DEAFNESS.*

I suppose that most at first resent the suggestion that they are growing deaf. I did so; indeed, it was several months after others began to remark upon my deafness before I could realize my altered status with the world, and then not from what people told me, or even from my inability to hear them, but from certain trifling but suggestive incidents. I sat reading one morning, when all at once I missed the companionable tick of the clock. My first thought was that it had stopped. I looked up; the position of the hands suggested no loss of time. I looked more closely; the pendulum was swing-

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ing as usual. I looked out upon the town-clock in a near steeple; the two marked the hour alike or nearly so. The truth came home almost as a blow that staggered me; it was I that *had stopped*. It was, however, in contact with outward nature that the scope of my loss was most vividly borne in upon me. One morning I was early out of doors. It was late in May, and the birds on the lawn and in tree and bush were holding carnival. For a little time I watched them, when all at once it occurred to me that I did not hear them. Could it be that they were not singing? A robin alighted on the lawn a little distance away. He lifted up his beak; I was quite sure I saw a familiar movement of his throat; but no note came to me. I turned into my home reflecting, "I shall never hear the birds again as I have heard them." Another day I was standing beside a little river near my home. It flowed in its usual curves, it rippled over stones as was its wont; but to me it was a silent river; it glided past me but spoke not, nor ever after would speak to me. At another time I was standing in a pine grove in the season of the year

When the pine tosses its cones.

The cones, indeed, were lying around me. I looked up; the breeze was swaying the branches, but

The song of its waterfall tones

was not borne down to me. At yet another time I drew up my curtain early one morning and was surprised to find it raining heavily. From childhood the sound of falling rain had been peculiarly pleasant to me; but now I discovered that the

Drip-drop, drip-drop, over the eaves,
And drip-drop over the sycamore leaves,

was no longer for me.

Thus through a few simple incidents was my changed estate made plain to me. There was still for me the thunder's crash, the tempest's roar, the cataract's plunge; but, aside from these and the like heavier noises, I must henceforth live in a soundless world. I remember reading about this time Krummacher's dialogue between Adam and Eloah, his attendant angel, and seeing in it a suggestion of myself though taken in the reverse. It is the evening of the first day, and the young Adam notes with anxiety the deepening twilight. In some things he was not as well instructed as I; at any rate, as shown in the pleasant story, he did not know that a sensation the less does not mean a reality extinguished. So he asks of his angel if the young creation *will go*, swallowed up in Old Night. I had no suspicion that sound would go, swallowed up in Old Silence. I had not a passing doubt but that to other ears the birds warbled, and the river laughed, and the rain-drops pattered, and the pine-trees moaned; it was I that had gone.

I write thus of myself, well assured that I tell in substance the experience of the great multitude of my fellow-sufferers. Now I would not magnify this experience unduly; there are sorrows everywhere in comparison with which it is entitled to no mention. Yet he is strangely wanting in sensibility who can take it home with cheerful spirit. He need not be rebellious, but he can hardly be less than pensive and regretful. To the ordinary sounds of nature he is dead. In his world leaves cannot rustle, or doves coo, or insects hum. Tree, air, bird, river, which before would converse with him in any solitude, now speak to no purpose. Before him the vast drama goes on, but it is only acted. A histrionic, but no voice is there.

The significance of this loss intensifies as we contemplate it more. The

pleasure of sound in nature, because of its very constancy, is hardly to be appreciated until it is lost. We fail to note it because it is so normal. The usual commiseration of deafness goes no further than the disadvantage it occasions in the necessary communications of life; just as of blindness, that it makes impossible the direction of one's hands in their tasks, of one's feet in their walk. These practical disadvantages are indeed serious and obtrusive, but in either case the measure of deprivation reaches far beyond them. Beyond the use of eyes in distinguishing objects is the simple joy of light; and we give no due estimate of the blind man's griefs till we take reckoning of this.

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The crowing of a cock under your window may not be a pleasant sound, but it is not without melody as it comes from a distant farmyard. The croak of frogs may grate harshly if very near, but at a little distance it is a lullaby to go to sleep upon. The cow has no fame even in poetry as a musician, yet her moo as borne to us from her pasture is musical. The thunder's peal may startle and terrify if it comes from just above you; but borne to you from the distant sky it seems the rolling bass of "heaven's deep organ." Emerson tells us how the Indian is daunted by soft music which is "wrought from barking waves," and how in the scream of the panther in the wild the child may hear "convent-chanting." The farmer's wife very likely is no prima donna, and her voice is sharp and shrill as she flings it across the fields in her noonday call to him; but its tone is not unworthy of Nilsson when it reaches him. The truth is that the very element by which sound is conveyed to us is charged with the further office of cleansing it from discord that it may become pure and pleasant to the ears. This, however, is of no purpose to the deaf man. With the sound he loses the music too; and so, when he wakes to the consciousness of his loss, it is with a sense of bereavement of which language can scarcely tell. He realizes that not only is a faculty destroyed, but that also an ever haunting joy has departed. There is within him a chord that responds to a harmony, but he has been banished to another realm where that harmony is not for him.

Only the half, however, has as yet been told. While the status with nature is thus changing, the status with men is undergoing a similar change. The finer chords of nature are lost, but the discords of the human voice are unhappily in evidence. Few speak to the deaf in pleasant tones. I well remember the impression that my wife was becoming very peremptory with me. Her requests seemed orders; her invitations were suggestive of commands. On her lips might be smiles, but there was severity between them. The people whom I met on the street seemed impatient with me. The grocer with whom I traded weighed and measured as usual, but a familiar geniality had gone out of his voice. The expressman did my errands, but he spoke roughly. The hostler was obliging in conduct, but his few and proper words came harshly to my ears. It seemed as if sympathy and kindliness had gone out of human tones, as for me, indeed, they had.

Of course this apparent harshness was due to a strained and unnatural use of the voice in the effort to make me hear. The old kindness was there, but the tones belied it. The tenderer emotions were as they had been, or perhaps enhanced by my evident misfortune; but the instrument that conveyed them was out of tune.

Such was my experience, the experience of so many others with difference of detail. And through this experience

it was at length borne in upon me, that as the finer voices of nature so the tenderer and sweeter human tones were no more for me; that save in exceptional instances there were for me only the rasping discords which an unnatural utterance is sure to bring forth. Does any one think this no serious matter? It is permitted him to experiment for a time, to suppress the gentler qualities of tone, and observe the practical effect. Try this suppression in invitation to a child, and see whether he will come to you or run away from you. Try it with the sorrowing, and note how far you succeed in comforting them. Try it with one in the heat of passion, and see whether you call him back to reason or intensify his frenzy. Let the young man try it in his tale of love, and note in which direction it will move a maiden's hesitating will. Try it for a time in the household; let wife speak to husband or husband to wife in such a tone as the deaf habitually hear, and note its effect upon domestic peace. Perhaps imagination, without the aid of experiment, may sufficiently realize the consequence. The truth is, that in these human tones are the solace and the madness of the world; and to be shut out wholly from the melody that gladdens and given over wholly to the discord that grates may be an endurable, but it is certainly no easy fate.