

Midsummer Sounds and Silences

The silence ends and sounds begin early in the morning in the country for farmers and chickens alike are early risers. Far too early for the would-be sleeper comes the triumphant crow of the first rooster, his crows not long alone, for his challenge is answered by a dozen others, near at hand or deadened by the distance, shrill and vigorous or querulous and sleepy. These are the earliest sounds, but with the growing light no song birds take up the chorus, midsummer is the silent time, the gay self-confident note of the robin, the chatter of the wren, the long liquid song of the meadow lark have hushed with the deepening summer; only the shrill cry of the jay, his ~~raucous~~ ^{raucous} voice belying his gorgeous coloring, jars our ears, as he quarrels with some chattering squirrel.

Soon we hear the stamping of the cattle in the wood pasture across the road, as they rise from their slumbers, and the tinkle of the bell as the lead cow bestirs herself. We hear, too, the impatient wickering of the horses ^{eager for their grain} for the men are up now and are about their chores. All these sounds are potent dispellers of slumber, and if they do not suffice there comes the rattle of the cookstove and the tinkle of china and silver, followed after an

one's nose is greeted by

interval by an appeal to another sense - the beguiling odor of coffee and of frying ham.

By the time breakfast is over the chorus is ^{even the jays} hushed. ~~the birds~~ have gone about their important business, and the chickens are silent too, except when some hen clamorously informs us that she has laid an egg. The morning is hot, breathless, not even the topmost branches of the elm quiver, the wind, like everything else is still. Suddenly across this stillness comes a deep humming sound, which seems to fill all the air, the steam thrasher has begun its work in the oat field north of the house. Its diapason is the song of the harvest, played as no other instrument could play it, now murmuring and low, now rising to a majestic crescendo. It tells of the dark damp seed bed, the sun and the dew, the wind and the rain, the long hot days and the warm starry nights, the whole story of the grain, until this moment when it flows in a golden stream ^{from the thrasher} into the wagons, while the straw rises in a golden mound on the other side. Its tones are all pervasive, inescapable, unwillingly we set our work to its ~~reception~~ ^{reception}, our minds are full of this symphony of the grain-fields.

Then when the sound seems to have been always in our ears and as if it were to be always in our ears, it sinks deeper and deeper and dies away followed by the piercing whistle which announces the noon hour. The silence that follows seems absolute, never

was noontide more dreamily silent, no one on the roads, no one in the fields; on the pasture slopes, turned brown by the long drought, the blue vernal lies like smoke, but the cattle have drawn away into the cool depths of the oak wood; only from far away come the plaintive cadences of that despondent of bird notes the, "Coo, coo. coo." of the mourning dove.

The thrasher ~~strains~~ ^{trains} ~~in vain~~, and we ~~hear~~ ^{hear} ~~no longer~~, the long hot afternoon drags slowly, the rain-crow, discredited prophet of the hoped for rain, utters his curious note, like the juddering of a cork from a bottle. Toward the end of the afternoon the clouds bank up in the west, a tiny breeze arises, murmuring in the trees, and stirring the ^{oak} leaves so that the white underside is visible. The rustling grows louder, there is a mutter of thunders, and then, with a rush, the storm comes. The thunder cracks sharply, the rain falls like a flight of arrows on the dry lawns and gardens, the wind has ~~ceased~~ and we hear only the thunder and the rustle of the pouring rain.

It is a brief storm, in an hour it is over and the sun shines out clearly, the cows come up from the depths of the pasture and are shut into the milking yard. The horses in the barn munch their hay with deep breaths of satisfaction, and as we pass the milking yard again we hear the streams of milk hissing into the pails. The sun sets behind the oak-trees with such flaming splendor that he might almost

Kindle those fresh straw stacks in the field, and in the long twilight the birds are singing their sleepy songs. Everywhere, close at hand in the elm and maple trees, yonder from the oaks in the wood pasture, we hear them murmuring half phrases and single notes, broken snatches of their daylight arias. The sweet, drowsy notes grow fewer and fainter, until only an occasional "che-e-e-f" from some dreaming bird betrays their presence among the branches.

As the twilight deepens and the bird chorus ceases new sounds are heard. The summer night is far from silent, tho' there may be no sound of human activities. The high pitched staccato notes of the crickets, shrilling in unvaried chorus, fill the air, and from the bays in the valley comes the deep booming of the frogs. Now that the sounds of traffic are hushed we can hear the water, too, flowing over the mill dam a mile away in the valley; we never hear it in the daytime. The cattle have settled themselves for the night and the only sound from the milking yard is the faint tinkle of the bell as the leader of the herd shifts her position.

Suddenly close at hand, in our very ears as it seems, comes the wild and startling cry of the Screech Owl, repeated twice or thrice, ^{near at hand} and then, after an interval, again far away in the fields. This jarring note is the exception, as a whole the nocturnal chorus is wonderfully soothing, wonderfully drowsy. Sometimes in the midst of the

tangled sounds we hear the call of the whip-foot-will
 sweet and plaintive in the distance. Long indeed could
 we sit and listen did not the shrilling of the crickets
 make one so very, very sleepy, as we enter the house a
 night wind has begun to stir, rustling in the tree tops
 and blowing the curtains at our windows far out into
 the room. We are almost asleep when we hear again the
 shuddering cry of the owl, startled awake we listen
 and hear it ~~once more~~, but we hear, too, the gentle tinkle of
 the cow-bell, a friendly, lonely sound, contrasting with
 the lonesome shriek of the foraging owl; and with this
 sound and the hushing of the wind in our ears we
 fall asleep again - this time so deeply that the owl may
 hoot unheard.