angles, you might almost say. Blowups of the entities lay on the floor.

"Maybe," said Dotan, "the three beings did not wish to destroy Isabella Santos, but they wanted to possess her to gain a point in the game, whatever it is."

"Comes to the same bloody thing!" exclaimed Jock Eraser.

I could not make Fraser out. The beefy, sweaty Scotsman claimed to be the Laird of a small Inner Hebridian island. He had been educated in Glasgow at a school supposed to have a considerable pedigree, so he said, which had been engulfed early in the twentieth century by the spread of the Gorbals slum district-implausible, or true? A life of some adventure as an engineer for oil companies had taken him to Nigeria, Indonesia, and other hot parts of the world. He was certainly a romancer in the literal sense: while sweating in Indonesia, he had produced a couple of love novels published under a female pseudonym-and he had also published privately a history of the Freemasons, amongst whom supposedly he held high office. The Masons, of course, were heirs to the tradition of the Knights Templar. Three years earlier, during a stopover to visit the site of Solomon's Temple, and while a wee bit tipsy, as Fraser freely admitted-the doors, or hinges, of perception well oiled-he had witnessed the Breach in the Wall. To investigate further, he managed to land a job at an oil refinery in Haifa. A Masada handshake at a British Embassy reception advanced Fraser's quest, the shaker being the only Scot in our group, Hamish Mackintosh-don't the Scots get everywhere.

Tall, muscular, going on fifty, hair beginning to silver, Mackintosh was head of security at our embassy in Tel Aviv. An ex-military officer and mountaineer, his work brought him into liaison with Avner Dotan. His own epiphany as regards the Wall . . . ah, never mind that. Never mind about the life stories of my other fellow investigators: Israeli, Armenian, American, except to mention Tomaso Pascoli who lived in Rome. A shipping magnate, Pascoli was a Knight of the Vatican, and I gathered that he was a conduit from our group to a highly placed Cardinal who might be a future Pope.

Let us assume that the entities had been jockeying for position for a thousand or for several thousand years-though how did they measure time? Did they just sit inertly like some toad or spider awaiting a movement or vibration or some sudden shift by one of their fellow denizens?

"It's possible," ventured Mackintosh, "that some of the beings are relatively benevolent at least not baneful." He gestured at the big grainy enlargements arrayed on the floor. "They could only communicate with one of them-get on its wavelength. Maybe by using the affinity of a photograph? Like sending a signal tuned to one receiver only."

"Suppose," said Avner, "we put up one of the images as a poster somewhere in the City where we know the Black Wall has already appeared? I mean a very temporary poster."

"We might release who knows what," warned Rabbi Feinstein.

Mackintosh nodded. "First we should use the general view and see if we can summon the Black Wall itself. This in itself would be a great breakthrough."

Where more suitable than in the shell of that same synagogue? Hurva Square might be in the heart of the Jewish Quarter, but it wouldn't be busy at three in the morning and access to the ruin was easily controllable. Avner let it be known to the police and the Defense Force that Shabak would be carrying out an "operation," so patrols would not interfere. He also arranged that we ought to go armed in case of any eruption from the Black Wall. Drawing weapons from Shabak's armory would not be a sensible idea, but back in the days when people who killed terrorists in action were allowed to keep their Kalashnikovs, Avner's father had acquired one while his colleague Avraham's younger brother was home on leave along with his Galil assault rifle.

A few nights later, six of us gathered in the ruin by starlight. Myself, because of my obvious affinity with this site. Ben, bearing the poster-if anything bad occurred, maybe a Rabbi could cope. Jock had volunteered to be movie cameraman, at which he apparently had some experience. Adam was ready with his still camera. Avner and Avraham brought the automatic rifles hidden in long sports bags. Three other Israelis kept watch outside. If any passersby became curious, we were a TV crew.

Murmuring to himself, Ben advanced and sticky-tacked to the mundane stones the black wall of the vista beyond the Black Wall. Scarcely had he stepped back than an ebon gloss began to spread out around the poster as if glossy black ink was flowing. In less than half a minute the wall of the synagogue might have consisted of smooth jet or basalt.

Cautiously Ben moved closer again and pulled the poster away.

Where it had been was a rectangular opening, upon a dark yawning gulf faintly lit by the silhouetted planes on which the entities perched or stood or sat. There they were: immovably and potentially aglow.

Jock inched forward, filming. At his side, Adam captured the astonishing sight with the avidity of a paparazzo who has sneaked up upon a secret gathering of celebrities-although where was his motorbike for a quick escape? Our two defenders pointed their guns. In a hundred and fifty years ago, sweating despite the nocturnal chill, might Sourdeval have unsheathed his broadsword?

In the domain beyond, came a stirring as of attention aroused.

"That's enough for now!" cried Ben. Like some firefighter with a protective shield, he pulled the poster reversed now. Hands spread wide, he covered the opening. How tensely he stood as if something might stab through the flimsy barrier-but the ebon gloss swiftly shrank like a drain draining away into a sump. When he lifted the poster aside, all was ordinary stonework.

Adam's flat, this time. A videotape ran on his TV. Many more enlarged photos lay on the floor.

Avner said, "I think what we see are not the entities themselves but *representation* of them-each a sort of icon standing in for them. When something occurs, each animates its icon. The entities take over and move and function."

"If that's so," said Ben, "and the real entities are someplace else, a blowup photo of an icon might give access, the way a computer icon launches a program."

Definitely we were moving closer to mounting an expedition.

Which of the icons suggested, if not benevolence, at least tolerance and wisdom? Which of us would become the astronaut who would venture into such a region?

I had watched Isabella being ripped apart in that other zone. Might such dismemberment perhaps be symbolic? Could the bits be brought back together again? I thought of Orpheus who ventured into an underworld to rescue his wife, but alas he glanced back. God-possessed women later tore Orpheus to pieces and the Muses gathered up his parts, but sadly could not rejoin them. What if they had succeeded? *Orpheus in Jerusalem*, a poem by Philip Wilson Love. Damn this artistic egotism that reared its head. Damn, too, the idea of affinity-of myself linked to Isabella who had already been sucked into that other region, *propelled* by me.

Might my new acquaintances regard me as expendable, a Johnny-come-lately who had indeed brought them an invaluable key, though purely by accident? Or were they honoring me with a great trust and responsibility?

Yes, I would volunteer. Yes, I would accept. How could an

Orpheus refuse? Would Billy Blake have passed up a chance to visit the terrain of his visions? "Mighty was the draught of Void-ness to draw Existence in!" he had written. I had no family ties. A full-length photo of me would be taken and enlarged so that by affinity I could be summoned back subsequently through my image to Jerusalem and normality-perhaps!-and to the extent that Jerusalem was any normal place. A Palestinian armed with a knife had gone before me in the Christian Quarter, slashing some nuns. I would carry a camera and a pistol fitted with a silencer-I would receive a quick course in the use of a gun-and high-calorie food and bottled water in my knapsack and a tiny tape recorder and a notebook in case the energy of our true entity might harm anything electronic. I would be well equipped, although we were improvising wildly.

We settled upon the being whom Isabella had named the Centaur-Angel. A burly-chestnut figure with a craggy, serious face. His buttocks swelled out into a secondary, shorter, hairy set of rear legs. From his shoulders sprouted diaphanous fairy wings-a sign of sensitivity at odds with the rest of his frame? He seemed like a knight in chess-affinity, therefore, with a Knight of the Black Wall?

Tomaso Pascoli flew in from Rome, a short, trim, dapper man with thinning dark hair, an observer on behalf of the Vatican, doubtless. Together with him and the three As, Avner, and Avraham, and Jock and Ben and two lookouts, I went to the Hurva ruins again.

night. A gibbous moon hung in the sky.

"You are a brave man," Signor Pascoli said to me, mopping his brow with an elegant handkerchief, cool though the night was. "And you even have an imagination-a Dante of imagination. Imaginative people do not always run such risks."

"Not quite in Dante's league."

"Ah, modesty, too."

And guilt. And ambition.

Jock set down the video camera and produced a hip flask.

"Ten-year-old single malt-liquor of the Gods."

"I don't think I ought to imbibe just now." I would have dearly loved to.

"I think I will." Jock uncapped and took a swig, then he thrust the flask at me. "Maybe a wee gift for the Gods wouldn't come amiss."

Who could say? I added the flask to my knapsack.

Jock gripped me by the elbow in an awkward show of wordless male affection.

Two of the As pointed Kalashnikov and Galil while the third stuck a poster of Centaur-Angel to the stone wall. In two hours' time, earthly time at least, he would use the reversed poster of me to call me home, perhaps. On either side shiny darkness began to spread. *Was I utterly insane?* As Adam pulled the poster from the Wall like a bandage, light shined forth-oh, that's just our floodlight for the documentary!

Mighty was the draught that pulled me, and I was squinting at a sun-drenched stony desert landscape all about me, sand and pebbles underfoot. I had passed through involuntarily. Before me was no sign of a doorway leading back. Could the others still see me? I raised my hand in salute, then I shaded my eyes-we had not thought to include sunglasses. The region of the sky was gloomy, and I had departed by night, yet here was the full blaze of day. Not too far away a mesa thrust upward, its broken precipitous sides wearing long skirts of scree. On its top was an edifice white as snow, twin tall towers rising from a dome, the base hidden from sight. But for the presence of that building, I might have been transported to Masada, a rock-fortress in the Judean desert where the Romans besieged the Zealots. All else in the wilderness was tawny, dirty yellow, brown, or gray in the shadows cast by the blinding sun.

Whence the white marble of the building upon the mesa? Materials must have been transported from far away and carried laboriously upward. Such an undertaking, an ostentation. I recalled that King Herod had built a luxurious palace on an upper side of Masada with a view over stricken, contorted desolation, to prove that he could do so, showing that Herod's three-tiered palace had been tucked in, cantilevered almost.

My sweat was drying as soon as it was produced. If only I had brought a sun hat. My protection never entered our calculations. Delving in my knapsack for one of the bottles of water, I swigged. In the shimmering distance I spotted a cluster of white shapes. Was it an encampment?

Sharp eyes must have spied me, too. Scarcely had I begun to foot-slog through the desert than a movement resolved itself into several creatures heading my way.

Those must be horses or camels, white-clad riders on their backs-three or four of them. Yes, four.

As the mounts drew nearer, they proved to be neither horses nor camels but other beasts entirely. Quadrupeds, with long heads and silky hair and a lolling gait and scaly

like those of giant rats. These were no members of the animal kingdom that I knew.

The four riders' robes were all-enveloping-only hands and eyes showed. They dismounted. Their hands were brown. Creamy eyes, light brown pupils. And the pupils on the mounts themselves were rectangular, goatish. Orange rheum leaked from the beasts' nostrils. Translucent membranes blinked dust away.

The mounted leader addressed me and I couldn't understand a word. Hopefully, I said "Shalom," and "Salaam," and I pointed up the mesa at the gleaming building, my guess supposed.

"I am an Englishman," I added, and felt absurd. "I came here because of the Centaur-Angel."

Incomprehensible discussion followed, then two of the people gripped me loosely while their companion relieved me of my knapsack and emptied it upon the ground. Kneeling, he sorted. The pistol, he turned this way and that, ending by peering down the barrel with an apparent understanding; thankfully the safety was on. He opened a bottle and raised a flask to sniff, exposing beardless brown chin, slim mouth, thin nose. After some fumbling, he unscrewed Jock's hip flask. This time his nostrils flared. Screwing tight, he spoke rapidly. Next he picked my pockets, then off came my wristwatch for the leader to inspect. Like a bangle, it went on to that man's wrist. I was being robbed-next thing, out would come a knife.

But no. My gear went into a saddlebag, and as soon as my searcher remounted I was invited, prodded, hoisted on to the beast behind him. I clung to a backward-jutting bony saddle, myself bareback, thighs and knees splayed, feet dangling. How I hoped these people had some code of hospitality.

At the encampment I saw some unveiled thin brown faces, undoubtedly human yet at the same time subtly *other*. A different side shoot of the evolutionary tree? How else to account for the mounts, and for a pack of sinewy feline creatures the size of lurchers that wandered around the camp?

Lurching, myself, after that ride, I was led into the largest tent. Open flaps admitted light and air. Richly woven carpets lay upon dirt. Dominating the main room of the tent was a formidable idol in white marble of the Centaur-Angel. Strapped upon its rump was a leather saddle, almost as if the statue was a plaything for the young tribal prince who sat cross-legged beside it on a tasseled cushion-presumably the slight person was a princeling since a collar of gold or brass held his head veil in place. The principal difference between statue and prince was that the head of the statue was like that of the mount I had ridden on. Another cushion occupied by a veiled figure dressed in black and seemingly elderly-the hands and the wrinkles around the eyes were deeply wrinkled.

Wooden cabinets, carved chests, low tables. Drapes divided off areas I couldn't peer into. I heard the whispers and giggles of women.

My escort reported, then my possessions were presented to Blackrobe, who passed them on to the young prince, including my gun. This ended up between the forefeet of the statue, along with Jock's flask of single malt and my watch and camera and flashlight. Offerings to the idol?

The moment the young prince addressed me, I knew from the voice that this was no lass. So: a priestess of the Centaur cult, perhaps? I smiled, I shrugged, I gestured. She pointed at me, then she jerked her finger toward the hindquarters of the statue. Speedily I hustled, and maneuvered onto the saddle. Hands pulled my own hands around the torso, laid

my fingers at the front. I was astride the marble effigy, clinging on. Bizarre, bizarre. Was this a way of judging me, or honoring me, or what?

Blackrobe produced a little silver flute from within his or her garment and proceeded to blow a series of notes, quite like the dialing tones of a phone-

Upon my artificial mount I was instantly elsewhere. Sunlight poured through glass windows into a hall floored with amber slabs each prominently incised in silver with a symbol. Letters of an unknown alphabet, signs of an unfamiliar zodiac? My gun and other things had tumbled on to an adjacent slab.

Ponderous movement! Fifteen meters or so away, the Centaur-Angel was in the room when it had come into existence at this very moment. An alert presence, it was bigger than the statue by half again. Huge, horselike head, metallic and angular-was that a mask covering a humanlike countenance? The eyes were black glassy pools. Silver chain mail covered the quadruped body. Black boots on its four feet, black gloves on its two hands. Its wings were spread. I cowered behind the marble torso as it advanced slowly, snorting. I felt I was confronting a mighty alien.

The muzzle moved and the lips-of that flexible mask!- stretched without parting. A rumbling voice emerged.

I cried, "I don't understand you!"

"Understand," it echoed. The lips moved as if it were chewing the word, digesting it. Now the entity was looming over me. Wings wafted, the draft ruffling my hair. An arm stretched down-as limbs had elongated to grip Isabella Santos-and it picked up my camera, inspected it, discarded it. My camera received similar casual scrutiny.

"I understand now," it announced. "How did you come here?"

It spoke English as though it had just accessed some great depository of languages.

I suppose I gaped.

Impatiently, "Is this your tongue?"

"Yes, yes."

"How did you come here?"

I told of Isabella and the Wall, of affinities and photographs- and the Centaur? A hand retrieved my camera for a closer look. It asked questions, which I answered. Finally, I began to know, "What are you? Where is this?"

As soon became obvious, I was of use to the Centaur-Angel, so it condescended to inform me of certain things . . .

Presently I was beginning to understand that the existence of our world gave rise to reflections in what I suppose you might call the multiverse. To echoes, to backup files, do you say?

A cosmos recorded information within its own fabric, perhaps in those rolled-up tiny dimensions which physicists theorize about. A kind of cascade occurred, from reality to lesser, miniature ghost-realities which assumed a contingent existence-versions of the great original, variations on a lesser scale. Those domains were like dreams compared to our own material reality.

Matter is made of bound-up energy, but ours is *more bound*- the ice upon the sea, the crust on the cake, the crust upon the pie. Hence, perhaps, the triumph of science and technology in our world, and even of great religions, firm bundles of beliefs.

Wizardry pervaded those bubble-worlds, the power of will and symbols, and in each realm energy gravitated or pooled into a ruling power, a presiding angel or demon. Most of the beings were ambitious and assertive and engaged in a power play of offense and defense. Their goal-which they could maneuver toward and interact with to a minor degree-was the primary reality of our own world. How the domain-demons yearned to escape their restrictions and achieve immensity.

"You shall become my channel," the Centaur-Angel said to me graciously, as if bestowing a boon. "My link. A vent for my triumphal eruption."

Its eruption into our world! It was not the regular human world that unrolled in Jerusalem but this realm and a hundred others, too-rolled up in themselves, awaiting. I caused a bridge to form between our reality and this other reality. Small wonder that the Angels had torn my predecessor Isabella apart in their eagerness to acquire her.

"Far better myself, than certain others!" declared the Angel. "You are fortunate, Philip-Wilson. The service of your kind will not be severe, scarcely even slavery." It started its feet in a solemn little dance.

I imagined an outburst of light and power from the Black Wall, bearing forth the Centaur-Angel to bestride Jerusalem like one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, steed and rider comprised in one being,, feeding upon the energies of our universe. This madness would not happen. The doorway must be closed, affinity erased.

"Your reward will be great," said the Angel.

Demons must have promised likewise in the past-to Doctor Faustus and whoever else. These partial breakthroughs faltered and failed. Never before had a person mounted a technological intrusion. How might human beings be constrained to serve this Angel? Us, with our nuclear and other weapons?

"Reigning over your world, I shall gain control of the other realms, too."

Would Armageddon be unleashed?

I slid backward, sore-bummed, off the saddle. The gun lay disregarded. Ultimately perhaps the Angel was stupid, or tunnel-visioned. Quickly, I picked up the pistol, thumbed the safety off, and fired, fired, fired.

As I emerged into the ruined Hurva Synagogue, I was still shouting. "It's me, Philip Avner and Avraham aimed, and someone uttered *a* shriek: Pascoli, had I hit him? No, he was still standing, startled. Illumination from the doorway dimmed as I swung around to see a desert vista puckering in on itself and the oily gloss of the Black Wall draining rapidly into a sinkhole, the old stones reappearing. None of my comrades could have seen the Angel within his palace. I think that my first gunshot had ruptured the membrane dividing me from my place of origin. Whether I had injured the Angel in his chain mail at the same time I had the idea, but the entity certainly wasn't pursuing me. In case the two As fancied I might be a terrorist, I threw the gun down. The moon was high, casting its own white light.

"Bloody hell, what were you shooting at?" demanded Jock.

"At the Centaur-Angel."

Adam retrieved the gun and then-"Hush!"-he was listening to the night in case Pascoli's brought army and police swarming. Thank goodness for the gun's silencer. By now the E Wall had vanished utterly.

As soon as we had left the synagogue, we decamped separately through moonlit lanes keeping to the shadows. Half an hour later we were all reunited in Avner's flat, and I talked last, lubricated by orange juice while he and Pascoli both recorded me.

After I finished, Rabbi Ben said, "We should not be trying to open the Wall but to keep it closed."

"And to keep all knowledge of it closed," added Pascoli.

"Bear in mind," said Adam, "we are relying on the testimony of one person, a person's creative imagination."

I had lost my camera and recorder-much use that I had made of either.

"Philip's experience might be subjective. Another person might have a different experience."

"I believe him!" Jock sounded angry. "You aren't seriously suggesting we mount an expedition?"

"Seems to me," said Ben, "we have enough evidence."

"All deriving from Philip."

"What's certain," Avner said, "is that we must never cede control of an inch of Jerusalem. This was a very Israeli perspective upon such a cosmic matter."

As for writing a Blake-like epic about Jerusalem and Angels and Armageddon . . . *other* great poem could I possibly contemplate, even if only for my own satisfaction, never see publication? Any such ambition was now thwarted not only by the awesome truth but by fear that the creative concentration involved might form an affinity. What I produced could prove to be a fatal text.

The political situation was becoming hairy. Trained as martyrs, Palestinian kids were throwing stones at Defense Force soldiers and being shot. An Arab informer was executed by his own people. A rabbi was tortured and murdered and his synagogue burned down. Police stations in the Arab-administered areas were rocketed in reprisal.

Hamish Mackintosh drove me from the hotel to Lod Airport for an early morning flight.

"Time to get you out, old son. Bad security situation. A word to the wise: you will have security in mind, won't you?"

I knew what security he meant. The domain-demons must stay behind the Wall and not be known about.

I felt like a Sourdeval being expelled from the Holy Land- except that the KBW would keep in touch with me fortnightly

*

then monthly by way of encrypted e-mails to which I was expected to reply. Avner

prepared me for this. I even imagined Israeli intelligence agents checking on me periodically without knowing exactly why, except that my activities or lack of them were of importance.

What a great downhill slalom-or shalom-ride, this car journey was, ever downhill in curves from the dizzy heights which I had ascended weeks earlier, as if we were unrolling toward the ends of the Earth, in my case toward one end of it, England. Where I thought I would be far removed.

How wrong I was.