

Night in the Galloway Woods

S.R.Crockett (in *Bog Myrtle and Peat*, 1895)

Through the darkness comes the melancholy hoot of the barn owl, while nearer some bird is singing very softly—either a blackcap or a sedge-warbler. The curlew is saying good-night to the lapwing on the hill. By the edge of the growing corn is heard, iterative and wearisome, the ‘crake,’ ‘crake’ of the corn-crake.

We wait a little in the shade of the wood, but there are no other sounds or sights to speak to us till we hear the clang of some migratory wild birds going down to the marshes by Loch Moan. Many birds have a night cry quite distinct from their day note. The wood-pigeon has a peculiarly contented chuckle upon his branch, as though he were saying, ‘This here is jolly comfortable! This just suits me!’ For the wood-pigeon is a vulgar and slangy bird, and therefore no true Scot, for all that the poets have said about him. He is however a great fighter, exceedingly pugnacious with his kind. Listen and you will hear even at night ‘The moan of doves in immemorial elms,’ or rather among the firs, for above all trees the wood-pigeon loves the spruce. But you will find out, if you go nearer, that much of the mystic moaning which sounds so poetic at a distance, consists of squabblings and disputings about vested rights.

‘You’re shoving me!’ says one angry pigeon.

‘That is a lie. This is my branch at any rate, and you’ve no business here. Get off!’ replies his neighbour, as quarrelsome to the full as he.

Birds at Night.

A dozen or two of starlings sit on the roof of an out-house—now an unconsidered and uninteresting bird to many, yet fifty years ago Sir Walter Scott rode twenty miles to see a nest of them. They are pretty bird enough in the daytime, but they are more interesting at night. Now they have their dress coats off and their buttons loosened. They sit and gossip among each other like a clique of jolly students. And if one gets a little sleepy and nods, the others will joggle him off the branch, and then twitter with congratulatory laughter at his tumble. Let us get beneath them quietly. We can see them now, black against the brightening eastern sky. See that fellow give his neighbour a push with his beak, and hear the assaulted one scream out just like Mr. Thomas Sawyer in Sunday-school, whose special chum stuck a pin into him for the pleasure of hearing him say ‘Ouch!’

As the twilight brightens the scuffling will increase, until before the sun rises there will be a battle-royal, and then the combatants will set to preening their ruffled feathers, disordered by the tumults and alarms of the wakeful night.

The bats begin to seek their holes and corners about an hour before the dawn, if the night has been clear and favourable. The moths are gone home even before this, so that there is little chance of seeing by daylight the wonderfully beautiful undervests of peacock blue and straw colour which they wear beneath their plain hoddie-grey overcoats.

The Coming of the Dawn.

It is now close on the dawning, and the cocks have been saying so from many farm-houses for half an hour—tiny, fairy cock-crows, clear and shrill from far away, like pixies blowing their horns of departure, ‘All aboard for Elfland!’ lest the hateful revealing sun should light upon their revels. Nearer, hoarse and raucous Chanticleer (of Shanghai evidently, from the chronic cold which sends his voice deep down into his spurs)—thunders an earth-shaking bass. 'Tis time for night hawks to be in bed, for the keepers will be astir in a little, and it looks suspicious to be seen leaving the pheasant

coverts at four in the morning. The hands of the watch point to the hour, and as though waiting for the word, the whole rookery rises in a black mass and drifts westward across the tree-tops.

Flood Tide of Night.

In these long midsummer nights the twilight lingers till within an hour or two of dawn. When the green cool abyss of fathomless sky melts into pale slate-grey in the west, and the high tide of darkness pauses before it begins to ebb, then is the watershed of day and night. The real noon of night is quite an hour and a half after the witching hour, just as the depth of winter is really a month after the shortest day. Indeed, at this time of the year, it is much too bright at twelve for even so sleepy a place as a churchyard to yawn. And if any ghost peeped out, 'twould only be to duck under again, all a-tremble lest, the underground horologes being out of gear, a poor shade had somehow overslept cockcrow and missed his accustomed airing.

Way for the Sun.

By two o'clock, however, there is a distinct brightening in the east, and pale, streaky cirrus cloudlets gather to bar the sun's way. Broad, equal-blowing airs begin to draw to and fro through the woods. There is an earthy scent of wet leaves, sharpened with an unmistakable aromatic whiff of garlic, which has been trodden upon and rises to reproach us for our carelessness. Listen! Let us stand beneath this low-branched elder. 'We cannot see what flowers are at our feet,' but that there is violet in abundance we have the testimony of a sense which the darkness does not affect, the same which informed us of the presence of the garlic. Over the hedge the sheep are cropping the clover with short, sharp bites—one, two, three, four, five bites—then three or four shiftings of the short black legs, and again 'crop, crop.' So the woolly backs are bent all the night, the soft ears not erected as by day, but laid back against the shoulders. Sheep sleep little. They lie down suddenly, as though they were settled for the night; but in a little there is an unsteady pitch fore and aft, and the animal is again at the work of munching, steadily and apparently mechanically. I have often half believed that sheep can eat and walk and sleep all at the same time. A bivouac of sheep without lambs in the summer is very like an Arab encampment, and calls up nights in the desert, when, at whatever hour the traveller might look abroad, there were always some of the Arabs awake, stirring the embers of the camp fire, smoking, story-telling, or simply moving restlessly about among the animals. As we stand under the elder-bushes we can look down among the sheep, for they have not the wild animal's sense of smell, or else the presence of man disturbs them not. One of the flock gives an almost human cough, as if protesting against the dampness of the night.

The Early Bird.

Swish! Something soft, silent, and white comes across the hedge almost in our eyes, and settles in that oak without a sound. It is a barn-owl. After him a wood-pigeon, the whistling swoop of whose wings you can hear half a mile. The owl is just going to bed. The pigeon is only just astir. He is going to have the first turn at Farmer Macmillan's green corn, which is now getting nicely sweet and milky. The owl has still an open-mouthed family in the cleft of the oak, and it is only by a strict attention to business that he can support his offspring. He has been carrying field mice and dor-beetles to them all night; and he has just paused for a moment to take a snack for himself, the first he has had since the gloaming.

But the dawn is coming now very swiftly. The first blackbird is pulling at the early worm on the green slope of the woodside, for all the world like a sailor at a rope. The early worm wishes he had never been advised to rise so soon in order to get the dew on the grass. He resolves that if any reasonable proportion of him gets off this time, he will speak his mind to the patriarch of his tribe

who is always so full of advice how to get 'healthy, wealthy, and wise.' 'Tis a good tug-of-war. The worm has his tail tangled up with the centre of the earth. The blackbird has not a very good hold. He slackens a moment to get a better, but it is too late. He ought to have made the best of what purchase he had. Like a coiled spring returning to its set, the worm, released, vanishes into its hole; and the yellow bill flies up into the branches of a thorn with an angry chuckle, which says as plainly as a boy who has chased an enemy to the fortress of home, 'Wait till I catch you out again!'

Nature is freshest with the dew of her beauty-sleep upon her. The copses are astir, and the rooks on the tops of the tall trees have begun the work of the day. They rise to a great height, and drift with the light wind towards their feeding-grounds by the river. Over the hedge flashes a snipe, rising like a brown bomb-shell from between our feet, and sending the heart into the mouth. The heron, which we have seen far off, standing in the shallows, apparently meditating on the vanity of earthly affairs, slowly and laboriously takes to flight. He cannot rise for the matter of a stone's-throw, and the heavy flaps of his labouring wings resound in the still morning. There is no warier bird than the heron when he gets a fair field. Sometimes it is possible to come upon him by chance, and then his terror and instant affright cause him to lose his head, and he blunders helplessly hither and thither, as often into the jaws of danger as out of it.

Did you see that flash of blue? It was the patch of blue sky on a jay's wing. They call it a 'jay piet' hereabouts. But the keepers kill off every one for the sake of a pheasant's egg or two. An old and experienced gamekeeper is the worst of hanging judges. To be tried by him is to be condemned. As Mr. Lockwood Kipling says: 'He looks at nature along the barrel of a gun Which is false perspective.'

Full Chorus.

In the opener glades of the woods the wild hyacinths lie in the hollows, in wreaths and festoons of smoke as blue as peat-reek. As we walk through them the dew in their bells swishes pleasantly about our ankles, and even those we have trodden upon rise up after we have passed, so thick do they grow and so full are they of the strength of the morning. Now it is full chorus. Every instrument of the bird orchestra is taking its part. The flute of the blackbird is mellow with much pecking of winter-ripened apples. He winds his song artlessly along, like a prima donna singing to amuse herself when no one is by. Suddenly a rival with shining black coat and noble orange bill appears, and starts an opposition song on the top of the next larch. Instantly the easy nonchalance of song is overpowered in the torrent of iterated melody. The throats are strained to the uttermost, and the singers throw their whole souls into the music. A thrush turns up to see what is the matter, and, after a little pause for a scornful consideration of the folly of the black coats, he cleaves the modulated harmony of their emulation with the silver trumpet of his song. The ringing notes rise triumphant, a clarion among the flutes.

The Butcher's Boy of the Woods.

The concert continues, and waxes more and more frenzied. Sudden as a bolt from heaven a wild duck and his mate crash past through the leaves, like quick rifle shots cutting through brushwood. They end their sharp, breathless rush in the water of the river pool with a loud 'Splash! splash!' Before the songsters have time to resume their interrupted rivalry a missel thrush, the strident whistling butcher's boy of the wood, appears round the corner, and, just like that blue-aproned youth, he proceeds to cuff and abuse all the smaller fry, saying, 'Yah! get along! Who's your hatter? Does your mother know you're out?' and other expressions of the rude, bullying youth of the streets. The missel thrush is a born bully. It is not for nothing that he is called the Storm Cock. It is more than suspected that he sucks eggs, and even murder in the first degree—ornithologic infanticide—has been laid to his charge. The smaller birds, at least, do not think him clear of this latter count, for he has not appeared many minutes before he is beset by a clamorous train of irate blue-tits, who go into an azure fume of minute rage; sparrows also chase him, as vulgarly insolent as himself, and

robin redbreasts, persistent and perkily pertinacious, like spoiled children allowed to wear their Sunday clothes on week-days.

The Dust of Battle.

So great is the dust of battle that it attracts a pair of hen harriers, the pride of the instructed laird, and the special hatred of his head keeper. Saunders Tod would shoot them if he thought that the laird would not find out, and come down on him for doing it. He hates the 'Blue Gled' with a deep and enduring hatred, and also the brown female, which he calls the 'Ringtail.' The Blue and the Brown, so unlike each other that no ordinary person would take them for relatives, come sailing swiftly with barely an undulation among the musical congregation. The blackbird, wariest of birds—he on the top of the larch—has hardly time to dart into the dark coverts of the underbrush, and the remainder of the crew to disperse, before the Blue and the Brown sail among them like Moorish pirates out from Salee. A sparrow is caught, but in Galloway, at least, 'tis apparently little matter though a sparrow fall. The harriers would have more victims but for the quick, warning cry of the male bird, who catches sight of us standing behind the shining grey trunk of the beech. The rovers instantly vanish, apparently gliding down a sunbeam into the rising morning mist which begins to fill the valley.

Comes the Day.

Now we may turn our way homeward, for we shall see nothing further worth our waiting for this morning. Every bird is now on the alert. It is a remarkable fact that though the pleasure-cries of birds, their sweetheating and mating calls, seem only to be intelligible to birds of the same race, yet each bird takes warning with equal quickness from the danger-cry of every other. Here is, at least, an avian 'Volapuk,' a universal language understood by the freemasonry of mutual self-preservation.

While we stood quiet behind the beech, or beneath the elder, nature spoke with a thousand voices. But now when we tramp homewards with policeman resonance there is hardly a bird except the street-boy sparrow to be seen. The blackbird has gone on ahead and made it his business, with sharp 'Keck! keck!' to alarm every bird in the woods. We shall see no more this morning.

Listen, though, before we go. Between six and seven in the morning the corn-crake actually interrupts the ceaseless iteration of his 'Crake! crake!' to partake of a little light refreshment. He does not now say 'Crake! crake!' as he has been doing all the night—indeed, for the last three months—but instead he says for about half an hour 'Crake!' then pauses while you might count a score, and again remarks 'Crake!' In the interval between the first 'Crake!' and the second a snail has left this cold earth for another and a warmer place.

Now at last there is a silence after the morning burst of melody. The blackcap has fallen silent among the reeds. The dew is rising from the grass in a general dispersed gossamer haze of mist. It is no longer morning; it is day.