

# The Listeners

WALTER DE LA MARE

## About the Poet

WALTER DE LA MARE (1873–1956) paints simple scenes of miniature loveliness. He uses thin-spun fragments of fairy-like delicacy and achieves a grace that is remarkable in its universality. 'In a few words, seemingly artless and unsought', he can express a pathos or a hope as wide as man's life. De la Mare is an astonishing magician of words. In *Peacock Pie* (1913), he surprises the reader again and again by transforming what began as a child's nonsense-rhyme into a suddenly thrilling snatch of music. He takes such casual things as the feeding of chickens, berry-picking, eating, or hair-cutting, and turns them into magical experience. The trick of revealing the ordinary in odd colours, of catching the commonplace off its guard, is the first of De la Mare's two alluring craft. His second gift is his sense of the supernatural, of the fantastic other-world that lies on the edges of our consciousness.

## About the Poem

*The Listeners* (1912) is a poem that, like all the best of De la Mare, is full of half-heard whispers. Moonlight and mystery seem soaked in the lines. De la Mare's chief distinction, however, lies not so much in what he says as in how he says it; he can even take outworn words such

as 'thridding,' 'athwart,' and make them live again in a poetry that is of no time and of all time. He is a poet who is distinctively in the world and yet not wholly of it. Notice how the poem weaves its creepy charm through silence and a shadowy night.

## The Listeners

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,  
Knocking on the moonlit door;

And his horse in the silence champed the grass *ate*  
Of the forest's ferny floor;

And a bird flew up out of the turret, *fern*  
Above the Traveller's head: *a small tower on the top of building*

**T** And he smote upon the door again a second time; *knocked*  
"Is there anybody there?" he said.

But no one descended to the Traveller; *came down*

No head from the leaf-fringed sill *horizontal slat of window*  
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,

Where he stood perplexed and still. *surprised*

But only a host of phantom listeners *surprisingly*

That dwelt in the lone house then

Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight

To that voice from the world of men:

Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair, *(crowding)*

That goes down to the empty hall,

Hearkening in an air stirred and shaken *listening*

By the lonely Traveller's call.

And he felt in his heart their strangeness,

Their stillness answering his cry,

*remove top* While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf, *layer of earth covered with grass*

'Neath the starred and leafy sky;

For he suddenly smote on the door, even *knocked*

Louder, and lifted his head:—

"Tell them I came, and no one answered,

That I kept my word," he said.

Never the least stir made the listeners,



Though every word he spake  
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house  
From the one man left awake:  
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,  
And the sound of iron on stone,     ↓  
And how the silence surged softly backward,  
When the plunging hoofs were gone.     ↓

### Glossary

champed:	ate
ferny:	covered with ferns, soft plant without flowers
turret:	a small tower on top of a building
smote:	hit; knocked
descended:	came down
leaf-fringed:	covered with leaves
perplexed:	surprised
phantom:	ghostly
thronging:	crowding
hearkening:	listening
'neath:	beneath
spake:	spoke
stirrup:	the metal rings hanging on both sides of a horse, where the rider puts his legs
surged:	went back

### Understanding the Text