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Visitors was written by Walter de la Mare (1873-1956), and was included in his *Collected Stories for Children* (1947).

Title: Collected Stories for Children — Visitors

Author: Walter de la Mare (1873-1956)

Date of first publication: 1947

Place and date of edition used as base for this ebook: London: Faber & Faber, 1962 (reprint of 1957 edition)

Date first posted: 30 March 2008

Date last updated: 30 March 2008

Faded Page ebook#20080308

This ebook was produced by: David T. Jones, Mark Akrigg & the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Visitors

by

Walter de la Mare

(from his *Collected Stories for Children* [1947])

One of the very last things that Tom Nevis was to think about in this world was a sight he had seen when he was a child of about ten. Years and years were to pass by after that March morning; and at the last Tom was far away from home and England in the heat and glare of the tropics. Yet this one far-away memory floated up into his imagination to rest there in its peace and strangeness as serenely as a planet shining in its silver above the snows of remote hills. It had just stayed on in the quiet depths of his mind—like the small insects that may be seen imprisoned in lumps of amber, their wings still glistening ages after they were used in flitting hither-thither in their world as it was then.

Most human beings have little experiences similar to Tom's. But they come more frequently to rather solitary people—people who enjoy being alone, and who have daydreams. If they occur at other times, they may leave little impression, because perhaps one is talking or laughing or busy, working away at what has to be done, or perhaps reading or thinking. And then they may pass unnoticed.

But Tom had always been a funny solitary creature. Even as a child he enjoyed being alone. He would sit on a gate or a stile for an hour at a time just staring idly into a field, following with his eyes the shadows of the clouds as they swept silently over its greenness, or the wandering wind, now here, now there, stooping upon the taller weeds and grasses. It was a pleasure to him merely even to watch a cow browsing her way among the buttercups, swinging the tuft of her tail and occasionally rubbing her cinnamon-coloured shoulder with her soft nose. It seemed to Tom at such times—though he never actually put the feeling into words—almost as if the world were only in his mind; almost as if it were the panorama of a dream.

So too Tom particularly enjoyed looking out of his window when the moon was shining. Not only in winter when there is snow on the ground, and clotting hoar-frost, but in May and summer too, the light the moon sheds in her quiet rests on the trees and the grass and the fields like a silver tissue. And she is for ever changing: now a crescent slenderly shining—a loop of silver or copper wire in the western after-glow of sunset; and now a mere ghost of herself, lingering in the blue of morning like a lantern burning long after the party is over which it was meant to make gay.

Tom was more likely to be left alone than most boys, owing to a fall he had had when he was three. He had a nurse then, named Alice Jenkins. One morning she sat him up as usual close to the nursery table and his bowl of bread and milk; and had then turned round an instant at the sound of something heard at the window. And he, in that instant, to see perhaps what she was looking at, had jumped up in his chair, the bar had slipped out, and he had fallen sprawling on to the floor.

The fall had injured his left arm. And try as the doctors might, they had never been able to make it grow like his right arm. It was lean and shrunken and almost useless, and the fingers of the hand were drawn up a little so that it could be used only for simple easy things. He was very little good at games in consequence, and didn't see much of other boys of his own age. Alice had cried half the night after that miserable hour; but the two of them loved each other the more dearly for it ever afterwards. Even now that she was married and kept a small greengrocer's shop in a neighbouring town, Tom went to see her whenever he could, and munched her apples and pears and talked about everything under the sun.

This accident had happened so long ago that he had almost forgotten he had ever at all had the full use of his arm. He grew as much accustomed to its hanging limply from his shoulder as one may become accustomed to having a crooked nose, prominent ears or a squint. And though he realized that it kept him out of things like climbing trees or playing such games as other boys could do with ease, though it had made a kind of scarecrow of him, it was simply because of this that he was left more to himself and his own devices than most boys. And though he never confessed it to himself, and certainly not to anybody else, he immensely enjoyed being in his own company. It was not a bit—as it well might be—

like being in an empty house, but rather in an enchanted one; wherein you never knew what might not happen next, even though everything was still and quiet—the sun at the windows, the faint shadows in the corridors, the water in the green fishpond and the tangled branches in the orchard.

Tom, too, beside being for this reason rather odd in his body—small for his age, with narrow shoulders, a bony face, light grey-blue eyes and a stiff shock of yellow hair standing up on his high head—was also a little odd in mind. He was continually making up stories, even when there was no one to listen to them. For his black-eyebrowed elder sister very seldom had time to do so; and the nurse he had after Alice was married had not much patience with such things. But he almost as much enjoyed telling them to himself. And when his sister Emily died he seemed to get into the habit of mooning and daydreaming more than ever.

He had other queer little habits too. Whenever he went downstairs from his bedroom—unless he was in a violent hurry or his father had called him—he always sat down for a few moments on a narrow stair from which he looked out from a tall landing window over the garden. It seemed to him you could never tell what you might *not* see at such a moment; though as a matter of fact he never saw anything very unusual: just the grass and the lawn and the currant-bushes and the monkey-puzzle; perhaps a cat walking gingerly on its errand, and the usual thrushes and blackbirds, tits and robins, and the light of the sun on the red-brick wall. And what you don't actually see you cannot put a name to.

Another fancy of his was, whenever he passed it, to stoop down and peer through the keyhole of a cellar that spread out underneath the old Parsonage. He might just as well have looked up a chimney for there was even less light to be seen through the keyhole. And nothing was stowed away in the cellar except a few old discarded pieces of furniture, some bottles of wine, empty hampers, an old broken rocking-horse and such things as that. None the less, whenever he passed that door, Tom almost invariably stooped on his knees, puckered up one eye and peered through its keyhole with the other, and smelt the fusty smell.

There was no end to his cranky comicalities. Long ago, for example, he had made a rule of always doing certain things on certain days. He cared no more for washing in those early days than most boys: but he always had a 'thorough good wash' on Fridays; even though it was 'bath night' on Saturdays. He went certain walks on certain evenings, that is, evenings after it had been raining, or maybe when some flower or tree was just out. And he always went to see his sister Emily's grave once a month.

She had died on the twelfth of April; and apart from her birthday, he always kept her month day—all the twelfths throughout the year. If he could, and if he had time, he would take a bunch of flowers along with him, choosing those which Emily had liked the best or those he liked the best, or both together. The churchyard was not far away, as the crow flies, but it was yet another of his odd habits not to go there direct—as if that might be too easy—but to go round by a meadow path that was at least three-quarters of a mile further than the way by the village lane.

Except when he happened to be by himself at evenings just after the sun was set, Tom always felt more alone on these monthly journeys than at any other time. And for as long a time as he could spare he would sit on an old bench under the churchyard yew. At first he had been exceedingly wretched and miserable on these visits. The whole Parsonage, his father and his sister and the maids—it was just as if a kind of thick cold mist had come over them all when Emily died. Everything that was familiar in the house had suddenly stood up strange and exclamatory, as if to remind them something was gone that would never come back again. And though none of the others, of course, really forgot what had happened, though he often actually noticed his father desisting from what he was just about to say simply because he could not bear the grief of mentioning Emily's name, as time went on, things began to be much as ever again.

In the early days Tom's black-haired elder sister, Esther, used to come with him to the churchyard now and then; but she soon had so many things to think about and to amuse herself with that there was very little time to spend with him. Besides, they agreed about nothing and spent most of the time arguing and wrangling. So for a good many months Tom had gone alone. He knew his own particular monthly walk to the churchyard as well as he knew his own clothes or anything else in the world. He never set out on it without wishing he could see his sister Emily again, and he never came home again to the Parsonage without thinking to himself that it was better perhaps he could *not* bring her back. For he was somehow sure, wherever her body might be, that she herself was perfectly happy, and, as it were, always to be young. Now and then, indeed, it seemed as if some wraith of herself had actually whispered this into his ear as he sat on his bench looking out across the tombstones, and sometimes wondering how long it would be before he was dead too. But then Tom's little moperies came very near at times to being a little mad.

That was another odd thing about Tom. He enjoyed thinking and puzzling over everything that came into his head, whereas most people will not allow hard or disagreeable thoughts to stay in their minds. They drive them out like strange dogs out of a garden, or wasps out of a sunny room. Tom thought of them, however, in the most practical way possible. He knew, for example, as much about grave-digging when he was ten as the old sexton could tell him at sixty. The thought of the bones beneath the turf did not frighten him a bit. Surely, he thought to himself, nothing could be as ugly as all that if it were just the truth. And if it was, why, then it *was*.

Not that he did not enjoy being alive in this world. He fairly ached sometimes with delight in it. He had talked to Alice about it, and to Emily too, sitting on a green bank in the sunshine or in the hayfields, or by the banks of their secret pond in the woods. He loved also to brood on what might happen to him in the future; though he never had the faintest notion in those days that he was going to travel, that he was going to leave England when he was still a young man, for good and all, and never come back. He had no notion of that at all until there came a talk one afternoon in her husband's shop with his nurse Alice. After that he knew he had been born to be a traveller in spite of his arm and his cranky meagre body. And what led up to the talk was what happened to him that March morning as he came back from his customary visit to the churchyard.

A faint but bleak east wind was blowing. Except for a light silvery ridge of cloud in the south the sky was blue all over, and the sunlight was as bright as if a huge crystal reflector behind it were casting back its beams from the heavens upon the earth. A few daffodils were out in the fields, and the celandine with its shovel-shaped glossy leaves too; and the hedges were beginning to quicken, looking from a distance as if a faint green mist hung over them. The grass was already growing after its winter's rest, and the birds of the countryside were busy flying hither and thither as if time were something that melted in the sun. Instead of returning from the churchyard to the house by the way he had come, Tom had turned in through a wicket gate into a straggling wood of birch and hazel, and so came out at the corner of a large meadow which lay over against the Old Farm.

There had been heavy rains during the previous week, and as Tom—absent-minded as ever—came edging along the path of the meadow, he lifted his eyes and was astonished to see a pool of water in the green hollow of the meadow beneath him, where none had lain before. Its waters were evidently of the rains that had fallen in the past few days. They stretched there grey and sparkling, glassing the sky, and the budding trees which grew not far from their margin. And floating upon this new wild water he saw two strange birds. Never had he seen their like before, though he guessed they might be straying sea-birds. They were white as snow, and were disporting themselves gently in this chance pool, as if it were a haven of refuge or meeting-place which they had been seeking from the first moment they had come out of their shells.

Tom watched them, fixed motionless where he stood, afraid almost to blink lest he should disturb their happy play. But at last he took courage, and gradually, inch by inch, he approached stealthily nearer until at last he could see their very eyes shining in their heads, and the marvellous snow of their wings and their coral beaks reflected in the shallow wind-rippled pool. They appeared to be companions of all time. They preened their feathers, uttering faint cries as if of delight, as if they were telling secrets one to the other. And now and again they would desist from their preening and float there quietly together on the surface of the water, in the silvery sunshine. And still Tom continued to gaze at them with such greedy eagerness it was a marvel this alone did not scare the wild creatures away. It seemed to Tom as if he had been looking at them for ages and ages under the huge shallow bowl of the March sky. He dreaded every instant they would lift their wings and fly away. That would be as if something had gone out of his own inmost self.

He was whispering too under his breath, as if to persuade them to remain there always, and let there be no change. Indeed they might be human creatures, they floated there on the water so naturally and happily in their devotion to one another's company. And it seemed once more to Tom as if the whole world and his own small life had floated off into a dream, and that he had stood watching their movements and their beauty for as many centuries as the huge oak that towered above the farm had stood with outflung boughs, bearing its flowers and its acorns from spring on to spring, and from autumn to autumn until this very morning.

What was curious too, the two strange birds seemed at last to have no fear of his being there, even though the bright shallow basin of rain on which they rested in the meadow was not more than eleven paces wide. They eyed him indeed with a curious sharp brightness, almost as if they wished to be sharing their secret with him, one brought from the remote haunts from which they had set out over-night; as if this was the end of their journey. The drops they flung with their bills over their snowy plumage gleamed like little balls of changing silver or crystal, though not brighter than their eyes. The

red of their webbed feet showed vividly beneath the grey clear water. And the faint soft cries uttered in their throats rather than with open bills were not sweet or shrill as a peewit or a linnet singing, but were yet wonderfully gentle and tender to listen to.

And Tom's odd mind slipped once more into a deep daydream as he stood there—in his buttoned-up jacket, with his cap over his short springy hair—in the light but bleak east wind that swept out of the clouds across the meadow and the roof and chimneys of the old red-brick farm... In the middle of that night he woke up: as suddenly almost as if a voice had called him. And the scene was still as sharp and fresh in his imagination as if he were looking at it again spread out in actuality in the morning light before his very eyes.

It was just like ridiculous Tom not to visit the meadow again for many days afterwards. Once or twice he actually set out in that direction, but turned off before the farmyard came into view. And when at last he did go back again, towards evening, the whole scene had changed. No longer was the wind from the east, but from the south. Lofty clouds towered up into the intense blue of the sky, like snow-topped mountains. The air was sweet with spring. The tight dark buds had burst in the hedges into their first pale-green leaf; thrushes were singing among the higher branches of the elms. But the pool of rainwater had sunk out of sight in its hollow, had been carried up by the wind and sun into the heavens, leaving only the greener and fresher grass behind it. The birds were flown....

One day in the following July, Tom went off to see his old nurse, Alice Hubbard. She had grown a good deal stouter after her marriage, and Tom sat with her in the cramped parlour behind the shop, looking out into the street across the bins of green peas and potatoes, carrots and turnips, lettuces and cabbages and mint, the baskets of gooseberries and currants and strawberries and the last cherries. And while Alice was picking out for him a saucerful of strawberries, he told her all about himself: what he had been doing and thinking, and about the new maid, and about the Parsonage. And she would say as she paused with finger and thumb over her basket, 'Lor, Master Tom!' or 'Did you ever, now, Master Tom!' or 'There now, Master Tom!' And all of a sudden the memory of the pool of water and the two strange birds flitted back into his mind and he fell silent. Alice put down before him the saucer of strawberries, with a little blue-and-white jug of cream, and she glanced a little curiously into his narrow, ugly face.

'And what might you be thinking of now, I wonder?' she said.

An old woman in a black bonnet and shawl who had been peering about at the fruit from the pavement close to the window outside, at this moment came into the shop, and Alice went out to serve her with what she wanted. Tom watched the two of them; watched the potatoes weighed and the sprig of mint thrown into the scale; watched a huge dapple-grey cart-horse go by, dragging its cartload of bricks, with its snuff-coloured driver sitting on a sack on top. And then Alice had come back into the little parlour again, and he was telling her all about the birds and the pool.

'Lor now, that *was* queer, Master Tom,' said Alice. 'And where might you have been that morning?'

And Tom told her he had been to the churchyard.

'Now you know, my dear soul,' she said in a hushed voice as if somebody might be listening; 'you know you didn't ought to go there too often. It isn't good for you. You think too much already. And Joe says—and you wouldn't believe how happy I am, Master Tom, living here in this little shop, though I never never forget the old Parsonage and the kindness of your dear mother—but Joe he says that one didn't ought to keep on thinking about such things. Not keep on, he means. How would the world go round, he says, if we was all of us up in the clouds all day. It looks to me as if you were more a bag of bones than ever, though p'raps you have been growing—sprouting up a good deal.'

'But wasn't it funny about the birds?' said Tom.

'Why,' said Alice, 'what was funny?'

'Why,' said Tom, 'they weren't just ordinary birds. I am not sure now they were even quite live birds—real birds I mean, though they might have come from the sea. And why didn't they fly away when I got near? They saw me right enough. And why, do you think, do I keep on thinking about them?'

'Lor bless me!' said Alice. 'The questions he asks! And all them whys! You ain't much changed at that, Master Tom.'

'Yes, but why?' Tom persisted, spoon in hand, looking up at her over his saucer of strawberries and cream.

Alice stood on the other side of the table, resting the knuckles of one hand upon it, and as she looked out across the shop a vacancy came into her blue eyes, just as if, like Tom himself, she too at times fell into daydreams. 'Well, I suppose—I suppose,' she said at last in a low far-away voice, 'you keep on thinking about them because you can't get them out of your head.'

'Oh that's all right,' said Tom a little impatiently; 'but what I want to know is why they stay there?'

'Well,' said Alice, 'some things do. I can see those birds meself. And of course they were real, Master Tom. Of course they were real. Or else'—she gave a little gentle laugh—'or else, why you and me would be just talking about ghost birds. What I mean is that it doesn't follow even if they *was* real that they didn't mean something else too. I don't mean exactly that such things do mean anything else, but only, so to speak, it *seems* that they do. All depends, I suppose, in a manner of speaking, on what they are to us, Master Tom. Bless me, when I stand here in this shop sometimes, looking out at the people in the street and seeing customers come in—even serving them, too—I sometimes wonder if the whole *thing* mayn't mean something else. How was I to know that I was ever going to get married to my Joe and keep a greengrocer's shop too? And yet, believe *me*, Master Tom, it seems just as ordinary and natural now as if I had been meant to do it from my very cradle.'

Tom looked at her curiously. 'Then what do you think the birds *mean*?' he repeated.

The soft lids with their light lashes closed down a little further over her blue eyes as Alice stood pondering over the same old question. 'Why,' she whispered almost as if she were talking in her sleep, 'if you ask me, it means that you are going to travel. That's what *I* think the birds mean. But then I couldn't say where.'

And suddenly she came back again, as it were—came out of her momentary reverie or daydream, and looked sharply round at him as if he might be in danger of something. She was frowning, as though she were frightened. 'You know, Master Tom,' she went on in a solemn voice, 'I can never never forgive myself for that poor arm of yours. Why you might by now ... But there! life *is* a mystery, isn't it? I suppose in a sort of a way—though Joe would say we oughtn't to brood on it—life itself is a kind of a journey. That goes on too.'

'Goes on where?' said Tom.

'Ah, that we can't rightly say,' said Alice, smiling at him. 'But I expect if them birds of yours could find their way from over the sea, there is no particular reason why human beings should not find theirs.'

'You mean Emily found hers?' said Tom.

Alice nodded two or three times. 'That I do,' she said.

'Well, all I can say is,' said Tom, 'I wish they'd come back, and the water too. They were more—more—well, I don't know *what*, than anything I have ever seen in the whole of my life.'

'And that's a tidy-sized one too!' said Alice, smiling at him again. And they exchanged a long still look.

And what she had said about his travelling came perfectly true. Quite early in his twenties Tom had pushed on up the gangway and into the bowels of the ship that was to take him across the sea to that far-away country from which he was never to come back. And though green peas and mint and the last of the cherries may not be quite such magical things in the memory as the sight of two strange sea-birds disporting themselves in a pool of rain-water on a bleak silvery March morning far from their natural haunts, these too when they came round each year always reminded Alice of that talk with Tom. Indeed she loved him very dearly, for Tom was of course—and especially after his accident—a kind of foster son. And when she heard of his going abroad she remembered the birds as well.

[End of *Visitors* by Walter de la Mare]