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PROGRESS

In that period, 1902-04, the real foundation of the *Orpheus* was laid. It was a period of evangelical fervour. We had found a faith, faith in ourselves. Zeal was at its highest. "Tell us what to do; we'll stand up and do it" seemed to come to me from every one of those simple men and women. And they did it.

It was in December, 1903, that the thing happened. We had been engaged to sing at the East End Exhibition. Between times we had been doing a lot of work, and we had given a second annual concert with marked success. But this engagement placed us amongst the elite. For some reason apart altogether from us, the hall was crowded. It was a new kind of audience for us, predominantly middle-class. We opened with Hickenstirn's song, "O who will o'er the downs?" (remember it was 42 years ago), and we pulled the house down about our ears. And we went on that night from triumph to triumph. It was our first taste of real success. We had addressed our audience with fervour and intelligence, we had given them of ourselves, and we had won them, creating a bond between ourselves and the Glasgow public which remains unbroken to this day. A supporter accosted me going out—an old man. He said this: "Ye can stop noo; for ye'll never get that choir to sing better than it did the nicht." He was wrong.

Willie Jackson (one of our staunchest members) came home with me. He was excited to the point of tears. Willie was a butcher to trade, and a man of extraordinary sensitivity and bigness of heart. Besides, he was a first-rate and highly intellectual singer. Together, on choir doings, we had, many and many a time, "tired

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the sun with talking, and sent him down the sky." He is no longer of this world, this fine man, but he still typifies for us all that was best of those early days, all too that we strive to be to-day. Thus were we bound together; thus do we grow, our roots deep in the rich fertility of the past.

Another singer who appeared on the platform (as a soloist) that night was Boyd Steven, then a professional singer. Little did we know that one day Boyd Steven would be in our ranks (she joined us in 1912) and that her work and her personality would shine through our story over so many years as a thread of gold.

A great occasion that East End Exhibition concert! I went to bed, could not sleep, rose, dressed, and walked out into the night. And I thought then, as I think now, that any virtue that may be in me might well have come to naught but for the affection and constancy of my friends. That is a chapter yet to be written.

"Honest workers" was how a critic of the time described us. We did not demur. It was just what we were, although the critic did not mean it in that way. Looking back, I am sure on one point, that the choir's strength of character, even in those days, was no fortuitous thing. The "honest workers" had in fact discovered what millions of other workers never discover. They had discovered a loyalty, an abiding something to which they could dedicate themselves, and, through that dedication, find expression for the gold that was in them. Out of that came their strength of character, their reality, their great human appeal. We, their successors, are far cleverer than they were, far more able; but, without that which they had, our cleverness might well be our undoing.

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INTERLUDE

Members of choirs (including church choirs) have often been described as kittle cattle, ill to manage, hard to thole, liable to follow a foolish lead, and still more liable to *take the pet*. In Toynbee House, we may have had instances of such frailty but not many. On the whole the Toynbee singers were too busily engaged in their musical work to find time for temperamental cantrips of that kind. Keep a choir going if you would keep it on its toes, and out of mischief.

It is invariably from the idlers and from the inefficient (blest pair of sirens!) that such trouble comes. Chafing (unconsciously) at their inferiority, they become restive; discontent follows, and then—heigh-ho the folly! The best way of dealing with dissidents is to send them home, quietly but firmly. Better lose a single apple than risk the barrel. And appeasement is no cure; it is only an opiate.

Someone has likened a choir to a democracy. It is more than that; it is, in many respects, a microcosm of the world. Let all pull together, and all will be well. Let discord enter, and lo, the golden bowl is broken, "the spirit flown for ever." Discord breeds strife, and strife breeds war, and war has one end—disintegration.

Society has its grumblers, its self-seekers, its odd men and women who will not team up, its odder men and women who, for want of anything to stand on, are constantly standing on their dignity; blissfully unconscious (as they are) of the fact that standing on one's dignity is, in itself, a negation of dignity. All this is choir-like as well as world-like, but with one important distinction; that while society perforce has to suffer fools (gladly or sadly) a choir is not under any obligation to

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suffer fools at all. "Ah!" I hear the struggling choir-master say—"but what if the fool happens to be a tenor with a good voice?" I know the answer to that one. An ordinary voice plus a good spirit is infinitely to be preferred to a good voice plus a bad spirit. "But if he, the fool, is the only tenor in the choir?" my choirmaster continues. In such a case I can only say—"bear your cross bravely, brother; you are not alone."

Society, again, has its malignant ailments—cholera, typhus, cancer, tuberculosis, &c. So with choirs. Of such ailments in choirs, there is one which ranks high in the scale of psychotherapy. It is a tricky, nasty business, often resulting in death. In medical terminology it may be known (for all I know, as *craniumitis*, but it is better known in colloquial parlance as *swelled-head*. Amongst Toynbee singers (the gods be praised!) we had very little of this, a blessing attributable largely, I think, to the fact that they were not brought up on flattery. On the contrary, they were brought up, and very grimly too, to realise that, like their conductor, they were learners; and, furthermore, that they would continue to be learners even if they lived to be the age of Methuselah.

We did, it is true, have one or two mild cases, very mild, so mild that the rash scarcely showed at all. Being mild cases, an antitoxin of mild ridicule was all that was needed to effect a cure. After all, the disease is a mental one, and we must remember that *mental age* differs widely in adults. As the mind develops, so the ego diminishes. At least, it should diminish. It is in cases where it does not diminish that the consequences are, so often, fatal. The disease, it should be added, has been known to attack conductors as well as singers.

In another respect a choir (remember, I am referring to ordinary choirs, not to highly selective bodies) bears a close resemblance to the world, or, putting it in another way, to society. The Toynbee Choir, where the coat had to be cut very strictly according to the cloth, was an

excellent example. Take this aspect. In the fourth year we had some 80 singers, and, that, it would appear, was the Toynbee Choir. But was it? No! In every choir there is a core which is the real choir, just as in every nut there is a kernel which is the real nut. Our core never at any time numbered more than 30 or so. That core, naturally, consisted of the best singers, the best co-operators, the best *spirits*; characteristics, by the way, not always found in one and the same person. Without the core there could not have been the choir. For, while the remainder, left to themselves, might have been able to function, it is certain they would be quite unable to function either artistically or convincingly. Buttressed, however, by the members of the *core*, those secondary singers served a very useful purpose, and gave a certain solidity to the whole. Indeed, some of them, under excitement, were quite capable of rising well above themselves, and of doing unexpectedly fine things. I speak respectfully of those good people. Many of them had high compensating qualities, and many of our greatest loyalists came from their ranks.

But we also knew the drones and the parasites, the "tak'-a'-an'-gi'-e-nanes," the "here-the-day-an'-awa-the-morns"; narrow-souled individualists devoid of social sense, of understanding, of purpose, of generosity, of gratitude; so much flotsam and jetsam aimlessly bobbing up and down in the sea of life, a menace to themselves and to everybody else. So like the world!

I referred earlier to the likening of a choir to a democracy. A weak analogy, I'm afraid, for while democracy hastens to give to the drones and the self-seekers a vote, a well regulated choir bestirs itself to show them the door. Nor does the microcosmic analogy fare any better, for if a choir were to make as many blunders in its work and in its governance as the world makes, it (the choir) would at once pass into oblivion. And rightly too.

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STANDARDS

Round about 1901 the problem of problems in Scotland was voices. We were not rich in choral tradition as was, say, Lancashire or Yorkshire or South Wales. We were, in a sense, beginners, first generationists. More than likely this state of affairs was a belated hangover from the Reformation; that revolution which, whatever benefits it brought to Scotland, certainly struck a damaging blow at singing, as it did at many other pleasurable recreations. Fear, "the hangman's whip to keep the wretch in order," still lurked in the hearts of the people. Standards, consequently, were low.

There were a few beacons here and there (the old "Glasgow Select" for example), but these were too few to affect the general level. The one idea of singers seemed to be to open their mouths and empty them. Voices of whatever denomination—soprano, contralto, tenor, or bass—bore little or no resemblance one to the other. Tenors themselves could, miraculously and without taking thought, produce two or three different voices from one and the same set of vocal cords. Throaty, wheezy, whiny, shouty; it was only a matter of pulling out a stop, and there you were.

To get people to laugh at themselves is one way of putting them in the way of salvation. So, like the housewife leaning over the tenement window to beckon to the coalman, I used to hold up two fingers to my tenors when they were at their shoutiest, and yell—"two bags!"

Contraltos were much the same, and, in a lesser degree, sopranos and basses. The idea of *placing* their tone, so that it could be resonated and controlled, never entered their lovely little heads. Words (the one means

of achieving some sort of working unity) simply did not exist. Expression! There was a thing called "light and shade." When the singing was loud (and ugly)—that was *light*. When it was soft (and incoherent)—that was *shade*. Light and shade! Oddly enough, a press notice, early in our career, taunted us with having no "light and shade." Critics can be very amusing. They have given me many happy moments.

Yes, it was a bad period, a period of lawless individualism—private enterprise carried to the point of privateering.

Musical festivals and other agencies have changed all that. To them, largely, we owe our present-day standards. Conductors who to-day start in on the drawing-room floor—will you, in your prayers, have a word of remembrance for the poor scullions who, long ago, had to get down on their knees to clean up the mess?

Notwithstanding all this, we, the choir, survived and progressed. As we got into our stride we were being called upon, more and more, to provide full programmes. This was a problem, for it meant solo as well as choral items. We had one or two fair soloists, but we required more, and had, therefore, to try out the less fair.

Memories! Those Lost Chords, and Distant Shores, and Sailor's Graves, and Dreams of Paradise, and Children's Homes, and Down the Vales, and Monas, and Nirvanas, and Stars of Bethlehem, and Holy Cities! Ah, how you haunt me with your lush and cloying convolutions.

I still recall, with bemused pleasure, one of our try-outs, a baritone with a strange and wonderful disregard of pitch. Gaily and unconsciously he would sharpen and sharpen. Up would go the accompanist (an accommodating fellow and one of the dry wits of the choir), and up again would go the singer, until, in the last lap they would meet and come romping home together in a

blaze of glory. After one such escapade, the baritone, twitted by his fellows for singing out of tune, became rattled. "Here!" he shouted to the accompanist, "did I go flat in that song?" To which, serenely and suavely, the accompanist replied: "On the contrary, my dear boy, you were a great success, and, by raising the song a full tone, I think you improved it enormously."

Then there was the contralto of the strictly "utility" type who would insist on singing "The Enchantress." Poor girl, she was no enchantress, and that was no fault of her own. But she held a trump card. It was a bottom G. With it she knew she could eventually scoop the pool. And she did. At "Love like ours is the power of magic powers" she let them have it good-o; and, of course, the audience threw in their hands.

That was the way of the world at the beginning of the century.