

The Inner Ear

By Kenneth Grahame

To all of us journeymen in this great whirling London mill, it happens sooner or later that the clatter and roar of its ceaseless wheels—a thing at first portentous, terrifying, nay, not to be endured—becomes a part of our nature, with our clothes and our acquaintances; till at last the racket and din of a competitive striving humanity not only cease to impinge on the sense, but induce a certain callosity in the organ, while that more sensitive inner ear of ours, once almost as quick to record as his in the fairy tale, who lay and heard the grass-blades thrust and sprout, from lack of exercise drops back to the rudimentary stage. Hence it comes about, that when we are set down for a brief Sunday, far from the central roar, our first sensation is that of a stillness corporeal, positive, aggressive. The clamorous ocean of sound has ebbed to an infinite distance; in its place this other sea of fullest silence comes crawling up, whelming and flooding us, its crystalline waves lapping us round with a possessing encirclement as distinct as that of the other angry tide now passed away and done with. The very Spirit of Silence is sitting hand in hand with us, and her touch is a real warm thing.

And yet, may not our confidence be premature? Even as we bathe and steep our senses refreshingly in this new element, that
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inner ear of ours begins to revive and to record, one by one, the real facts of sound. The rooks are the first to assert themselves. All this time that we took to be so void of voice they have been volubly discussing every detail of domestic tree-life, as they rock and sway beside their nests in the elm-tops. To take in the varied chatter of rookdom would in itself be a full morning's occupation, from which the most complacent might rise humble and instructed. Unfortunately, their talk rarely tends to edification. The element of personality—the *argumentum ad hominem*—always crops up so fatally soon, that long ere a syllogism has been properly unrolled, the disputants have clinched on inadequate foothold, and flopped thence, dishevelled, into space. Somewhere hard by, their jackdaw cousins are narrating those smoking-room stories they are so fond of, with bursts of sardonic laughter at the close. For theology or the fine arts your jackdaw has little taste ; but give him something sporting and spicy, with a dash of the divorce court, and no Sunday morning can ever seem too long. At intervals the drum of the woodpecker rattles out from the heart of a copse ; while from every quarter birds are delivering each his special message to the great cheery-faced postman who is trudging his daily round overhead, carrying good tidings to the whole bird-belt that encircles the globe. To all these wild, natural calls of the wood, the farmyard behind us responds with its more cultivated clamour and cackle ; while the very atmosphere is resonant of its airy population, each of them blowing his own special trumpet. Silence, indeed ! why, as the inner ear awakes and develops, the solid bulk of this sound-in-stillness becomes in its turn overpowering, terrifying. Let the development only continue, one thinks, but a little longer, and the very rush of sap, the thrust and foison of germination, will join in the din, and go far to deafen us. One shrinks, in fancy, to a dwarf of meanest aims and pettiest account before this army of full-blooded, shouting

shouting soldiery, that possesses land and air so completely, with such an entire indifference, too, towards ourselves, our conceits, and our aspirations.

Here it is again, this lesson in modesty that nature is eternally dinning into us; and the completeness of one's isolation in the midst of all this sounding vitality cannot fail to strike home to the most self-centred. Indeed, it is evident that we are entirely superfluous here; nothing has any need of us, nor cares to know what we are interested in, nor what other people have been saying of us, nor whether we go or stay. Those rooks up above have their own society and occupations, and don't wish to share or impart them; and if haply a rook seems but an insignificant sort of being to you, be sure that you are quite as insignificant to the rook. Nay, probably more so; for while you at least allot the rook his special small niche in creation, it is more than doubtful whether he ever troubles to "place" you at all. He has weightier matters to occupy him, and so long as you refrain from active interference, the chances are that for him you simply don't exist.

But putting birds aside, as generally betraying in their startled, side-glancing mien some consciousness of a featherless unaccountable tribe that may have to be reckoned with at any moment, those other winged ones, the bees and their myriad cousins, simply insult one at every turn with their bourgeois narrowness of non-recognition. Nothing, indeed, could be more unlike the wary watchful marches of the bird-folk than the bustling self-centred devotion to business of these tiny brokers in Nature's busy mart. If you happen to get in their way, they jostle up against you, and serve you right; if you keep clear of the course, they proceed serenely without so much as a critical glance at your hat or your boots. Snubbed, hustled, and ignored, you feel, as you retire from the unequal contest, that the scurrying alarm of bird

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or beast is less hurtful to your self-respect than this complacent refusal of the insect to admit your very existence.

In sooth, we are at best poor fusionless incapable bodies ; unstable of purpose, veering betwixt hot fits and chill, doubtful at times whether we have any business here at all. The least we can do is to make ourselves as small as possible, and interfere as little as may be with these lusty citizens, knowing just what they want to do, and doing it, at full work in a satisfactory world that is emphatically theirs, not ours.

The more one considers it, the humbler one gets. This pleasant, many-hued, fresh-smelling world of ours would be every whit as goodly and fair, were it to be rid at one stroke of us awkward aliens, staggering pilgrims through a land whose customs and courtesies we never entirely master, whose pleasant places we embellish and sweeten not at all. We, on the other hand, would be bereft indeed, were we to wake up one chill morning and find that all these practical capable cousins of ours had packed up and quitted in disgust, tired of trying to assimilate us, weary of our aimlessness, our brutalities, our ignorance of real life.

Our dull inner ear is at last fully awake, fully occupied. It must be a full three hundred yards away, that first brood of ducklings, fluffily proud of a three-days-old past ; yet its shrill peep-peep reaches us as distinctly as the worry-worry of bees in the peach-blossom a foot from our head. Then suddenly—the clank of a stable-bucket on the tiles, the awakening of church-bells—humanity, with its grosser noises, is with us once more, and at the first sound of it, affrighted, the multitudinous drone of the under-life recedes, ebbs, vanishes ; Silence, the nymph so shy and withdrawn, is by our side again, and slips her hand into ours.