

The City

Roger Chittick

Slowly, inevitably, as out of a moving mist, he could begin to distinguish forms. They blurred and retreated, then advanced again, gradually becoming more distinct. He was experiencing things as a man just reviving from unconsciousness after a hard blow on the head, or as a man who has drunk too much might slowly and with effort attempt to establish once again a mental contact with the world of time and space. Then again, perhaps this was not it at all; perhaps this slow revelation was really taking years; perhaps he was passing through the first years of life and seeing things as a child might see them.

He was standing on one side of a large city square. The street was crowded with automobiles which were traveling extremely fast. In the middle of the square was a large fountain which sprayed great cascades of water high into the air. The water splashed down on the heads and backs of innumerable carved statues of such diverse nature as sea nymphs, winged angels, and ugly goblins. Around the fountain was a small grassy plot bordered by a high, black iron fence. Forming the circumference of this island in the middle of the square was a sidewalk on which many people were walking. Inside the fence children played on the grass. On the sidewalk directly across from him, an old woman was selling flowers to the passers-by. She held the remaining flowers clasped tightly to her bosom. On her head she wore a black shawl which served to make her pale, wrinkled face seem even more sallow by comparison.

His vision was quite clear now. Yet he stood still, studying this incomprehensibly strange world in which he found himself. The buildings surrounding the square were very old. Some of them were very elaborate with tall Greek columns, friezework, and even mosaic set in the front. Others had stained glass windows, and there were large, carved wooden signs painted in bright colors hanging in front, much like the old inns one so commonly associates with Europe. The tops of the buildings were covered with a network of chimney pots and crooked smoke stacks that recalled the pictures of London so often seen in a Dickens novel. The scene seemed very familiar. It seemed to be a compound of everything he had ever known so that he was seeing no one place or thing, but rather all places and all things mixed together. It was the same and yet different from all places he had known before.

"It is very strange," he thought, "everything is so familiar, and yet it is very strange." He could not remember

where he was, or who he was, or how he came to be where he was, or where he was to go, or how. He could remember no details of his past life—his mind was blank—there was only the present.

He turned slowly and began to walk around the square. The sidewalks were crowded with people pushing and jostling each other. The thought entered his mind that this affair of living was just a mad dash with no beginning or end, or possibly all beginning and all end. It was like being in a maze and not knowing the way out, and so one tried every door and any door in sheer desperation. He walked on swiftly, pushing with the rest of the crowd. He felt as though he must hurry—faster and faster—a blind imperative drove him on. He began to run pell-mell through the crowd, knocking people right and left. In his haste he ran into an old man selling pencils and knocked him down in one of the doorways. The pencils and some small change scattered out over the sidewalk. The old man lay still where he had fallen. No one paid any attention to him.

Exhausted, he stopped in one of the streets leading off the square. His mood of blind haste had passed. He began to walk again slowly down the street. Up and down both sides of the street were lines of pushcarts filled with merchandise of all descriptions. The street was busy and many people crowded around the cart.

Suddenly he was seized with a passionate desire to get out of the city. Everything seemed clear to him. He knew somehow that once outside the city all would be well with him—all questions answered, all doubts erased. He walked forward confidently.

He walked down the street for a long time. How long, he couldn't say, for he was progressing, as it were in a sort of suspended state in which time failed to make an impression. He felt he was walking in infinite space and that because the space was infinite, he was making no progress. The street was lined solidly on both sides with old stone houses. There were no yards or trees, only houses of stone built flush with the sidewalk.

It began to get dark. There were lights in some of the houses, but there were no street lights, and the walks and streets were deserted. It was as though the people were afraid of the dark and the night. A feeling of apprehension and fear of the unknown passed over him momentarily, but he soon shook it off and continued on his way.

Finally he came to the end of the street and found himself standing on the edge of a large field grown up with weeds and cluttered with refuse and garbage. On the other side of the field a high stone wall stretched in both directions as far

as he could see. Nobody was in sight. He picked his way cautiously across the field until he stood at the base of the wall. It was very high, and along the top he could see a row of pointed spikes. It would be impossible for him to climb over it. He felt as though he were looking down from a great height. He trembled violently. He was alone, yet he felt as though there were someone just behind watching him. He looked about fearfully. There was no one in sight. He began to run back wildly across the field, stumbling and weaving as he ran. Once he tripped and fell to his knees, but he did not notice and dashed on in furious haste. When he got back across the field, he entered another street and began to walk toward town.

He presented a lonely figure as he walked down the deserted street. After walking for some time he came to an intersection with a street that was, judging by its width and the fact that there were a few cars passing, of more importance than the one on which he had been traveling. Looking down this new street he saw only a few blocks away a cluster of lights and the flashing colors of blinking neon signs. He turned toward the lights. As he passed the first of the brightly lighted buildings, a saloon, he noticed an old man sitting on the curb weeping bitterly. He was about to pass by, when the old man turned to him and croaked in a broken voice, "Come and share my sorrow."

Not wishing to seem rude he walked over to him and asked, "What is your sorrow, my friend?"

The old man looked at him with a simple smile on his face and said, "What is the sorrow of us all? Buy me a drink."

This strange answer rather puzzled him. "But then," he thought, "a drink might not be a bad idea, and perhaps the old man can tell me the way out of the city." So he replied, "All right, get up and we will go in and have a round."

The old man jumped up with amazing alacrity and throwing his arm about him pulled him into the saloon. It was dark and hot inside. There was a smell of age, and mold, and vomit in the air. The floor was covered with sawdust, and apparently no effort was made to dispose of the trash and garbage, for all kinds of filth and refuse were mixed with the shavings on the floor. The only light came from three old lanterns hanging above the bar and three small electric light bulbs attached to the music stands of a violinist, a cellist, and a pianist. The trio was playing Brahms with obvious accomplishment, and seemed oblivious of the activity in the rest of the room.

He and the old man sat together at a table in the corner, from which position he could observe most of the interior of the room. Two men dressed only in loin cloths were wrestling

in the middle of the floor. Their great hairy backs and shoulders were taut with exertion, and the sweat rolled off their perspiring bodies. They were covered with sawdust, garbage, and all kinds of filth which stuck to their moist bodies. On the other side of the room several men had made a clearing in the sawdust and were pitching pennies at the wall. They were arguing continuously. The bartender was a mammoth man, at least seven feet tall with huge shoulders and a black beard. He was dressed in clothes of shiny black silk with a bright red sash tied about his waist. The waitresses were extremely tall with mannish figures. They wore red and white silk shorts and very revealing blouses. One of them stopped at his table, set a bottle of wine in front of him, and walked off. It looked like excellent wine, for the bottle was obviously old and the vintage was of the best.

He poured the liquid out into two glasses which were sitting on the table, and watched the old man as he drank greedily. "Now," he said to the old man, "perhaps you can do me a favor and tell me how to get out of this city. I've been trying to find a way for some time but so far without success."

The old man looked at him with an incredulous stare and said, "There is no way out of the city. There is nothing outside; this is all there is. Drink your wine and try to be sensible!"

The old man's words made a cold chill run down his back, and he found it hard to breathe. He could feel his flesh creep, and his hands tremble. That cold unreasoning terror that he had experienced while standing alone by the great wall came over him again. This fear was no ordinary fear. There was no way in which he could combat it. He was defenseless against the terror it brought. He reached for his wine. As he was about to drink, however, he noticed that there was a thick coat of ugly green mold on the liquid. He looked across the table inquiringly and saw the old man was gone. He jumped up and looked about the room. It was empty except for the two wrestlers sleeping together in the corner with their arms about each other. The lights had been turned out. It was very cold. He dashed out the door onto the sidewalk.

Once outside, he found everything dark and all of the buildings closed. He began to walk aimlessly and dejectedly down the street. After he had walked along in this manner for some time, he heard music in the distance and walked in the general direction of the sound. The rolling, carefree melody became louder and clearer as he walked. Then, as he rounded a corner, he saw in a vacant lot on the other side of the street, a carnival in full swing.

Even at this late hour crowds of people in gay-colored clothes were milling about the grounds. All the concessions were open. Everybody appeared to be having a wonderful

time. He was impressed by the brilliance of the colors in the clothes people were wearing. The colors seemed actually to glow, and the combinations were amazing. Some of the men were wearing bright orange pants and red shirts with variously colored polka-dots on them. Most of the women wore dresses of a peasant nature with embroidered designs on them. He was also impressed by the tremendous number of balloons floating about everywhere. They were shaped like human heads and had leering faces painted on them.

He walked across the street and mingled with the crowd. In spite of their apparent gaiety he detected a note of bitter sorrow running through all of their actions. Sometimes they would stop laughing and break into tears, and nearly always when they thought no one was looking they would begin to weep. He stopped beside the roller-coaster and watched the people climbing aboard the cars for their rides. They were all smiling, and it seemed to him that their smiles must be painted on, for they never changed. Leering at him and at the world, these painted mannikin-like people rode off smiling up the steep slope of the roller-coaster. As he stood watching them it occurred to him that, although a loaded car left the platform every few minutes, he had seen none return. He walked along the fence that separated him from the scaffolding for a few hundred feet trying to see where it was that the cars went. To his horror he found that after the cars went over the top of the first rise and roared down into the big dip, the scaffolding and the tracks ended and the loaded cars shot off into space. He watched with fascinated horror as car after car loaded with grinning people shot off the end of the track and dashed to pieces against a hill in the background.

Sickened by this incredible destruction of human life he turned to go. As he walked away he passed by a large carrousel crowded with children and adults waiting for the ride to begin. He watched entranced as the calliope started to play and the merry-go-round began to move. It went faster and faster until at last all the horses, the people, and the polished brass bars blended together so that he could not distinguish individual objects. It seemed as though it would spin right off its axis. After several minutes it began to slow down, but of all the crowd that had climbed aboard the carrousel. He felt as though soul was left. They had all disintegrated. A new group of people began to crowd aboard the carrousel. He felt as though a great weight were pushing down upon him—suffocating him. He hurried through the crowds of people, trying to find the exit so that he could leave. As he pushed on through the crowd he saw standing at the entrance of the tent just ahead of him a group of men throwing baseballs at little children who were tied in the back of the tent. The men were laughing

and jesting with each other, and they seemed oblivious to the screams of the battered children. The proprietor of the shop was engaged in untying the mangled bodies and putting fresh ones in their place. He looked into the tent and saw a large pile of bruised and bloody lifeless bodies lying in the corner.

He began to run through the crowd. Just as he came within sight of the exit, however, the loudspeaker blared: "Everybody congregate at the entrance to the grounds for the big free show of the evening. There you will see the greatest act of sheer bravery ever witnessed by mortal man. Carlos the Great will leap off the top of the three-hundred foot pole, in his death-defying high diving act into just six feet of water. Hurry, hurry, hurry!" Immediately such a mass of people crowded around him at the entrance that he could not force his way through to get out. Dozens of spotlights were turned on, illuminating the top of the three-hundred foot pole. As the drums rolled and the loudspeakers blared, Carlos began to climb the swaying cylinder. Higher and higher he climbed, but he was not alone. For, following behind him at regular intervals, people from the crowd were climbing as well. When Carlos reached the top a deadly hush settled over the crowd. Then as the drums rolled more loudly, as the audience cheered, as the spotlights played Carlos the Great leaped off into space. Immediately following him, another, and another, and another jumped as the drums rolled.

He finally managed to crowd his way to the exit and out into the street. As soon as he was free he began to run desperately and quietly. Behind him the drums still rolled as, one after another, the crowd at the carnival leapt from the top of the high pole.

He ran for a long time until he was completely exhausted. He realized that he was tired, so he lay down in the entrance of a large cathedral and went to sleep. When he woke up it was light outside, although the sun had not yet risen. He looked about and saw many people going into the cathedral for the morning service. He got up, brushed himself off, and joined the people going into the cathedral, hoping that perhaps here he could find some information on how to get out of the city. The cathedral was very beautiful in the early morning light. The stones were lustrous, giving off such a light that they seemed to be alive. The great towers rose high above him and two massive bronze doors stood open. He was sure that here he would find the way. As he walked through the doors, however, he was amazed at the change. There was a musty smell inside, and he could see that there were cobwebs on the walls and dust on the floor. There was a pale green light shining through the windows, many of which were broken and covered with dust and cobwebs. The air was damp, and

the acrid smell of smoke and incense filled his nostrils. Some people in black robes were sleeping on the floor in the front of the building, and others walked back and forth behind a large open fire. Smoke from the fire filled the inside of the church. He looked about the sides of the room and saw some statues in their various niches. In the heart of each, however, was a long knife, and the blood ran down the front of their robes and dripped onto the floor. He rose and bolted for the door. He wept as he ran.

He ran out the door and down the steps into the warm morning sunlight. As he looked about he was surprised to find that he was back at the same square from whence he had started. It was early morning and only a few people were about. The old woman was still selling flowers on the island in the middle of the square, and the fountain was still sending up its bubbling cascades of water. He walked around the square rapidly.

A large black sedan whirled around the corner ahead of him and began driving around the square very rapidly. He turned and stepped out in front of the speeding car. There were the squeal of brakes and the crunch of broken bones and bruised flesh. The car drove on. A hearse pulled up to the curb beside the lifeless figure. Two men stepped out, picked up the body, and lifted it into the car. The little old woman stood silent and motionless on the sidewalk watching, her flowers clasped close to her breast.

No Cause for Alarm, Mrs. Temple

Barbara Sims

My mother was rather grimly determined that, of her brood of three, one should soar to great heights in the field of art. Since my older brother and sister displayed no taste for culture, she undertook to concentrate all her efforts on me and nudge me around in the various arts until I found a niche that fitted. With this thought in mind, she enrolled me in the Broderick School of the Dance, where I spent several weary months unsuccessfully trying to shuffle in time to the music of "Tea For Two" played on a tinny old piano. Seeing the futility of this venture, Mother, who was not yet to taste despair, decided to try the field of music next and forthwith deposited me at Mrs. Trundle's Piano Studio. Mrs. Trundle and I clashed almost immediately, and it was she who suggested to my anxious