

AND, AS I DREAMED

And, as I dreamed, it seemed a place of peace,
A deep, dry-bedded pass that slept between
Steep slopes that swept up into open sky,
Beneath which brilliant blue on either brink,
Twin cities met the rise and set of sun,
As each one inward turned its mirror eyes
Across the narrow valley's trackless sand,
Upon an alien image of itself,
Whose towers split the scintillating sun
In splintering jousts of long and lancing light;
And yet, at eve, whose battlements rose dark
And starkly bare against the sun's last fire.
Twin citadels, yet not identical;
For, where the keep of one curved smoothly bare,
From deep within the other's sleeping core
The barrel of a cannon drooped at rest;
Thus cast, made fast no man alive knew when,
Took aim, and yet, for shame, could never meet
The level best we gave of blameless gaze,
Nor raise, enraged, its hangdog muzzled threat,
And wage, unleashed, its throaty barks of war
Unless it whimper warning as it rise,
And, risen, raise alarm that havoc cry
To see the monster's fearful menace rear,
Jutting in high trajectory to hurl
Its thunderous bolt from out the lightning blue,
And break by breach of peace our virgin wall.

All this we seemed to know; yet how we knew
No one could tell; for no one ever told
How harmless was this weapon whilst it hung
Inert, inept, and kept its secret still;
For one short word might, like a hammer blow,
Awake us, with a start of living fear,
To nightmare truth that nails our daydream lies;
And fear itself give rise to hanging threat,
Exposure that on insight must impose
A widening of shocked and wondering eye,
When, taken by surprise in naked shame,
By what we hitherto had barely dreamed
Unconsciously in waking, walking sleep,
Of what we heretofore had all our days,
Aware yet unaware, but blindly seen.
Thus, still in sight, the cannon hung unseen;
Until one sudden hour, when rumour ran
As wild as fire along the city's veins,
Spluttering its spitfire lightning, till its spark
Exploded blood-and-thunder in our heads,
And hurled us, panting, to the parapet.

To see above those strange, familiar walls
The frightening barrel's high and mighty rise,
Raising that raking arm like shaking fist,
Stiff in its pride and bearing, primed to breach
With quickening thrusts our brittle privacy
By brutal fracture of our fragile peace;

By rape and rapine pierce us to the quick,
Till all we were be different and dead,
And all we are be differently alive.
But I, for one, not yet prepared to yield,
To lie in wait upon that weapon's will,
Took to my heels, and, fast as fear could run,
Down steps of stone, through halls as dark as Hell,
Through keep and dungeon, sleeping crypt and vault,
Unfaltering, I beat my bat-winged flight;
Through sightless lanes and lightless galleries,
As blind as night is black, in fright I flew
With such sure speed as one who knew his way
Through every twist and turn of tunnelled rock
That mazing mind remembered; till I fell
Upon I know not what forgotten door,
And, breathless, swung its shrieking hinges back,
Flinging its groaning timber to the wall.
Dazed on the threshold, lost in dazzling light,
I heard the fearful echoes die away;
And, in dead silence, trembling on the brink,
I blinked into a blaze of sun-bright sand,
That never-never land we overlooked,
That shadowed valley, known and yet ignored,
Till now, down soft and soundless dunes I slid,
And hid within those twin and towering heights;
Until, at last, beyond its line of fire,
Kneeling, I knew the hour, at last, had come.

Half-bowed. to bear the punishment of power.
Yet head thrown back to scan the threatening sky,
I waited for the thunderstroke of doom.
And when it came (if come it ever did
Or was that thunder only in my head?
That sudden thud but throb of heavy heart?
That wreath of smoke, the merest smudge of cloud
That flowered on that proud and chastening rod?) -
And when it came - it welled up like a tear
That trembled in the barrel's widened eye,
And, swelling, fell as secret and as soft
As sweet and silent rain upon the sand,
In which I knelt and watched it fade away.
And I, surprised by joy, and overcome,
Fell in a faint of death, a dark of dawn,
My body beaded by its heavy dew,
And knew no more but that I breathed again,
In dreamless sleep within a sleeping dream;
Till, laved by love, in a warm wash of life,
I felt a melting languor flood my flesh,
Loosen the cold that cramped my stiffening limbs,
And waken me to wonder and reprieve.

And, looking up, I saw the gun had sunk,
Had shrunk again into its hiding-place,
As motionless as if it never moved,
Hanging as harmless as it ever was;
And, looking back, I knew my countrymen,
Conspirators in practising pretence,
Were even now about their business
As if there never had been such alarm
As broke their sleep and brought me to my knees;
The merchants haggling in the market-place
As if they were as lasting as their gold;
The wives and workmen at their daily toil
As if they were as endless as their tasks;
And wise men's lies and laws of time and place,
Into eternal space dispersed to nought.

Leaders and led, possessed of whereabouts,
But neither whence nor whither to their name!
Sleepwalkers in a dream within a dream,
Oblivious to future as to past,
Like playing children lost in make-believe,
For whom there never was a yesterday,
And whose tomorrow never, never comes!
I looked again, with lingering regret,
Towards the world I knew and loved so well;
But firmly turned my face away at last.
I rose, and, confident, began to climb
Towards the shadow of the farther cliff,
In blind belief that I might find somewhere,
Set in its face, just such another door
As that from which I made my first escape;
And, as I climbed into that doubtless dark,
The cliff and I both vanished from my sight.

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