

VOICES OF INTOLERANCE

I am a good neighbour. In this overcrowded city, hemmed in on all sides with the houses of other men, I am impercipient. Especially do I take no note of the uproars that break out around me from time to time—I presume these are signs of life's onward march here, just as the grating sounds from around the corner are tokens of the progress of trams, and I am incurious. But, on Friday morning, I was awoken by such a varied and sustained din that overcoming my civic sense I rushed to the backyard and looked over the wall.

The hubbub came from a cassia in the compound of my neighbour to the east. A number of crows and rose-ringed parakeets had assembled about the tree, and in its top branches, circling round, settling, and circling again, screeching, screaming, cawing, and demonstrating at something that sat lumped, indistinct, and immobile in the heart of the tree. The something was almost completely hidden by foliage and flowers—it looked large, whatever it was, and apparently it knew there was little calm outside the screen of leaves. I took a quick census of the demonstrators, since the object of their attentions was invisible. The crows (mainly grey-necks) kept flying in and out and were too numerous to be counted, but there were about two dozen of them, and there were seventeen parakeets. A surprising number, for although parakeets visit the neighbourhood, they do not roost here, and I had not thought the locality held so many of them.

For a few minutes I had to rest content with watching the demonstration, for the cause of it all gave no clue of its identity—I guessed it was a large owl that had strayed into the neighbourhood, incautiously. Then unable to suffer the prying eyes and the many-keyed curses of the birds, it broke cover, climbing down surprisingly to earth, a young three-fourths-grown bonnet monkey, with half its tail missing, that raced across my neighbour's compound and streaked up the wall, and from it up the tall coconut tree in the corner of my backyard. Promptly the frenzied crows and parakeets shifted *en masse* to the coconut, and with a plainer view of their quarry demonstrated against it even more agitatedly.



The cause of the demonstration.

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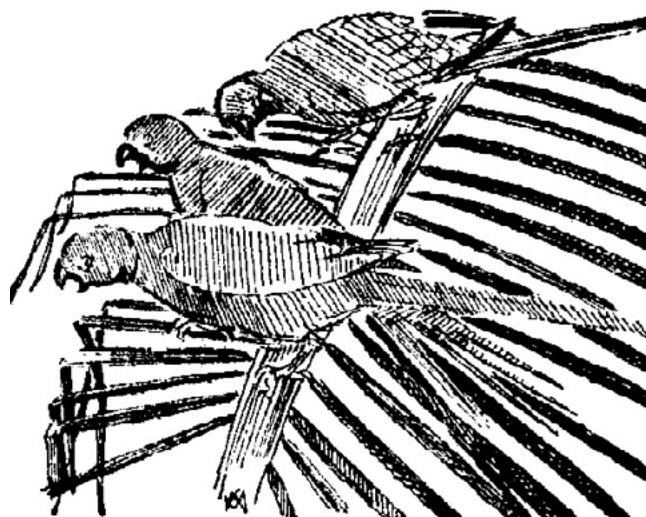
There are no monkeys hereabouts—this one must have been a runaway from some gypsy's troupe. From the coconut to the great wood-apple tree in my compound, from there through a row of coconuts to a mango, and finally to the concrete parapets of my western neighbours, the fugitive took its wretched liberty, never descending to earth again, seeking the cover of foliage from the tormentors—and the birds followed every move in its progress in a vociferous mob. Only when that harassed monkey took to the house-tops, abandoning green sanctuary, and disappeared westwards to where there were no trees, did they stop heckling him. Then all at once the chivvying ceased, as suddenly as it had begun some half an hour earlier.

At first all this may seem trifling, and hardly worth the record, but I feel the incident is not without interest to the naturalist. For one thing, this was the first time I had seen

parakeets demonstrating at a monkey, or any other creature, for that matter. Dewar, I think, mentions an instance of rose-ringed parakeets panicking at their roost, when a hawk took one of them, but this was something quite different. Though there were many more crows there, the varied voices of the parakeets almost drowned their cawing, and the crows seemed half-hearted in their heckling, by comparison. They just flew in from neighbouring perches to the monkey's tree, and then out again, but each parakeet, before settling, circled the tree on stiff-held wings, with every long-graded tail-feather outspread, heaping shrill curses on the unhappy macaque's head: they sat in rows craning over to peer through the leaves at their quarry till their heads seemed disproportionately big on the taut, thin necks, yelling vituperations, almost toppling off their perches in their excitement.

I cannot imagine why these birds were so affected by the monkey—in the countryside where they lead an arboreal existence together, I have never seen them demonstrating at macaques. Anything out of place excites the birds of a locality, and certainly that monkey was utterly strange in that setting, but this does not seem to explain the obvious anger of the parakeets. The crows were merely a subsidiary force, drawn to the scene of action by the parakeets—they were, as I said, almost casual in their protests.

Another remarkable fact was the complete indifference of other creatures present. I noticed that the numerous squirrels of my compound, and a party of white-headed babblers there just then, utterly ignored the monkey and its tormentors. Palm squirrels and white-headed babblers are notoriously more given to demonstrating against enemies and intruders than parakeets, but they showed no interest whatever.



The main demonstrators.

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Even more remarkable was the apathy of the human population. A gardener's child threw a small stone vaguely in the direction of the monkey, as it leaped from one coconut tree to another overhead, but this was a purely formal gesture, prompted by some dim, atavistic obligation to throw things at fugitive creatures. After performing this rite, the child took no further notice of the monkey, well within his puerile range. No one else seemed even aware of the commotion in tree and air. One of my neighbours was shaving at a window seat, and got up—I hoped he would step on to his terrace to see what it was all about—but it was only to get a towel before resuming his toilet.

Notes:

1. This article was first published on Sunday, April 21, 1951 under the fortnightly column 'Country Notebook' in 'The Statesman' of Calcutta. It is reproduced here with the permission of Asha Harikrishnan, who holds the copyrights of all of M Krishnan's works. Digitised versions of other writings by M Krishnan can be accessed here: <https://www.mkrishnan.com/writings.html>.
2. To read more about M Krishnan, check out his Biography titled 'Nature's Passionate and Meticulous Chronicler' by Varun Sharma on page 4 of this issue.
3. Are you wondering who Dewar is? Douglas Dewar (1875-1957) was a British civil servant and an ornithologist who wrote extensively on

Indian birds and wildlife. His books include: 'Jungle folk, Indian natural history sketches', 'Animals of no importance', 'Glimpses of Indian birds', and 'The Indian crow, his book'. You can find these and many more in the Biodiversity Heritage Library: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/search?searchTerm=Douglas+Dewar&stype=F#/titles>.

4. If you are as fascinated as us by the many characters that appear in this short piece, turn to page 43 of this issue.
5. Source of the image used in the background of the article title: Jigsaw pieces. Credits: Wounds_and_Cracks, Pixabay. URL: <https://pixabay.com/photos/puzzle-piece-tile-jig-jigsaw-game-3306859/>. License: CC0.



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