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The Noises That Weren't There Chapter II: The Voice of the Rat

Charles Williams

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Abstract
Initial chapters of an unfinished novel by Williams.

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About an hour later, Clarissa was sitting in her brother's flat, looking at his painting. Jonathan himself was leaning against a table, close to his wife Marjorie, who was curled up in an armchair; they too were looking at it. Jonathan was two or three years younger than his sister, broader and a trifle shorter. The impression he gave, especially when, as now, they were in close neighbourhood, was of solidity contrasted with her more formal fineness. They had a profound and intimate affection for each other, with that emotional sensitiveness which sometimes, but not always, resulted from childhood spent in close companionship and without other friends. Both Clarissa and Jonathan had seem­ed to the other children of the district a little remote, and they had known it. They had been pleasant and agreeable, but on the whole they had preferred to play long and complicated games of their own. In their youth those games divided them; and now where once their families met together, now their capacities walked separately. But each of them entertained a respect for the other's apprehension and comments. Of the two, Jonathan preserved the greater silence; he listened to his sister's histor­ies, if she told him of them, and his occasional questions some­times recalled details which even she had forgotten. But what his private judgment was she did not know. It was not necessary or not yet; it was sufficient that they should live in sympathy.

The painting before them had only just been finished. Jonathan had wished his sister to see it at once, and she had promised to go down that afternoon. 'Though, mind you,' she said when she arrived, 'I can't stop long.'

'Hair, isn't it?' Jonathan asked. 'Well, you must do this properly. I'm no more going to have my pictures scamped than you your hair.'

'You shan't, my dear,' said Clarissa. 'And anyhow it isn't hair. It was going to be, but now I've got to ring up the Colonel.'

'O well, you can do that from here and then we can go back to the picture. Something new?' He asked the question as he might have done of any serious practitioner of his own art.

'Yes,' she said. 'Something the Colonel showed me. I'd like to tell you about it when I know a little more.'

'Any time,' Jonathan said. 'What fun you do have, Clariss.'

After her talk with Challis, the word struck her with a fuller meaning than the phrase usually held. She said, laughing: 'I suppose I do, though I hadn't quite realized it till to-day. Where's the painting?'

'In here. Sit down... and don't quote Wordsworth.'

'Wordsworth?' Clarissa asked blankly, after exchanging a kiss and a smile with Marjorie, but her brother only waved at her impatiently, so she docilely sat down as she was told. The painting was on an easel at a little distance. She set herself to look at it carefully. 'This is your best thing, Jonathan.'

'It was part of London — she thought, of the City after a raid.'

Note: I should like to acknowledge the kindness of Alice Mary Hadfield, who worked with Charles Williams at Amen House, Oxford University Press, for providing the typescript of "The Noises that Weren't There." In a recent letter Mrs. Hadfield says that the novel was, in fact, written "at the end of his (Williams') life. It follows from All Hallows' Eve, and has a war-blitz-bomb-city background. I know of no reason why he didn't intend to finish it, and take it that he did." — Dr. Glenn Sadler.
'Two, darling,' said Marjorie, 'if you mean since you
finished with me.'

'Four - no, six, since I finished the submarine,' her hus-
band said. 'That wasn't bad, but I do better on land.'

'No.' Clarissa interrupted, 'it isn't so much that you do
better, Jon, but one unconsciously expects the light effects in the
sea and air and undersea stuff. But the French adored
the Je ne scais quoi, and Hogarth laughed at them. He said it
band said. 'That wasn't bad, but I do better on land. '

'Was Marriage, quite simply Marriage. Till I pointed
out that a wild stretch of rubble and a few shadows under the
name of Marriage might give quite a lot of people the wrong idea.

'What shall you call this one?' Clarissa asked.

'Well, the more you paint the more you observe,' Jonathan
allowed. 'I didn't once. That's why Marjorie's clothes haven't
got it. But I'll do another of her and then we'll see,'

'What shall you call this one?' Clarissa asked.

Marjorie struck in. 'What he wanted to call it, Clarissa,'
she said, 'was Marriage, quite simply Marriage. Till I pointed
out that a wild stretch of rubble and a few shadows under the
name of Marriage might give quite a lot of people the wrong idea.
Jonathan always thinks that people who look at his pictures will first
see whatever he wants them to see.'

'So they will - in fifty years,' Jonathan said. 'All the same,
when it comes to these heads, it will be the best thing said
about marriage in our generation. But perhaps a little literary?'
Marjorie drew her brows earnestly together. 'O that!' she said. 'Well, I think that's very good. I mean... that's what it is like, isn't it?' She began to laugh, and went on: 'I never have quite known what all the fuss was about. Of course, Jon is a very good painter, and I don't know why everyone doesn't see it. But he's not particularly unusual, is he?' Jonathan struck in. 'You have to remember, Clarissa,' he said, 'that Marjorie does a good deal of work on my stuff.'

Marjorie began to blush. She said: 'Nonsense, darling.'

'Painting,' Jonathan went on, 'is apt to tire me out, and then I don't get to sleep, or shouldn't, if Marjorie didn't manage to be awake -- when it's necessary -- instead of me. It's taken us a good while to get into the way of doing it, and I was very obstinate about it at first -- very haughty and independent and selfish. But I learned.'

'And you don't, Marjorie,' Clarissa asked, 'no, I know you don't, but tell me; I like to hear -- you don't ever feel stale and disagreeable the next day or several days and -- let loose!'

This time Marjorie did actually blush. 'Really, Clarissa,' she said, almost sharply, 'that would be a lot of use to Jon, wouldn't it? What would be the good of his sleeping at night if he had to spend his time soothing me down by day? Jon and I manage things better than that, I hope.' She relaxed into smiles, and added: 'Have some sense!'

'So I have, I hope,' Clarissa said, laughing outright. 'Forgive me, Marjorie. I told you I only wanted to hear you say so. You've no idea how charming you are when you're indignant. "Virtue in her own shape/How lovely,"' she added, throwing a mischievous glance at her brother. 'I don't wonder Jon paints as he does, but I begin to see how the light comes to him.'

Jonathan looked at his wife, 'Yes,' he said. 'Still you should answer. I a little pain of a tube of paint in the drawing-room.'

'O well!' Clarissa said. 'You wouldn't approve if she put a streak of green over your best crimson. I think you're both remarkable people.'

'Normal, normal,' said Jonathan. 'Common observation and a plain understanding... Are you going?'

'My dear, I must,' Clarissa said. 'I've got to be ready to go out at half past six with my inspector. You must meet him. You'd agree about common observation.' She went to kiss her sister-in-law, breathed 'Pray for me!' in her ear, whizzed on Jonathan with another kiss, and was gone. The other two looked at each other.

'Clarissa's worried,' Marjorie said.

'Hardly worried -- did you ever see Clarissa worried? But she's got something on her mind.'

'What was all that about a body?' Jonathan laughed.

'So she'll tell us when she chooses. I only hope she doesn't want you to do something for her. You ought to sign the pictures along with me. Or I will for you. "By M. & J.D.," Why haven't I thought of it before?'

'You certainly will not, Marjorie said with energy. 'I should be very angry indeed. Why, it's no more than buying a brush for you at the Stores. Anyone could do it, only... it's happier for me. And anyhow you don't leave tubes of paint in the drawing-room. I can't think why you said you did.'

'I precisely didn't,' Jonathan pointed out. 'I said she ought to hear you if I did. So she ought. When will you sit for me again?'

'Any time, now the children have gone back,' Marjorie answered. She paused in putting the china together, and a greater gravity came into her voice. 'But, Jon, if you're going to do me again...' She paused. Her husband stared at her. 'Well, angel?'

'Well,' said Marjorie, 'I know it was my fault, in a way, and of course we've no business to do it again so soon, but it was a dark day and both the girl and I were tired. Still, I don't think I'd think of it if you weren't a great man, and it's no use pretending I shan't feel better... Would you mind if...'

He took her by the arms. 'As Clarissa almost said to the Colonel, 'Stop, Madam. Shall I tell you?' A new frock. And you had one for the last painting.'

'I know,' said Marjorie, 'and the worst of it is I've no money at all. But, Jon, I couldn't be painted again in that one.'

'And yet,' he said, 'you'd go without sleep and food and shelter and peace -- yes, and even clothes too -- to get one of my colour-schemes right, if I were bothered. And would I put the wrong colour in to give you a tooth-sache? I don't know. Ought I to? I don't know, and at least no one else does either, which is a consolation. Besides I like the other frock.'

'O darling, you can't,' Marjorie protested. 'But it would be
risk. Too many follies thriven in such confusions; too many follies thriven in such confusions. Still, there was no good reason why one meaning should not lucidly propose another; if 'grace' might mean 'elegance' and might mean 'aid from heaven,' and if elegance might mean a certain kind of aid from heaven, she did well to be pleased with the thought of exact and fortunate clothing as a prolongation of spiritual grace. Since however money was not limitless, she must limit her bravery. She put on a suitable gown and coat for the dinner, but she packed a more serviceable uniform in a case, with sandwiches and a thermos. Delicately correct in all the degrees, she polished her nails and used her lipstick, rejecting in every movement that insipidity which distinguished (she suspected) that poor power responsible for the flaccid imitation of womanhood that had polluted earth that very day. She smiled at herself in the glass and heard the door-bell ring.

Challis had put on a dinner-jacket. With the growth of the consciousness of peace, there had been a gradual resurgence of such things. He half-apologized: 'but I must be one or the other. I can't sit on the hedge.'

'Whereas this,' said Clarissa, 'is the hedge. One side of it, however - the side of the high-road - is packed in the case. May we put it in the car?'

As they came past the door of Jonathan's flat, it opened, and he and Marjorie came out. Jonathan raised his eyebrows at the case. 'Flitting by moonlight, Titania?' he asked.

Clarissa stopped and made introductions. 'And does this grandeur mean a special show?' Jonathan said. Clarissa looked sideways at her companion. 'We don't quite know yet,' she said. 'We're going to see.'

'We,' said Jonathan, 'are merely going to the local flicks. The gods, you may remember, approve the depth but not the tumult. As Clarissa passed him he laid a hand on her shoulder. 'Are you going to try and damage us unless we attack it. As they say animals don't. And we're not going to be active to-night; I shouldn't dream of being active without a priest. But my uncle the Bishop is in Wales, and -' Challis, in the midst of his preoccupation, grinned suddenly. 'My uncle the Bishop!' he repeated. 'How magnificently right you are, Clarissa! You ought to have an uncle a Bishop!'

'So I have,' she said. 'The Bishop of Caerleon. He's coming to London in a day or two, and I shall talk to him. Only you and I may as well get all the information we can first.'

'Very well,' he said. 'There's the river. We'll be there in a few minutes.'

The house, when they went over it, offered nothing out of the common. It held no sinister atmosphere, and the dim sense of decay was no more than would have been expected. It was of two stories, with four smallish rooms in each, a basement below containing a kitchen, a scullery, and a cellar, and a large attic above. There was a small strip of neglected garden behind, in which were a mass of nettles, a stunted evergreen bush, and a few dead plants. A fairly high wall separated it from the yard of the warehouse beyond. As they climbed stairs and opened doors, Clarissa listened for any renewal of the noises she had heard earlier in the day. But she heard nothing, except every now and then the very faintest hint of hidden movement. The silence indeed now rather astonished her; empty houses next door to warehouses were usually much more infested by actual mice or rats than this showed any signs of being. In the end, unenlightened, they returned to their car and went off to dinner.

During dinner, Clarissa refused to talk about the house or almost anything else connected with what is called the supernatural -- including her uncle the Bishop. It was true, as she soon realized, that only by a great effort could Challis relate bishops to the operations of the supernatural; he found it much easier to believe in ghosts than in priests. The one (whom he had not seen) impressed him, at least, fabulously, with a sense of awe; the other (whom he had) impressed him only with a sense of repulsion. It was certainly a different repulsion from that exercised on him by the sight of the apparent sand. He thought them foolish and therefore disagreeable; he felt the other somehow fatigued and disgusting. But there was, all the same, a slight resemblance; the faint horror that so often flickers over the lower reaches of that farther world affected him in both. Clarissa for a moment doubted her wisdom in bringing him; he was intelligent and sincere, but hardly adult; his agnosticism - if it could be called that - was adolescent. She almost wished she had asked Jonathan to come instead. If Jona-
than were agnostic - and she did not quite know - his agnosticism went the whole way. However she had not asked her brother, and she had asked Richard.

Much of the conversation, however, concerned Jonathan, for Challis had a pretty taste in pictures and entertained a reverence for Drayton's work. Even Clarissa, highly though she approved, frequently thought, as he did, that to be able to see the astonishment which people do feel when their relations are praised. This is partly because most people move in quite other circles than their relations; so that to meet their names in conversation is like meeting them personally in a strange street - not unpleasant but quite unexpected. One is a little taken aback by the general identifi-

ty of interests as well as the particular admiration. Challis knew the war-paintings, but only in reproductions; he had not seen the originals, so that it was the earlier work he chiefly knew. 'Reproduction,' he said, 'must ruin his effects more than most. I very much want to see the colour of the sea in the subma-

rine painting.'

'You must come up and see his latest things,' Clarissa told him. 'There's one of his and one of the City - most extraor-

dinary. A kind of solidity of fresh light. Was it said that 'Matter is the house of light'? That's what his paint is,'

'He always had that clearness,' said Challis. 'Don't you re-

member the moonlight in Doves on a Roof?'

'Yes - but that was the moon,' Clarissa answered. 'There was all that cold hazy business; now it's as if he'd cut into the sun, or dragged him into it. In a way, it's terrifying. I mean that with the doves or the submarine or even the air in the aeroplanes over Paris, one feels that the thing itself is always there to be seen if one could. Like something of Lepine. The thing is like that. But this - ' She paused.

'The next thing? What was that?'

'Very likely feel that to see it is to be in it,' she answered, and

looked towards the door. 'It's there, waiting for us to go into it. No; it must be here too... if Jon's right. Richard, is the cof-

fee a compound of light?'

She smiled at him, and as he felt again how quick, how fresh, how joyous her smile was, he answered sincerely: 'I could easily think you were.'

She looked at him as if she only half-heard, and as if the half she heard were impersonal, and not personal. She said: 'If one was like that?'

There was a silence. Challis felt that he understood exactly what Jonathan Drayton's portrait of his wife was like; only he doubt-

ed if even Jonathan Drayton could get on to canvass any likeness of the absolute wealth of power-in-light which sat opposite him. He wished to see the whole of her body radiating glory; only he might not dare - and then he knew that now at least, if never again, he could certainly dare. That courage was a sort of enthusiasm, and yet it was something which, any-

where else, with anyone else, would have been courage. But not now, and with her.

She stretched out her hand; he looked at it with such a rising sense of intelligence, that he felt almost idiotic not to understand what she was saying intelligently. That shining hand expressed a centre of intellect, but what it was he had no idea. He heard her voice say: 'The report, Richard; perhaps I'd better look at it now.' He took it from her pocket and gave it to her. As he did so the thought of its content flashed across him and seemed at that particu-

lar moment more monstrous than before - the thought of the dead body which, at one small cut, had dissolved into fluid and scum and sediment. Then, as she spread out the paper and, her chin propped on that hand, began to read, the monstrosity lost its horror and be-

came something small and trifling compared with the dark head,

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'So she had gone on: 'We ought perhaps to be getting back now.'

She stood up. Clarissa looked up at him, in her eyes a lin-
gering shadow of doubt. She was almost on the point of sending him away; she was not at all afraid to go alone, and he seemed to her very young. She was not quite enough experienced in personal relations to have realized that this sense of childlikeness in him was partly that felt whenever a relationship grows intimate. It is, to the innocents, in the greatest degree of comprehensibility; it can, at times, be maddening beyond words but also it can be y-

beyond words. It can, in a flash, change into its precise op-

site, as it did at this moment, for while Clarissa thought she was looking at his child's simplicity, she found suddenly that she was in fact gazing at his power. He stood over her; he said: 'Let's go.' As she too rose, she found herself wondering which of them was taking the other. Their hierarchy, as she had felt it, was in a flash reversed, and she realized that if, in one particu-

lar voice which she would at once recognize, he had said: 'You had better not go to-night, ' she would at once accede, though she would probably dispute it for some time. But he did not, and when they were back in the house he spoke of the prophet of man; he

She settled that the watch should be kept in the room where the body had been found; there, while Challis brought their small paraphernalia into the hall, she changed into her older clothes. Then they carried the things into the room and settled themselves in the corner at the end of the right hand wall. They brought in one of the few teacups, in case their hands were too hot; they were back at the house it was she who once more took charge. The thing was in a flash reversed, and she realized that if, in one particu-

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whispered in the mountains of Norway or Greece. Compassion, once returned, returned with ironic power.

It was not to be denied that others might have been as evil; it was certain that, by the mere stress of danger, they had not been. London, in its darkness, expecting doom, had been forced on compassion; that inexorable law, the first of human necessities, had watched with it and survived with it during the year of fire and death. Its children had died in it or lived with it through its terrible justification; or, if by necessity they had been removed, had remembered it and almost with trembling rejoiced in it. 'London, thou art of cities a per se.' A per se indeed, since that September Saturday when first, for many years, in full day it blazed again to the skies. Challis now, remembering, felt as Clarissa had done, that that which had happened could not have happened. It could not be but that the Infamy had succeeded, and that London and all England had fallen. The almost undefeated City had perished, and now, forgetful of its past doom, knew itself again in a new earth. The dream (as so often) seemed likelier than the truth; the impossible itself was less strange than the improbable.

But the dream was destroyed for him, as it was not for Clarissa, by his awareness of an intimate death. He was dead? no, his wife was truly dead. He could not confuse the two; the separation had been too sudden and too intense. It had made him wise, with a wisdom that conditioned all later knowledge. Nothing could be without it; its nature entered into all. The fantasy of London dead and living - mighty in its own kind - was impoverished and to dispute its truth. It had been a warm, healthy, earthly, loving house, among hinted and suppressed meanings, with disturbing brain. He had used it without any precise thought, but the use had physical fidelity forbade.

And that which he had used was, perhaps, everything that wasn't; and they swung backwards and forwards in his brain. He strongly suspected that he was going to sleep; he felt the exquisite indulgence; only there was a kind of creaking which prevented him. It was as if his own thoughts, swinging in the stir of that wind which drove the clouds through the sky so that a continual change of moonlight and shadow fell on one side of the room and left the other dark, he almost suspected that that which had happened could not have happened. It could not be but that the Infamy had succeeded, and that London and all England had fallen. The almost undefeated City had perished, and now, forgetful of its past doom, knew itself again in a new earth. The dream (as so often) seemed likelier than the truth; the impossible itself was less strange than the improbable.

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To-night, as they waited and the City sounded, he felt even more. She was dead - yes; but ever since he had used the word 'supernatural' some other thorn of consciousness had pricked his brain. He had used it without any precise thought, but the use had imposed on him a kind of sensation of thought. She was dead, but her very death heightened that word 'supernatural'; it was what she, not being, was. But being that, had she not still being? The illogical ambiguity teased him in the backways of his mind; in this house, among hinted and suppressed meanings, with disturbing phenomena he could not trust, the one phenomenon he had trusted stood out more clearly. His knowledge of her had had about it a little of the great romantic vision, and he was not therefore tempted to dispute what had been a warm, healthy, earthly, loving she whom he had known and who had died.

Here - not here; there - not there; neither here nor there; being for ever, yet not being at all; opposite balanced opposite till his brain swung. And still, through the vast holes, the sound of the City drifted, something to which he was always used and yet something fresh and new, as the noise of it might come on a fortunate morning to a man waking from delirium - tam antiqua, tam nova. But though it pleased, it did not appease him. It could not - yet not - unite his more profound dichotomy; here... not here; there... not there. There were two sides to everything, to everything that was, or perhaps nothing that wasn't; and they swung backwards and forwards in his brain. He strongly suspected that he was going to sleep; he felt the exquisite indulgence; only there was a kind of creaking which prevented him. It was as if his own thoughts, swinging in the stir of that wind which drove the clouds through the sky so that a continual change of moonlight and shadow fell on one side of the room and left the other dark, he almost suspected that that which had happened could not have happened. It could not be but that the Infamy had succeeded, and that London and all England had fallen. The almost undefeated City had perished, and now, forgetful of its past doom, knew itself again in a new earth. The dream (as so often) seemed likelier than the truth; the impossible itself was less strange than the improbable.

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It rang in him as when a man in the second of waking hears himself called, or at least hears a call and believes it to be for him, and at once from the mere shock cries out in answer. But Challis' eyes were so on Clarissa that at first this new voice did not penetrate; he was held, within and without, by the vigour of her concentration. The voice again rang through him; it became a repetition; it said, with a kind of shrillness in it, but not at all hysterical, rather with a plaintive challenge: 'Is anyone there?'

He knew, even at that moment, that Clarissa was trying to hold him back from any answer, and for his part he was perfectly willing that she should. He shut his mouth firmly; he had had to have his voice under control on many occasions, and so now; but he could not altogether prevent himself thinking; and somewhere in him, even under Clarissa's eyes, there sprang an emotion which, translated into speech, would have been: 'I shan't tell you.'

The shrill noise — it was rather a noise than a voice; a kind of humanized squeal, but articulate and even imperious — said: 'Who? who?!' That at least was what it seemed to say, and now he began to pull himself together. For one thing, the floor had stopped swaying; for another, through the hole beyond Clarissa there was only the moon in a clear sky and no drifting cloud; for another, Clarissa herself was no longer making gestures, but only looking at him seriously and full. He felt himself, somewhere within him, saying: 'no'; and then he was smiling at Clarissa, and finding himself a little surprised that she did not smile back. He did not, after her warning, quite like to speak first, but he did not know why she was looking so serious; unless —

The rat — it must be a rat — squealed again, but he took no notice of it, for a much more important thought had struck him; she couldn't be thinking — or could she? — that he was ill or drunk? They had only had a little wine, hours before; still, he had been reeling about and grunting... she might wonder... He said: 'What have I been doing? It did not seem as if...'

She cut through his words. She said: 'We'd better go,' and began to move towards the door. He started on another half-apology, changed his mind, and said: 'But we haven't found out anything, have we?'

Her hand pressed his arm, but she said nothing. They came down the stairs and into the room below. They collected their things, and still in silence carried them to the car. While they did so, he was aware of the same rat's squeal, recurring from time to time. It was, he thought, a little odd that he should hear no other sound, no scurry or rush in the walls, but the thought was unimportant and faded. Presently as they got into the car he ventured to say again: 'Did you find out anything?'

Clarissa moved her head; he was not sure if she shook it or nodded. The calm of her apparent competence was shaken, and he did not well know how to respond. But presently, as he drove, he said: 'Something's happened to worry you; something new. Tell me,' and when she did not answer, he said again, and she felt once more, as she had after dinner, that now he had taken charge: 'Clarissa, tell me.'

She answered: 'I've gone further than I meant; we've gone further. I've found out all I thought, and I'm afraid it may have found us out. When we get home come in and we'll talk. You'd better know everything now.'

The con is now several months past, and it has passed out of immediate consciousness into the "mythic time" of memory, but there it becomes something alike to what Hyoi said to Ransom:

"A pleasure is full grown only when it is remembered."