

THE LISTENERS *by Walter de la Mare*



Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor:
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
'Is there anybody there?' he said.

But no one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
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,
That goes down to the empty hall,
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
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.

Walter de la Mare



One of Walter de la Mare's greatest friends was the minor poet and novelist Gilbert Sheldon, who lived in the Old Manor House, Lympstone between the wars. It is possible, therefore, that Walter de la Mare visited our village, where presumably the door was answered when he knocked.

He is one of our most magical and unusual poets, many of whose poems are written for children, though they all have a wide appeal. *The Listeners*, published in 1912, was his first successful collection, and his work remains popular to this day.

In his favourite themes of childhood, fantasy and the numinous, commonplace objects and events are invested with mystery, and often with an undercurrent of melancholy. He was awarded the CH in 1948, the OM in 1953, and is buried in St Paul's Cathedral/.