

IV

GYMNASTICS

The indescribable gusto of early days. Picture this scene. The little hall in the Rottenrow, fitted out, as it was, as a gymnasium. Along one of the walls, rows of Indian clubs. Sight-singing class. Eager students, rather puzzled, some hiding their blushes behind their copies. "Put your books down!" I say. Then, taking up an Indian club, I dump it on the top of the piano.

I begin. "Call this *doh*." Then, taking another club, I put it down some distance apart. "Call this one high *doh*. Thus we get the octave. Sing! One note the replica of the other, only higher. Simple. Sure you've got it?"

"Here now are two smaller clubs. Watch where I place them. This one, near the centre. Call it *soh*. This one a step or so lower. Call it *me*. Come on then. Watch the pointer—*doh me soh doh'*—up and down, down and up. The majestic common chord. Now let's make a bugle call out of it. Grand. Now a tune. Cheers."

"Two other clubs forward, please. Thanks. One goes between *doh* and *me*. Call it *ray*. The other goes just above the *soh*. Call it *lah*. Now see what happens. Are you ready? Follow the pointer. The scale first, up and down—

d r m s l d' l s m r d

Well done. See if we can make a tune. Ready?

m | s l d' s | m r d r | m s l d' | s m r m |
| s l d' s | m r d r | m s r r | d ||

Marvellous. We are becoming composers. That series of notes is the Caledonian (or pentatonic) scale, a good scale, but not the full modern scale."

"Throw another couple of clubs over, boys. Right. These clubs we might call the poor relations. Poor or no, they have their place in the musical economy. They are called *fah* and *te*. Watch where I place them; the *fah* immediately above the *me*, the *te* immediately below the high *doh*. Now we have the full modern scale—

d r m f s l t d'

Let's sing it. Again. We simply must get it into our bones. Capital. Now let's make tunes out of it. See if you recognise this one. Of course you do. '*Three blind mice*.' Now I call that real clever. Fancy getting such fun out of eight bits of inanimate timber."

"But, when you come to think about it, singers cannot be expected to carry a woodyard about with them every time they want to do a bit of singing. No. Well it so happens that the names of the symbols from which we have been singing are all printable. That is what is called notation. Look! There they are on the Modulator."

Having said this, I sweep the octet of clubs from the piano. They clatter on to the floor and roll obliquely in all directions. "Now, let's sing from the modulator. It only requires a little more mental effort." And they sing, leaping up, swooping down. It begins to dawn. Gone the blushes. Gone the gawkiness.

"And what are those notes you have been singing but the notes that you will find printed in your sight-singing exercise books? True, in the books, the notes are all on one level, and that is a pity; but what's the use of intelligence if you don't apply it? The thing is to get to know the notes, to sense their mental effects, and their relation one to the other. The rest is easy. So, with your permission, I'll remove the modulator. Here goes. Now, where are we? No clubs! No modulator! Does the prospect make you feel cold and shivery? No need. Another little mental effort. And yet another.

Good. I look ahead. I see you one day out on the high road with a strong desire to wear your hat at a rakish angle."

No fantasy this. It happened. The saplings had to be airted in a right direction. And they were.

V

TRIALS

We started, as you will have gathered, with raw material. But it was material after my own heart; for I, as well as the singers, had much to learn. And, collectively, we had the sense to realise that if the house was to be built, the foundations had to be well and truly laid.

We started, rightly, with simple music, music through which the singers could find expression without being stymied by note-consciousness. And we made progress of a kind.

Very soon we found ourselves *on the road*, providing concert items at Mission halls and such like places where our singing was expected to do little more than fill in cracks between recitations, and speeches, and the dispensation of tea and buns. Thus we gained experience, and much more besides; for the meetings often yielded an outcrop of humour both welcome and unexpected. For instance, it was at one such meeting, on a Saturday night, that we saw a loud-voiced and bombastic temperance orator brought to a standstill so complete that I question to this day if the poor man ever survived it, as an orator at least.

It happened thus. A little old white-haired woman had wandered in off the street. She was in that happy state of inebriety known as "sleepy-fou." She composed herself sedately on the front row. During the singing she was all ears and cheers. But the temperance orator she could not stand at any price. Something in her rich nature told her that somehow he was a misfit. Down would go the old head on the old bosom, nodding there, pendulum-like, until lulled to sleep. Alas! the orator would insist periodically on becoming temperamental,

working himself into a passion and punctuating his climax by a resounding thump on the table. Every time the table was thumped the old woman would waken with a start, querulously drawling this choice request: "Ach mister, gie us Annie Laurie." To this pleading heartfelt invitation the orator had but one reply: "Be quiet, woman!" Again and again this happened, until finally the orator simply had to sit down. This he did to the resounding cheers of the audience. It was a noble victory, a victory for that art which is eternal, over that rhetoric which is but froth. Alone, single-handed, that valiant little woman did it. Forty years and more have slipped by. I still think of her (long since gathered to her fathers) with affection and with gratitude.

At the end of the first year we gave a concert of our own. Choir concerts in those days were not popular. The only interest they evoked was from the relatives of members, and the relatives were generally more interested in the members than in the music. I don't blame them. Consider this particular concert—the choir singing some six or seven pieces, the programme filled out by stray soloists, a rather shaky fiddler, a recitationist, and a *Comic*. The *Comic* was the draw, if draw there was. Furthermore, neither the choir nor the soloists *addressed* the audience. One and all had their noses in their copies. Truly a grim affair.

I conducted with, of course, a music stand in front of me. The music stand on that occasion was one of those shaky metal affairs. A happy accident took place. During the singing of a piece, it collapsed, and there on the floor of the platform lay my music. I said a "happy accident." It was. For never again did I take a piece of music on to a platform with me; and never again was the choir guilty of singing with their noses in their copies.

Next door to the concert hall in which we were sing-

ing there was a pub. I might almost call it a retreat. For it was to this place, I believe, that many of our first supporters retired—after the *Comic* had finished his last turn. That was the end of the concert, for them.

Were we downhearted? No! We were not ready. This we realised. A heart-to-heart talk was the result. We spat on our hands, so to speak, and proceeded. We must learn how to address our people, how to carry them with us. We must break with tradition and evolve a new type of concert altogether. Spade work intensified, loose screws tightened, order and purpose in our work—these were the orders of the day. Never were orders more diligently and enthusiastically carried out.