

REVOLT

Since the set-up at Toynbee House itself had a distinct bearing on what happened to us there, let me give a word or two of explanation.

First of all there was a parent Association. This consisted of a small group of west-end social reformers who, fired by the example of Toynbee Hall in London, conceived the idea of starting a club for working men in Glasgow. In pursuance of this idea, a beginning had been made at 25 Rottenrow. The Club established there had full autonomy in organising and managing its own affairs. These consisted of social activities of various kinds. One of those activities was the Choir.

In 1901, when I started, the Choir had no constitution. Some time later, as a result of agitation, it was given a constitution, but a limited one; nothing more than what might be called "Colonial status." The Club remained the controlling body. The members of the parent Association interfered hardly at all; believing, as they did, in giving scope to the Club members to exercise themselves in the arts of self-government. There, then, was the position.

Had the Choir been content to dabble away at music in a quiet and sociable way, as had been the case for some years before I became Conductor, things, no doubt, would have gone on quite smoothly. But the Choir became serious, very serious, asserting itself more and more as time went on as a musical body pure and simple.

Later, through its concert work, it actually became an economic asset. Here then was an anomaly—an income-earning Choir under the jurisdiction of a Club which was not; for, of course, the Club was not even

expected to be anything like self-supporting. Such a position was bound to give rise to trouble. It did. Constantly the Choir's liberty of action was being challenged. To give one example only. When, in the second year, we (the Choir) wanted to introduce an eight-page programme with words, in place of the usual four-page programme, we were brusquely told we had no right to do so; the argument being that what was good enough for our predecessors was good enough for us. Of course, it was not good enough for us. Eventually we got our way.

But with such things constantly cropping up, heat was engendered. There was bickering. There was strife; and strife, as all men know yet never learn, leads to more strife. Finally, when it was made clear that the ultimate say in the allocation of choir-earned funds lay not with the Choir but with the Club, there was revolt. The women in particular were up in arms. Their only "Toynbee" status was membership of the Choir. That being so, their loyalty to the Choir was an undivided one. The men, on the other hand, could be (as many were) members of both Club and Choir. It was not surprising, therefore, that the eternal query of the women became: "What right have these men to boss us?" To which there was no answer.

"Complete freedom" became the slogan of the women, a slogan which grew quickly from a whisper to a shout. The names of those warriors flash before me as I write—Jenny M'Coll, Elsie Hall, Carrie Emerson, Nellie Duthie, Lizzie Lees, Chrissie M'Kean, Bessie Laing, and others as well; all working girls fired by the flame-like spirit of independence. Their implacability was terrific. I could not understand it at the time, and this makes me respect them all the more to-day; certain as I am now that their attitude was inspired primarily by personal loyalty to myself. What they desired above

all was to free me from petty irritation, and to secure for me a fair field in which to carry on my work.

I confess I was not entirely with them. I would have been content with "Dominion status"—that is, a larger share of self-government. Beyond that, I could not see clearly. This view was shared by many of the men, although there were stalwarts who sided with the women. Others of the men were simply non-plussed. "How could we possibly maintain ourselves?" they would say. To all such faint-hearts, those Trojan women of ours had but one reply—a withering stare. Their blood was at boiling point. One day it would boil over.

What was the attitude of the officials of the parent Association during all this? On the whole they were sympathetic to our point of view, but, as I said earlier, it was not their policy to interfere with the working of the Club. On several occasions, however, they did try (unsuccessfully) to secure agreement.

After it was all over, and we had gone, one of their number confided in me. He expressed regret at our going, but thought it was inevitable. And then he told me that, much as he admired my work, he did not think I was temperamentally fitted to hold a body of people together for any length of time. That was over 40 years ago. He lived to admit his mistake, and to rejoice that it had proved to be a mistake.

EXODUS

The manner of our final going was dramatic in the extreme. What will it be? When? Where? How? These were the questions agitating the members. The girls were as restive as two-year-olds. To hold them to their work was becoming difficult. Clearly, the sands were running low.

Elsie Hall, a highly respected employee of a local firm (Wm. Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., Cathedral Street), went so far as to reveal the whole state of affairs to her manager. At once he offered to provide us with hall accommodation in Collins' Institute (only a few yards from Toynbee House). To be or not to be? To be it was.

There came a Monday night in early January of 1906, and I present to take the rehearsal, and the members clustered together excitedly. What was afoot? Elsie Hall spoke. She was a petite blonde, with blue sparkling eyes, and a perky, cock-sparrow manner. She did not mince her words. "We're leaving this place to-night; we'll not sing another note in it," she said, stamping her size-threes. Loud applause! The women had won, hands down.

Into the cold night we went, Elsie, pattering ahead, talking twenty to the dozen. I did not hear what she said, but I have a shrewd suspicion that it consisted of a castigation of the male sex in general. At any rate, Elsie never married.

We crossed the road. We filed into Collins' Institute. We sat down. We were free. It was I who suggested the name—*Orpheus*. What did the name matter? We were our own masters at last. Never did bride and bridegroom take up house with more joy than we did

that night. We sang. We laughed. Tears were shed I know; tears of happiness. We had no money, no influence. We were happy. In spirit it was all so like that night, four-and-a-half years gone, when first I met them. And again, as on that night, they spoke to me, not in words; in something more eloquent than words. This is what they said: "Lead on! No matter where you go, there will you find us." In this way, and after much labour and not a little pain, the Glasgow Orpheus Choir was born.