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The Noises that Weren't There

Charles Williams

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Abstract
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Charles Williams died on May 15, 1945, at the age of fifty-eight, on the sixth day after the end of World War II. His sparkling Shelleyian genius was cut short and some of his greatest literary dreams remained unfinished; for example the final Arthurian poem, "The Figure of Arthur" fragment, the "Figure of Wordsworth" (never begun) and a final novel.

Regarding her husband's post-war writing plans, Mrs. Williams has been quoted as saying: "I shall write one more novel, which my faithful public will not like, I think. This time it will be a straightforward one. There will be no black magic, no dancing figures, and no supernatural beings wandering through its pages." During a delightful co-inheriting chat in Mrs. Williams, at her Hampstead, London, home, I asked her if "The Noises That Weren't There" could possibly be that novel. She replied that frequently her husband began and then discarded parts of poems and novels but that it is possible that a dead girl be his last, "straightforward one." It is interesting that the novel takes place shortly after the war and that the haunted house in it is like many such places Williams must have seen (and visited?) as he explored the devastated City.

Clarissa said into the telephone: "Good-morning, Colonel." Her godfather's voice went on: "I promised to ring you up, and I'm doing it. Can you come down here this morning for an hour or two?"

"Certainly I can," Clarissa answered. "Now?"

"Now would do very well," Colonel Benton said. "We'll go out to the place together. Mind you, there'll be nothing for you to do, because our people have covered it all in the usual way; in fact it's only because they've done their job so far that I'm talking to you. But you wanted me to let you know if anything in your line came along, and this is as near as we're likely to get,... short of a murder at a spiritualist seance."

"But tell me a little more, Colonel," said Clarissa. "What is it? and what made you think of me?"

"It's a dead girl," the Colonel answered. "She was found this morning in an empty house just across the river from Charing Cross. No sign of how she died, nor of her clothes. What made me think of you was that the house is said to be haunted. We haven't got much about that yet, my people not thinking it of the first importance."

"Where is the house?" Clarissa asked.

"99 Union Square. Ever hear of it in your psychological explorations?"

"I don't think I remember it," Clarissa said slowly. "But I'll look before I come. You think someone killed her?"

"Someone took away her clothes," the Colonel answered. "The report, which I found when I got here this morning, only mentions ghosts parenthetically."

"What?" Clarissa said.

"Ghosts or a ghost. I suppose that's what's meant by haunted," the Colonel said, a little irritably. "But do as you like." Clarissa was silent for a few seconds; then she said, "Yes... yes. Shall I come to you this morning, or do you want me to go?"

"Meet me here and I'll take you over and introduce you to the Super-intendent. But mind you, no interference. If you want to make any notes about the house you can, but we'll deal with the murder ourselves."

"I'll be with you as long as I remain (in typewrite) interested," Clarissa said. "Good-bye."

She put down the receiver and stood up.

Clarissa Drayton was a woman of about thirty-three, dark in colour and dark also from the sun. But under the tan her flesh had a clearness which matched her vigorous and shining eyes. Her face might at first have seemed a little worn; it was not; only it seemed to have lost all superfluity, so that its pattern was marked, and there was no dimming of it any more than in the directness of her look. That look seemed, in its casual glance or direct gaze, to apprehend things with a warm and sensuous, but undisturbed, passion; there lurked in it a hint of glowering joy. Eros, and all that is meant by Eros, lived there in some greater continent, of which the rational centre lay behind her faintly-lined forehead and below her smooth black hair. Her movements were as swift as they were restrained.

She was often in the streets; she kept the records of those investigations to which the Colonel had referred. She smiled a little as she moved, thinking tenderly of her godfather's kindness. Colonel Benton, as she knew, very much disliked all that activity in which her own capacities say Mrs. Williams, while her husband was riding the London tube in them, the intermingling in them of natural and supernatural things and occurrences (this time of a haunted house, filled with postponed sound, which has in it the nude "dissolving, sandy" body of a young woman) reminds us of William's fondness for the theme of interpenetration and coinherence. And of course there is in this novel fragment the image of the City: it is Williams' last journey through it: "A distant clock struck eleven; the vigil began. As they waited, there came through the open holes in the walls the sound of the City,... A thrub of resurrection held the night; the City attired from its preoccupation and began again to think of joy. Poor and perversive, to many, that joy might be, hardly worthy to be called by the august word. The re-action from the war would soon be, in some, towards excitement; in some, towards sheer bad-temper. The pains and problems of Europe and the hour were very great; and far away, in the East, the armies and navies and air-flights moved to their duty still. But the change in the City could not be content, for however brief a time, with any word but joy..."

Would that Charles Williams had lived to finish telling us what happened when the clock struck twelve, after All Hallow's Eve.
since her girlhood, but it had developed with her maturing years. Her 
father had said that very early he had at first thought it fancy, but there had 
been episodes which convinced him that she was capable of it. He 
remembered, for example, once seen a neighbor in the country bleeding in a railway ac-
cident; she had seen in one place a house that had not been yet built and in another 
one that had been pulled down. These phantasmas lasted each but a few 
moments; they were tenuous, mottled, and dissolved. She heard the 
silent, in the midst of her general attention; and they sent before them al-
ways a kind of tingling expectation, so that she grew to know and distinguish 
them from her other sensations. Sometimes there were periods of that 
tingling, and while she was talking would behind the companion another 
vision of his form writing or writing in a doorway or driving at great speed in 
the night. Or sometimes, with the same preceding sensation, there 
looked at her with the hollow eyes and the drawn and scrunched 
beauty, a laughter, a fear. The underworld of a soul lay clear and then was 
closed.

Such moments were not many, nor could she find that they came by any 
rule. She had offered to work with more ordered certainty when she was 
concerned with what is more generally called 'another world.' She had, 
after taking her medical degree and putting in some years of training, be-
come until the war an investigator for the Society for Psychical Research. 
There she had been noted for the accuracy both of her observation and of 
her records. Her sensitiveness to phenomena went with a detailed and lu-
documentation. She was chiefly responsible for the reports on the pol-
tergeist at Malvern in 1935 and the haunted villa at Abneyworth in 1937; she 
oversaw the place of their work. Sometimes there, sometimes in 1938 
owed whatever value it had to her exact statements. Such manifestations 
are rare in England and the case awaited comparison with others before 
any kind of even provisional decision could be reached. She had kept her 
own full notes of the cases and was still collecting other interesting 
evidence for her historical reading supplied. The chief difficulty 
precisely the lack of reliable evidence; it sometimes seemed to her 
demonstrating the mechanisms of the society without asking what 
understanding could what and what could not be regarded as evidence. 
With all its faults, the modern age had at least produced this; and until this was 
produced, law and judgement had hardly been able to begin to operate. She 
pointed out with as much accuracy as possible. What her 
senses told her might or might not be actual; she suspected that in many 
cases the thing present, if anything was present, only communicated it 
by one or other sense, but in itself belonged to none. Yet her long expe-
rience was at best without value; she began, beyond her senses, to grow in 
knowledge.

During the war she had done certain hospital jobs of a therapeutic kind, 
and she was undecided now whether to continue with these or whether to 
return to psychical investigation. She had played a little with the idea of 
examining, if opportunity offered, the relationships between psychical 
manifestations and crime; and it was with this in mind that she talked to 
her godfather, Colonel Benton. The Colonel had been compelled by his 
sister, Clarissa's mother, to that office, though he took much less seri-
ously it. As, moving forward, she attentively listened, the sound recurred 
again. The hum of an insect. Or in the night. Or sometimes, with the same preceding sensation, there 
looked at her with the hollow eyes and the drawn and scrunched 
beauty, a laughter, a fear. The underworld of a soul lay clear and then was 
closed.

Her files offered no trace of 59 Union Square, and she abandoned them. 
She chose her frock and hat with a wish to do herself justice and her god-
father credit in the eyes of any police officers who might be there, and set 
out for Westminster. Her flat was in Highgate, overlooking London; it was 
the upper part of a house of which the lower was occupied by her brother 
Jonathan and his wife. They, on a Saturday in September 1940 she had 
first seen London burning — the great pillar of fire which had stood up 
through the closing afternoon and the darkening evening, and shown to later 
destroyers. Great fires of war smouldered where, she had heard the humming and 
grunting of aerial enemies. There 
were moments when, remembering that dreadful autumn, in which nothing but 
England and London seemed to remain defiant of those scoreful and tri-
umphant wings, she indulged a fancy that those wings had triumphed indeed; 
that England was a burnt and desolate wilderness; and that she and all 
those she knew were already dead and now, in some other state, permit-
ner, presumably not form part of that London. Bunyan had set a gate to hell 
for England was a burnt and desolate wilderness; and that she and all 
those she knew were already dead and now, in some other state, permit-
ner, presumably not form part of that London. Bunyan had set a gate to hell 
and grown. With each one of her steps, it increased out of all proportion to 
her own discoloured poverty.

The front-door stood open. A few of Messrs. Hatching's drivers and 
girl-clerks lingered a little distance off. Colonel Benton and Clarissa 
crossed the pavement, and went up the steps. The Colonel atoned aside for 
Clarissa, and she stepped across the threshold and took a few paces into 
the hall. On her right a constable was coming out of a room towards the 
front door. When she saw him he quickened his steps and began to speak, 
but he caught sight of Colonel Benton behind her, checked himself, and 
said: "What is the matter?"

As Clarissa entered the hall, the first faint sound reached her, as it 
came to a man reading alone in his room by night. She heard, or seemed 
perceiving a tender whisper, and the sight of a face that was in 
sequence with the sound. As, moving forward, she attentively listened, the sound 
recurred and grew. With each one of her steps, it increased out of all proportion to 
the short distance covered; it was softly multiplied on all sides. She had 
never seen such a sound, and then, since the war. She had never heard 
such a sound before. She thought she should know what they said before. 
Yet it seemed as if all the mice in all the world were at work behind those walls, scurrying, scratching, nibbling, millions 
and millions of tiny claws and tiny teeth. She stood still, revolted by that 
sense of secret multitudinous hustle; it was so ludicrous and so 
ugly.
No walls could long sustain themselves under such an immense outbreak of elfish activity; she felt they must, in another moment, give way and let the huge armies of dirt-dropping vermin through. The vermin were rushing to and fro beneath her, also; she had quite definitely to refuse to raise her feet from the floor. Among the unceasing scuffle there emerged another sound — the high-pitched noise which certain kinds of mice make, a recurrent thin squeal. It was not very clean, for all those other noises drowned it, but every now and then it pierced through them. It pierced like a cry — scratch, scurry, scurry, squeal; and a cloud of dust seemed to float down on her, from among the joists above, the creatures nibbled and tore.

She stood listening. She knew very well that she alone of the three heard it. Colonel Benton disliked mice almost as much as some women, and he would never have remained silent under such an astonishing activity of mice, however much like them it sounded. She would have known that whether Colonel Benton had heard it or not, the mere volume of the sound in her ears would have told her, even if she had not been instructed by other experiences. Something was going on which happened to translate itself into that sound when sensitive ears were near. It was not aimed at her; it did not probably even know of her; she had merely walked into the middle of it. This too was a noise that wasn't there; it was a pressure felt in her body and changed by her body into the noise. This knowledge did not make the thing easier to bear physically; her senses were still inconvenienced. Her private meditations could, from long practice, continue under any such invasion; but all such invasions mastered for the time being whatever sense they attached. She could not hear doubly. She saw Colonel Benton turn to her; she heard his voice, but the words were lost. Glowing with a sudden small anger at the interference, and aware that it might deepen if she went further into the house, she took another step forward and said: — it was more a thought than a word; and neither the Colonel nor the constable heard it, and hardly she herself: — she said: "Tacete!"

The noise ceased at once, again with a ludicrous likeness to actuality. So, exactly so, the scratching gnawing mice do stop when a man-stirs. The silence was exactly the silence that comes when all the vermin in the walls crouch palpitating, aware of a presence they had not suspected. Whatever in this house caused that sound, whatever it was at which she had aimed her command, was now similarly aware. It remained in suspension, and in its turn listening intently. How much of her world it could catch in its apprehension she did not know: it might have passed in almost animal shock and fear, or it might now have had its attention roused and be capable of some elementary understanding. On that "Tacete!" she instantly moved forward; the silence accompanied her. She went past the constable into the room on her right. Colonel Benton went after her.

It was a poky little room, and must when all those other buildings were still standing have been very dark and airless. But now, on that September day, the wind was blowing gently through the unglazed windows and the sun was shining full on the dirty unpainted floor. The wallpaper was a dull grey, ragged and stained. There were several people in the room, who were moving and speaking together. They appeared, and when they saw the Colonel gave him their attention immediately. So that, beyond them, she could see against the farther wall the body, of which she had only seen the hands. The sun was shining full on the dirty uncarpeted floor. The wallpaper was pressed, while her eyes searched. The Superintendent, watching, compared her movements to those of the police—surgeon, not altogether in his own mind to Clarissa's credit. "Ferrinckety," he thought; "all right for a woman, and probably, even with the fire—watching and all, not accustomed to criticism. But we shouldn't get far like that. So the Superintendent handles a corpse as if he knew about it. Education or no education, there's a difference between a woman and a man."

Clarissa stood up; she brushed her hands together with none of the delicacy she had used on the other occasion, and said: "Colonel, did you say the P.M. was going to be this afternoon?" she asked.

"I expect so," her godfather answered. "It's a little late to get it through this morning."

"May I have a copy of the report?" Clarissa asked. The Colonel, with a glance, passed on this question to the Superintendent as to the officer in charge. He answered mildly: "Why, yes, Miss Drayton. I'll give special instructions, and I'll try to have it posted to you to—night." The slight sound which the words "posted to you" was meant to include any tendency on Miss Drayton's part to call at the Yard, Clarissa hardly noticed it; she looked as if she was about to add something more, and then changed her mind. She smiled generously at the Superintendent and turned to her godfather. "Thank you so very much, Colonel," she said. "I won't keep you any more now. May I come back to the house some time, Superintendent?"

"Of course, Miss Drayton," Matheson answered. "Let me know and I'll arrange it. You've finished with—" He nodded towards the body. Still with a slight hesitation, Clarissa said: "Yes, I think so." She looked distastefully at her hands, almost as if she had found them stained with the dead girl's blood.

"Well, come along then," said the Colonel; and as Clarissa, with a final look back to the Inspector joined him, he went on ignorantly: "The Superintendent's diplomacy: "Where do you want to go? Can I drop you? Or will you come to the Yard and read the file?"

"If you've got anywhere at the Yard where I can wash," her godfather said, "let's go there. If they can't wash us as they went through it, but there was no sound — except, once, just as she reached the front door, the faintest scurry behind her, as if a single mouse had fled in one frenzied rush across the hall. They came again into the open air.

An hour or two later Inspector Challis arrived at the flat. Clarissa took him straight to her dining-room, saying: "I'm being entirely selfish and doing you out of any reasonable food because I want you to talk to me. Do sit down." She chatted for a few minutes till they were properly settled at the meal; then she said: "And now, Mr. Challis, will you tell me exactly what happened last night?"

Challis considered. "You saw the reports?" he said.

"Yes, thank you, Miss Drayton," Challis said. He spoke simply enough, but Clarissa thought there was a note of caution in his cold voice, as if he did not wish to commit himself to anything. She went on: "Good. How did you find the body?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Drayton," Challis said. He spoke simply enough, but Clarissa thought there was a note of caution in his cold voice, as if he did not wish to commit himself to anything. She went on: "Good. How did you find the body?"

"I expect so," her godfather answered. "It's a little late to get it through this morning."

"I don't quite know what I can tell you beyond my report," said Challis.

"Do you mind if we don't go into that yet?" Clarissa said. "I'd so much rather hear you first."

"What is your point of view, Miss Drayton?" Challis asked.

"Well... I don't quite know what I can tell you beyond my report," Challis said. Everything was normal except for the odd sensation of hearing the noise. I mean, of course," he added hastily, "it was normal to us."
He paused, "... my wife. And then I heard an aeroplane a long way off —
he said, "Well, but go on. What did you do then?"
He settled more freely and easily to his story. "I looked at the time," he
and stars and a little cloud — and I was thinking..." He stopped and added
more coldly: "I suppose you'd like to know what I was thinking about. It
might explain everything,"
"I shall be very surprised if it does," Clarissa said, "and I certainly
don't want to seem impertinent. But yes — if you would just hint at it.
It might conceivably be useful.
Challis looked at the table. He said: "If you want to know, I’ll tell you.
"So was," Challis paused. "Well... I was walking home, as I told you.
The stars were very bright and low, even if they didn’t show so well as
they used to because there’s more light in the streets. I remember
walking through the streets wasn’t very different. There
seemed to be no beginning to the streets and no end to them, and one was­
’t getting anywhere, whether one was walking down them or up them;
and I remember wondering if perhaps I was doing both at once, and that another
whom I couldn’t see was walking past me in the other direction, but never
getting past me any more than I could get past him. So there we were,
both of us walking very fast in opposite directions, but never getting
away from the point, you see. There was nothing. And I heard something, something
close at hand. There didn’t seem to be any blast; it was just the sound.

Clarissa interrupted him. "Now you’re arguing about it. Let’s leave
that till later. Go on, Mr. Challis. You went to the window, and you no­ticed that you weren’t treading on glass. That surprised you.
"Yes, but I must have known that...
"Oh never mind what you must have known," Clarissa exclaimed.
"That’s what you’re thinking now while we’re talking about it. All that
matters is what you thought and felt then before we talked. You went up
and looked in?
"The moon was very bright," Challis said obediently, "and it shone all
over the floor. And there was a girl’s body.
He got up suddenly and took a step or two away; then he came back.
"You know, I remember that at first I didn’t think it was a body. It didn’t
look like a body. It looked... like a heap of sand, the sort of thing
you see in a children’s playground or nursery..." He forced a smile, and
added in a slightly unreal voice: "Miss Drayton, will you forgive me if I
say that it all comes back to me, the whole thing?"
"No," said Clarissa, rising also. "Don’t waste time, Mr. Challis,
and don’t fuss. You are neither mad nor drunk and you saw in the moon­
light a thing like a heap of sand lying in a children’s playground. Very
well. What did you feel about it?"
"I felt it was unbearable horrible," Challis said. "I was utterly re­
volted. It was so simple and innocent and... I don’t know. It was all over
in a moment, and I saw it was only a girl’s dead body, and I felt all right.
It was so quick that I’d honestly forgotten all about it till now."
They had both walked away from the table towards the window. Chal­
lis stood and looked out, his face becoming hard and fixed. Clarissa
glanced at him, then she said: "It wasn’t frightening — or was it?"
"No," he answered, "it wasn’t frightening. It was horrible but not ter­
rifying. It was obscene."
He paused. Clarissa was silent. He resumed: "It was all so quick.
I thought — or did I? am I just making this up?" He looked at her, and
then as their eyes met he went on: "No; all right; I’m not. It came and
went almost literally in no time, but I’m sure I’m remembering and not in­
venting. I thought: ‘Sand. Children’s sand.’ And then I thought: ‘God,
no; the children...’ I turned the whole thing over..."
"Was it so horrible about it?" Clarissa asked.
He spread his hands out. "Only that, it was a playground of... some­
ting no child must come near. But why —" he shrugged. "Just sand, Miss
Drayton. Then it moved — no, not slid or shifted, but moved, like a body.
"You said in your report that you thought you saw the girl move as if
she was alive," Clarissa said.
Challis went on staring out of the window. He said: "I only made one
mistake there. I saw it move, and then I saw it was a body. So then I
knew it must have been the body that moved." He drew a long breath. "At­
why you want to go; our people ransacked it pretty completely. But if you would come too. We shan't be sure what it is. But I mean to go myself, and I'd be very glad if you will come again to that house to-night with me. I don't know what we may hear or see — nothing, very likely; and if we do, I believe that it was something no child had better come near — nor anyone else. "You really mean it was as loathsome as that?" "Yes," Clarissa said, "yes. When you say the P. M. — Oh well, never mind that yet. But I've cancelled an appointment with a hair-dresser this afternoon, because I've told the Colonel that I shall ring him up presently to hear about the result of that P. M. If it's what I think it may be — You must understand, Mr. Challis, that if you come to-night, you come to look for clues to the bomb that wasn't there and to the sand that became a body. And to the mice." "Mice?" he asked. She told him, briefly, of her own experience, of hearing the mice that were also not there. Ending, and pressing out her cigarette, "You see," she said, "it's all a very odd business. And in a way none of mine. You have every right to do as you choose. But I can't reconcile myself to leaving it as it is without any kind of further effort." Challis suddenly grinned at her. "I doubt if you've tried very hard," he said. Clarissa stared at him for a moment, almost as if taken aback by his words, and all but inclined to be offended. Then she relaxed and herself broke into a quick answering smile. He was astonished at its rich delight; her eyes danced, her mouth quivered, and in that release of joy she stood stretched her arms as if in relief after the heaviness of their long talk. "Well, no," she said, "perhaps I haven't. You're very good for me, Mr. Challis. There's a risk, of course, but really very little. What I do so hate is the — her voice changed to a serener joy — and the Eucharist, and it's gone." "The—" said Challis, startled. "Oh yes, of course, the—" He stammered so obviously over the word that her smile came back and then she laughed outright. "Oh I do beg your pardon," she said and stretched out her hand to him. As he took it, she went on: "You looked so surprised that I couldn't help it. Never mind that now. Where shall I find you to-night? Say, at half-past ten?" "Half-past ten!" he exclaimed. "You think that's rather late?" she said. "In my experience, it's not usually much good being earlier." "I was thinking of the evening," he said. "If you want to look over the house, it'll be dark by then." "We'd better perhaps be there before dark," she said; "after all, I don't know the house. But it's generally from twelve to two that one ought to be about. Only it makes it a long time and too long a time makes one stale." "Couldn't we go and look at it about seven, " Challis suggested, "and then if you'd dine with me? We could go back afterwards. Let me call for you here about half-past six; I'll get a Yard car and save trouble." "That's very kind of you," Clarissa said. "Yes; I should like that. And now go and get some sleep if you can, for you must have been up all night. Till half-past six then, Mr. Challis" — she smiled at him again as she opened the door — "and God defend the right."