

WALLED TOWNS

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Walled Towns by Ralph Adams Cram

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By

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WALLED TOWNS

PROLOGUE

THE stone-flagged path on the top of the high walls winds along within the battlemented parapet, broken here and there by round turrets, steeple-crowned barriers of big timbers and, at wider intervals, great towers, round or square or many-sided, where bright banners blow in the unsullied air. From one side you may look down on and into the dim city jostling the ramparts with crowding walls and dizzy roofs, from the other the granite scarp drops sheer to the green fields and vari-coloured gardens and shadowy orchards full forty feet below.

Within, the city opens up in kaleidoscopic vistas as you walk slowly around the walls: here are the steep roofs of tall houses with delicate dormers, fantastic chimney stacks, turret cupolas with swinging weather vanes; here the closed gardens of rich bur-

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gesses, full of arbours, flowers, pleached alleys of roses, *espaliers* of pear and nectarine; here a convent or guild chapel, newly worked of yellow stone and all embroidered with the garniture of niches, balustrades, pinnacles. Here, under one of the city gates, opens a main street, narrow and winding but walled with high-gabled houses, each story jutting beyond the lower, carved from pavement to ridge like an Indian jewel casket, and all bedecked with flaming colour and burnished gold-leaf. Below is the stream and eddy of human life; craftsmen in the red and blue and yellow of their guild liveries, slow-pacing merchants and burghers in furred gowns of cramoisy and Flemish wool and gold-woven Eastern silks; scholars in tippet and gown, youths in slashed doublets and gay hose, grey friars and black and brown, with a tonsured monk or two, and perhaps a purple prelate, attended, and made way for with deep reverence. Threading the narrow road rides a great lady on a gaily caparisoned palfrey, with an officious squire in attendance, or perhaps a knight in silver armour, crested wonderfully, his emblazoned shield hanging at his saddle-bow, — living colour mix-

PROLOGUE

ing and changing between leaning walls of still colour and red gold.

Here a stream or canal cuts the houses in halves, a quay with gay booths and markets of vari-coloured vegetables along one side, walls of pink brick or silvery stone on the other, jutting oriels hanging over the stream, and high, curved bridges, each with its painted shrine, crossing here and there, with gaudy boats shoving along underneath. Here a square opens out, ringed with carved houses,—a huge guild hall on one side, with its dizzy watch-tower where hang the great alarum bells; long rows of Gothic arches, tall mullioned windows, and tiers and ranges of niched statues all gold and gules and azure, painted perhaps by Messer Jan Van Eyck or Messer Hans Memling. In the centre is a spurting fountain with its gilt figures and chiselled parapet, and all around are market booths with bright awnings where you may buy strange things from far lands, chaffering with dark men from Syria and Saracen Spain and Poland and Venice and Muscovy.

And everywhere, tall in the midst of tall towers and spires, vast, silvery, light as air yet solemn and dominating, the great shape

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of the Cathedral, buttressed, pinnacled, beautiful with rose windows and innumerable figures of saints and angels and prophets.

There is no smoke and no noxious gas; the wind that sweeps over the roofs and around the delicate spires is as clean and clear as it is in the mountains; the painted banners flap and strain, and the trees in the gardens rustle beneath. There is no sound except human sound; the stir and murmur of passing feet, the pleasant clamour of voices, the muffled chanting of cloistered nuns in some veiled chapel, the shrill cry of street venders and children, and the multitudinous bells sounding for worship in monastery or church and, at dawn and noon and evening, the answering clangour of each to all for the Angelus.

And from the farther side of the walls a wide country of green and gold and the far, thin blue of level horizon or distant mountains. There are no slums and no suburbs and no mills and no railway yards; the green fields and the yellow grain, the orchards and gardens and thickets of trees sweep up to the very walls, slashed by winding white roads. Alongside the river, limpid