A Blind Musician Looks Back

An Autobiography

Photo by] *[Hislop & Day*

ALFRED HOLLINS AT THE ORGAN

ST GEORGE'S WEST, EDINBURGH

A Blind Musician Looks Back

An Autobiography

BY

ALFRED HOLLINS

Bardon Enterprises
Packebusch

First published in 1936 by Blackwood & Sons Ltd.,
Edinburgh and London.

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ISBN : 1-902222-00-8

Typeset and printed in Germany

by Bardon Enterprises.

Bound in Germany by Ronarteuro.

Packebusch, Germany

Second impression, 2009.

wwww.bardon-music.com

To

MY WIFE

And I thought to myself, How nice it is
For me to live in a world like this,
Where thing can happen, and clocks can strike,
And none of the people are made alike ;
Where Love wants this, and Pain wants that,
And all our hearts want Tit for Tat
In the jumbles we make with our heads and our hands,
In a world that nobody understands,
But with work, and hope, and the right to call
Upon Him who sees it, and knows us all.

—W. B. Rands.

INTRODUCTION

A LITERARY critic of long experience and wise judgment, who before he died saw the first few chapters of this autobiography, wrote to me, "One is captivated." I believe that that will be the comment of nearly all who read the book. It is a feat of memory such as few could perform, and even more striking in the original page—type-written almost faultlessly—which contain descriptions of organs, dates of various happenings, times of trains, and many other details that had to be sacrificed in order to save space. I envy those their pleasure who read the story of my friend's life straight through as it stands, but they in turn may envy me the satisfaction I have had in reading the full narrative as it came from the author's richly stored, methodical mind.

But memory alone, however good, does not make an interesting book. There must be something more. Alfred Hollins is a master of the organ, one of a group of great players, including besides himself Peace, Balfour, Lemare, and Hoyte—all recital organist—and in addition he remains to this day what he was in marked degree fifty years ago, a virtuoso of the pianoforte. You may hold your breath while he plays the long pedal passages in Bach's great Toccatas in C and F, or find yourself smiling with joy at his light touch in Pietro Yon's humorous Organo Primitivo, or be amazed by his unsurpassable power of improvisation, but you will assuredly forget that it is a blind man who is playing and you will be conscious only of music that carries you out of yourself. Or you may hear him at the piano in a friend's drawing-room, when he will give you a modest programme of Schumann, Mendelssohn (because you are pleasantly old-fashioned), one or two of his own published pieces, Chopin, and Wolstenholme, whom he admires and loves. You will not hear the big-

ger pianoforte works : for these you should try an organ recital, first making sure that there is a concert grand within reach. But if you are lucky you will hear in the drawing-room an improvisation, and likely enough it will be modern in treatment, because you may, after all, be a modernist with a chromatic urge. Usually there is no improvisation except at an organ, but I have heard on the piano a working out of the Malvern chimes (see page 323) the cumulative effect of which is unforgettable. A thrush came and sang an obbligato. He perched in a tree just outside the window, coming as close to the piano as he could.

Great memory work and great playing—but even these together do not necessarily make an interesting book. Hollins has to his credit a number of composition—too many to be listed here—all of them individual, melodious, and persuasive. Music is music, and we need not concern ourselves with arguments about the programme and the absolute.

The broad truth remains that a composer gives expression to what has inspired him, and it is not, I think, incorrect to suggest that Hollins in his compositions tells of the light and shade he feels but cannot see. Sightless himself, he has the power of making things plain to the sighted, and his music is popular in the same way as the light of the sun is popular. Of one of the compositions Mr Ralph T. Morgan of Bristol wrote not long ago : "In one week I was asked to play it at a service on Sunday ; at a Christian Science lecture in the Colston Hall ; at a wedding in S. Mary Redcliffe ; at the funeral of a young doctor which was taking place in a country church near here ; and at an organ recital… particularly was I touched by the request to play it at the funeral of that gifted young doctor friend."

An exceptionally retentive memory, the brilliance of a great executant, and considerable ability as a composer—we are nearer to what makes an interesting book ; but there is still something more than these, an intimacy of purpose that com-

pels attention in the reader. This blind musician's love of life, his appreciation of clever mechanical contrivances, and his affection for animals have much to do with it, but above all else it is his genius for friendship that makes his story so attractive. It is a patient genius, too, as I have reason to know. For a blind man to revise his written work by hearing it read to him would be a long and tedious process, and I have had the relatively simple job of going through the original manuscript and suggesting such emendations as the author himself would probably wish to make. It was a severe test of his toleration. The index is the work of Miss M. H. James, to whom we are both indebted for her assistance.

Between Alfred Hollins and his wife exists a sympathetic understanding not to be described. I wonder whether I shall be allowed to tell of one or two domestic matters, or whether the blue pencil will be taken into their shy but determined fingers? On the cover of his typewriter she has sewn a scrap of cloth so that he may know exactly where the middle point of the front should go. It is one of the clever contrivances he likes so well. If he wants a new shoe-lace he must put it in straight : "I shall get a rare talking-to if it's twisted," he says. And when the telephone bell ring—I hear it now—"Telephone, Alfred!" He takes the call. …

The discerning will think it out for themselves.

JOHN HENDERSON.

EDINBURGH, *July* 1936.

CONTENTS

CHAP. PAGE.

I. WHAT IS SNUFF? 1
II. TAMBOURINE TARGET 15
III. THE BLIND SCHOOL AT YORK 30
IV. INTRODUCTION TO NORWOOD 48
V. HERO-WORSHIP AND A PLAYGROUND RAILWAY 62
VI. MAY I GIVE YOU A TEXT ? 79
VII. KNOX AND I WANDERED 91
VIII. MANY GREAT MUSICIANS 111
IX. RECITAL ORGANIST 128
X. DAFFODIL DAYS 139
XI. PUPIL NO LONGER 157
XII. TORCHLIGHT PROCESSION 177
XIII. TIRING THREE BOYS AT THE BELLOWS 200
XIV. FROM NORWOOD TO EDINBURGH 214
XV. FREE ST GEORGE'S 229
XVI. VOYAGE TO AUSTRALIA 242
XVII. RECITALS DOWN UNDER 252
XVIII. THE FIDDLES IN IT 267
XIX. SOUTH AFRICA 277
XX. MARY'S LITTLE LAMB 289
XXI. THE JOHANNESBURG JOB 302
XXII. OVER THE AIR 322
XXIII. BEGINNING OF THE BIG TOUR 336
XXIV. HALF-WAY HOUSE 359
XXV. HARDENED TRAVELLERS 378
XXVI. A MELODY THAT LINGERS 401

INDEX 410

CHAPTER I.

WHAT IS SNUFF ?

THE 11th September 1865 came on a Monday, and it was on that day at 123 Coltman Street, Hull, that I first saw the light. This is a strange expression to be used by one who is supposed to have been blind from birth. For many years I believed that I was born blind, and for all practical purposes that was so. But an eminent oculist who examined my eyes when I was a student at Norwood told me that I must actually have had the power to see. He asked when I lost my sight. I said I had never had it. "You mustn't say that any more," he said, "for you were certainly born seeing. Whether you saw only for a minute, or an hour, or a day, I can't tell you." If that is true my sight must have gone almost immediately, for it was not long after birth that I was discovered to be blind. What actually caused my blindness is not known.

My paternal grandfather was a native of York, where he lived until his death in 1872. He had four children : George, John (my father), Mary, and Joseph. My father was born in 1834. He was apprenticed to a stationer in Harrogate at the age of thirteen, and used to travel from York to Harrogate by coach. Afterwards he went to De la Rue's in London for a time, and eventually settled in Hull as assistant in the Stamp Office under Mr Croskill, whom I remember perfectly. My mother was Miss Mary Evans. She came from the south of England, and was married to my father at Brighton in 1856 or 1857, but I do not know anything about her parents or other relations except my uncle, William Evans, who lived at Norwood.

My father and mother had three sons—James, 1858, who is still living ; John, who died in infancy ; and myself. I recall very

many circumstances connected with my early childhood, and if I mention any that have been told me in later life I shall make it clear that they are not from my own memory. My mother does not take a prominent place in these early recollections. She was musical and had a good voice. Hearing her sing and play was most likely my first acquaintance with music. My father had no singing voice, but he could sing a tune correctly. There were three songs I used to ask him to sing and play for me ; "So Early in the Morning" (which he always played in D, but when I first learned it was D, I cannot say), "Wait for the Waggon," and "Uncle Ned." The first two were my favourites. How vividly I recalled those days when, a few years ago, my friend the late E. G. Meers played his clever variations on "Uncle Ned" on the charming organ in his house at Guildford!

I distinctly remember my mother singing "Juanita." It must have been very popular then, for Arnold Bennett, depicting the same period in "Milestones," makes Rose sing it. Hearing this old-fashioned melody in the play had a marked effect on me, for to the best of my belief I had not heard it since my mother sang it.

Coltman Street is one of the longest side-streets I know. Like many others it began by being on the edge of the country, only to find itself ultimately part of the town. The houses are mostly semidetached, with a side-passage separating each pair from the next. Up to 1928—the last time I was there—the numbers, unlike those in most streets, ran consecutively and not odd on one side and even on the other. Our house was a small two-storey one with back and front rooms, kitchen, scullery, &c on the ground floor, and three or four bedrooms upstairs with an attic above. Over the kitchen and entered from the half-landing was a fairly large room which my brother and I called the nursery. To a child everything appears larger than it really is, and when I revisited No. 123 after an absence of nearly sixty years, I was surprised to see how small the rooms were and how narrow the hall. It was, however, very gratifying to find that I had carried many of the details in my mind all that time—*e.g.*, the cor-

ner in the hall between the two sitting-rooms, the French windows opening into the garden from the back room, the step down into the kitchen, and so on.

I don't think the garden was very large, but it seemed so to me when I was a child. It had a path all round it bordered by flower-beds, and a lawn in the middle on which my father and mother and their friends played croquet. One of the croquet hoops had a bell hanging from the middle, and I liked to get hold of a ball and the small mallet used for knocking the hoops into the ground, kneel on the grass about a yard from the hoop (first measuring my distance) and then knock the ball and try to get it through the bell-hoop. Sometimes, of course—probably most times—I missed the hoop, and an abject grovel on hands and knees followed till the ball was found. And I used to delight in running round the garden pulling a tin railway engine which I later pretended was a steam-roller. But more often my plaything was a fine substantial wheel-barrow specially made for me to my father's order. Strange to say, I very seldom pushed this barrow—in fact, I do not think I realised then that wheel-barrows were pushed—but preferred to get between the handles and pull it. My brother Jim, seven years older than I, was always very good to me and played with me whenever he could. He often gave me a ride in the barrow, which was a great treat.

To this day I am at a loss to understand how a blind person, especially a child, gets the sense of direction and learns to find his way about, for he has nothing to go by but touch and sound. But we do get it, thank God, from a very early age ; at least, most of us do.

Few sighted people realise that the blind have no idea of proportion or of the size of a thing unless they can feel it. Even long-experienced teachers of the blind do not take this sufficiently into account. Schools for the blind should have models—not raised diagrams—of as many objects as possible, especially of those things such as bridges, roofs of churches, aeroplanes, &c., which are out of reach.

From the first I was interested in any new thing that was being made. My father had a summer-house built at the top of the garden. It was not a rustic arbour, but a little room with windows all round, made to open. I remember how excited Jim and I were about it. A large slate cistern for holding rain-water was also a source of interest. I suspect that my father had a passion for collecting rainwater, because in addition to this large upper cistern he sunk an underground one from which the rain-water was drawn by a pump in the scullery. Young Master Inquisitive wanted to know all about the working of a pump, but was too young to take it all in. No doubt it was sufficient satisfaction to be allowed to pump, or rather to imagine that he was pumping when another really did the work.

The toys I remember best were musical. There was a musical cart with pins stuck into the back axle and arranged to pluck two or three wires when the cart was pulled along, but I did not care much for it. I liked tops best, especially little metal ones that were wound up with a kind of spring key. And I have been told that one of my amusements was to run round the dining-room table with my left hand touching the edge and my right pulling a toy railway carriage to which I had taken a special fancy. So devoted was I to this pastime that I wore a complete circle in the carpet. My brother was at school most of the day and I had therefore to amuse myself as best I could.

Although I began to take notice of musical sounds—especially those of the piano—almost as soon as I could toddle, these did not absorb all my attention or keep me from my playthings. I have never been one of the sloggers who practise for three or four hours on end, especially at technique.

But before getting on to my musical life I want to say a little more about my childhood. It may hardly be credited, but I distinctly remember being in frocks, especially one, a poplin with big velvet buttons. I do not know the colour, but I must have been told I looked nice in it for I know it was a favourite.

My father was devoted to me, and I returned his devotion. I do not remember his scolding me, but to the best of my belief he did not spoil me. I think he took the right way of training me. He would always try to answer my many puzzling questions. For instance, I had a little wooden snuff-box, made like a book. It was a puzzle to open, but I soon learned how to do it. Father said it was for snuff. I asked : "What is snuff ?" Instead of putting me off by saying I was too young to understand, he brought some snuff for me to examine. The result of the examination was probably amusing.

A round clock in the hall had a deep "strike." This clock, afterwards known as St Paul's, was much too high for me to reach, but one night my father lifted me up as it was striking seven and let me examine it thoroughly. Until the house was given up, this operation was repeated every night at the same hour. It became the first movement of the Bedtime Symphony. For the second movement my father took me on his knee and gave me what I called "five biscuits" and a drink of warm milk and water. I don't believe it was five whole biscuits, but one or two at the most, broken up into five pieces. But I was most particular to have no more than five. The "five biscuits" were placed in the lid of the biscuit tin, perhaps to avoid the risk of my breaking a plate and to give more room for crumbs. Then father would take me upstairs, undress me, and tuck me up in a little cot close beside my mother's bed and his. The last thing he always said to me was :

> Good night, God bless you ;
> Get up in the morning
> And I'll dress you.

Every morning I went with father to the front door to see him off to the office. It was my ambition to open the door for him, but I could not reach the latch. Father got over the difficulty by fastening a cord to it so that I could pull it back. After I had shut the door—and it had to be shut first—he would call, "Good morning, Alfy." If by some mischance he happened to

forget or I not to hear this parting salutation he left a weeping little figure behind.

I have mentioned that I had to amuse myself a good deal, but this must only have been during my first two or three years. Our next-door neighbours were Mr and Mrs Marker, and I suppose I was still in frocks when I began to know their children, and particularly their younger son, Herbert (now British Consul at Valencia), who is just my own age. The Harkers had been living at 124 for some years before my father and mother came to 123, and it was occupied by two of the daughters up to the end of 1928, so that the Harker family lived there for the unusually long period of more than seventy years. How or when our acquaintance began I cannot recollect, but I remember crawling through the railings which separated the two back-gardens and spending the greater part of the day next door. For some reason or other I never went out and in by the front door, and it was soon noticed that I was trampling down the flowers in both the gardens. To prevent further damage my brother laid down a narrow strip of board on each side of the fence, just wide enough for me to walk on, and I took full advantage of what was my own private path. When, a few years later, my father gave up the house in Hull, and I went to live in York, I lost touch with the Harker family for a time, but to this day the tie has not been broken. After I went to Norwood I spent part of the first two or three summer holidays in Hull and never failed to visit my old friends at 124. It was on one of these visits that Mrs Harker showed me a box of table ninepins with which, she said, I used to be very fond of playing. I played with them again on that occasion, not to renew old associations, but simply because I was enough of a boy to be still fond of playthings.

I cannot recall when I first knew that I was different from other children—I mean, that I was blind—but certainly I realised that there was something the matter with my eyes when I was about three years old. My father and mother took me to London to see Dr Murie, who, if not an oculist in the present-day meaning of the word, was a noted physician and highly

skilled in treatment of the eye. It must have been my first railway journey, and I remember it distinctly. The sound of the train, the feel of the carpet-covered cushions of the seats, the wooden floor of the compartment, the wooden doors—doors were not padded then—have all left an unforgettable impression. I remember sitting on Dr Murie's knee and crying when he put drops into my eye. And I remember a spring bell on the table and that I was told that if I would be a good boy and keep still, I might ring it. I suppose I kept still, for after the examination was over I rang the bell. It brought an attendant, and very proud I was to find that I could call anyone by ringing a bell. Afterwards we went somewhere in a bus called The Bank Favourite. The experience was lived over again when some years later I travelled by a London bus and knew once more the characteristic jolt and smell and the typical voice of the conductor.

On the occasion of the visit to the oculist I think we must have had something to do in or near Hornsey, for I remember sitting on the counter of a shop to try on a pair of gloves which, when I asked for them afterwards, I always called my Hornsey Road gloves. We also went to see my uncle and aunt Evans who lived at Sunnyside, Gipsy Hill, Upper Norwood. My uncle had a harmonium which I played, but I suspect that someone worked the bellows for me.

Blind people are very quick to notice the slightest detail of anything they can feel with either hands or feet, and rises or depressions in the ground are a great help in going about, especially when one is alone. On that first visit to London I was taken to the Crystal Palace and I noticed the wide openings between the floor-boards. The floor of the Pavilion at Buxton is similar, as I found when I was there for the first time three or four years later. And when I went back to the Palace after I was at the Royal Normal College in Norwood, the first sensation of those open boards came back in a flash.

My parents bought me a humming-top at the Palace which I long treasured and called my Crystal Palace top. I know the

feel of it now. And I must have heard the Palace organ, for I remember getting muddled between "organist" and "orchestra."

I cannot say when I first began to notice musical sounds ; I do not remember a time when the names of the notes of the piano were unknown to me ; I do not recall the days—for there must have been such days—when I could not pick out a tune with one finger. The curious thing is that until I had my first lessons at the age of six or seven I played only single notes with my right hand—and that with the second finger (English fingering)—but I used the thumb and fingers of my left hand correctly. I made up my own basses. The tunes I played were those heard on the barrel-organs that used to come regularly and from my earliest days were a source of delight and interest.

There were three organ men who came to us : the Monday man ; the Thursday man ; and one whom I liked best, the Friday man. Those old barrel-organs are fast dying out. Even when I was still a little boy they were being replaced by the street piano, which, since the Great War, has almost disappeared too. Nearly every barrel-organ played in E flat, but my firm belief is that my Friday man's organ played in C and G. To me it sounded richer than the others. And I think my Friday man must have been old and that he had a son who was also an organ man, for one Friday when I had a bad cold and could not go out to give the customary penny and have a turn at the handle my father asked the man to come into the kitchen, and the organ in the kitchen played in E flat. The loud noise it made frightened me, and the E flat disappointed me. This was not my Friday man, the old man, whose organ played in C and G and pleased my ear. It must have been Friday man's son who played in the kitchen, and I had no day of the week by which to name him. Probably the old man, like myself, had a cold and was obliged to stay indoors.

Among the tunes I picked up from the barrel-organs were "The Lancashire Lass," "Up in a Balloon, Boys," "Ever of Thee I Fondly am Dreaming," "Champagne Charlie is my Name," &c. I have heard that a child picks up much more readily what it

should not, than what it should. Although I went to church regularly with my father, I do not remember picking up any of the hymn tunes, but one Sunday morning I had to be taken out for crying because my father could not tell me the name of the tune that was being sung. Shortly before this happened I had been given a toy trumpet with a slide which produced four notes—G, C, E, G. On reaching home I thought to console myself with this new treasure, but as a punishment the consolation was at once denied me.

We had a very good Collard piano. I have the feel of that piano in my mind now, the moulding of the key cheeks, and above all the rounded black keys. Until I was about seven years old I did not sit at the piano, but stood and played my barrel-organ tunes, making a click with my nails after each in imitation of the organ man changing the tune.

My first acquaintance with a real organ must have been at about this time. I was brought into the world by Dr Healey, who used to make me angry by saying in a loud voice, "Now, Bobby!" to which I would reply, "You know my name is not Bobby, and I don't like it." Dr Healey had a small organ in his house, and one Sunday afternoon I was taken to see it. I was lifted on to the seat and began at once to play "The Lancashire Lass" or some other profane ditty. Certain good people present were shocked and my secular propensities were apologised for. I knew nothing about pedal notes, and when someone sounded one I exclaimed in rapture, "Oh, how delicious!"

It is strange that I had not previously heard pedal notes, for we attended Wycliffe Congregational Church regularly, where there is a large three-manual Forster & Andrews. It may be that at the time of which I write the organ had not been built, for I remember being told one night that my father and mother had gone out to the organ opening at Wycliffe and I wondered what an organ opening was. If the Wycliffe organ was not built till after the episode in Dr Healey's house, it is probable that a harmonium was in use, and this would account for my not having heard pedal notes. But why I did not pick up hymn tunes is a

question for the psychologist. Perhaps it was a case of original sin.

The minister of Wycliffe was the Rev. W. M. Statham who afterwards joined the Church of England. I cannot remember anything of his voice or sermons : I was very young and our pew was at the back of the church. But I remember very clearly that I liked to sit at the top end of the pew next the division because a young lady or little girl—I do not know which—who sat on the other side of the division would then hold my hand during the service. And I remember a clock on the front of the gallery which struck once at the hour and half-hour on a very deep gong. At first it frightened me, but when its strangeness had worn off I looked forward to it, because I enjoyed its deep note just as I did our St Paul's at home. Some years later, when I went to play the organ and heard the clock again, its booming sound brought those days back to my mind most vividly.

On our way to chapel we used to pass a grocer's shop, then owned by a firm called Topham & Spink. The pavement in front of the shop was of asphalt, and I liked walking on it in summer when the heat made it soft. But I was not allowed to walk on it very often in case I got tar on my boots.

Moon had recently invented his system of raised letters for the blind, and it gradually superseded the old raised Roman characters, just as Braille has superseded—or practically superseded—Moon. In the Moon type there are roughly speaking only some half-dozen principal characters to memorise, as each character by being turned round one point makes four different letters. My father got hold of a Moon alphabet, and under his directions Mr Lamb—the joiner who built my wheel-barrow—made a board about a foot long and little blocks with a Moon letter in wire on each. A notch in each block gave me the correct position for the first of the four letters represented by the single character on the block, and I soon knew the shapes of the letters and began to spell little words, fitting the blocks into grooves in the board and using blank blocks for spaces. Thus I learned to read.

One curious feature of Moon's system was that the first line read as usual from left to right and the next from right to left, a bracket guiding the finger from one line to the next. Doubtless Moon's idea was that if the finger had to go back to the left in the ordinary way it might be difficult to find the next line. Moon is certainly very easy to read and is especially useful to those who have lost their sight late in life and whose finger-tips are hardened by work, but the letters are enormous as compared with Braille and the books far too bulky for practical use. I have heard that if the volumes of a Moon Bible were placed one on top of the other the pile would be twenty-seven feet high. Moon was a religious man and his books were nearly all of a religious nature, among them being a large number of tracts. The first thing I read was a single Moon sheet which began, "A blind man sat by the wayside begging, and as Jesus passed by . . ." &c. This was followed by two little stories, "A Seaman's Leap for Life" and "A Remarkable Tiger Hunt." Except that I wanted to learn the art I was not much interested in reading for myself. Indeed, I still prefer being read to by a really good reader, although since I joined the National Library for the Blind more than twenty-five years ago I have read, and still read, a great deal. And my wife has always read much to me—everything in fact that I cannot read in Braille.

Thus the days passed until I had turned six and changes came which set my life in a new direction.

My mother's health had been failing for some time and she died on 3rd December 1871. It was a Sunday morning, and my brother and I were in the nursery together. He was crying and saying, "Mama is dead." Someone placed my hand on my mother's forehead and I wondered why it was so cold. I think I remember feeling the coffin, for I have a recollection of its being covered with smooth cloth (which no doubt was black) and studded with large, rounded nails.

During my mother's illness I was told not to play the piano, the sound of which would have been disturbing to an invalid. But Aunt Mary, who no doubt heard of this prohibition and re-

alised what it would mean to me, had an old square piano of hers sent to us from York. I remember feeling the big packing-case and its being unpacked. This piano must have been very old, and the thin tone could scarcely have penetrated from the nursery, where it was placed, to my mother's bedroom. Even to my childish ears it sounded tinny and it felt worn out. Certainly the making of square pianos had long been discontinued in this country, although Steinway, Chickering, and others in America still made them up to the beginning of the present century.

The first modem square I tried was in 1883. It belonged to my friend the late Charles Howden of Lame, and a beautiful piano it was. When I went for my first tour to America three years later, I tried many squares by both Steinway and Chickering, and one or two by Knabe. The squares made in this country had only one pedal, but those in America had two. I am not sure if the soft pedal used in America was of the Celeste kind or whether it brought the hammers nearer the strings as in all good modem uprights. And Mr Howden had one of the earliest precursors of the Pianola, a machine called the Pianista. It had fingers, and was played by means of perforated rolls, but the bellows were worked by turning a handle. There were expression, time, and pedal levers as in the Pianola. I believe that the Pianista was brought out at the Inventions Exhibition in London in 1885, where I first heard it. One day, as I was wandering round that happy hunting-ground for all musical enthusiasts, I heard in the distance what I supposed to be a wonderful pianist playing a brilliant octave study with amazing speed. I had never heard such technique, and felt convinced it must be one of our greatest pianists who was playing. What was my astonishment on following the sound to its source to find a man turning a handle!

I am somewhat confused about what happened between my mother's death and my going to York, but a few incidents stand out clearly. My father went to lodge with Mrs Procter in Peel Street, and I went with him. Whether he took any of the furniture I am not sure, but I know he took the piano, and he must have done this on my account. I cannot remember much

about Mrs Procter except that she used to read a chapter of the Bible to me every night before I went to bed. My favourite passage then—and it is one of my favourites still—is that in the twelfth chapter of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, beginning, "Be kindly affectioned one to another." For a long time I thought it was "affectionate."

I conceived the notion of conducting a choir and giving concerts. I remember someone coming to take me for walks, and I have a hazy idea that it was a girl a little older than myself. It may have been Edith Dyson, a niece of my future stepmother's, but whoever it was I used to tell her about my imaginary choir and the concert we had given that morning. I always made my choir consist of thirteen members only. Why thirteen I do not know, but that is the number I gave my friend, and she really believed that I had such a choir. It was not until two or three years later that I heard anything about soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, so what kind of choir shaped itself in my mind or what its phantom members sang is shrouded in mystery.

I did not find the days long, for besides the piano, my choir, and the walks with my friend, I sometimes went to the office with my father. And I used to enjoy going to the G.P.O., which was then in Whitefriargate, nearly opposite the end of Parliament Street where the Stamp Office was. My father lifted me up and let me drop the letters into the box, and my pleasure was greatest when it was clearing time and I could hear my letters being taken out from behind as fast as I put them in. We often went home by bus. On one of these journeys I persuaded my father to ask the conductor to let me ring the bell and start the bus. I was allowed to do this at the end of our journey. Father got out first, I rang the bell, and the driver started his horses. I had the delicious experience of being snatched up just in time to prevent my being carried on.

One of my father's intimate friends was Henry Webster, the governor of Hull Prison, and I spent many happy afternoons at Mr and Mrs Webster's house, which adjoined the prison, playing with their children. Mr Webster took me through the prison

and put me on the treadmill. Of course I could not move it by myself, but even so—and young as I was—it seemed a barbarous engine. Those never-ending stairs must have meant cruelly heavy labour. The prisoners had to tread on each step absolutely together, and I remember asking what happened if one of them failed to keep in time. The reply was that the step or tread would catch the prisoner's shins, and that if he had not a firm grip on the two handles allotted to him he would be thrown off. Mr Webster told me later how I read the maker's name stamped on the locks in raised capitals : Hobbs, Hart & Co.

On one occasion when I went to see the Websters I noticed at once a peculiarly subdued atmosphere in the house. A prisoner was being flogged, and although the house was too far from the place of punishment for anything to be heard, everyone was affected with a feeling of horror. Webster was an extremely humane and kindly man and could not bear to witness any form of corporal punishment. He might have been governor of York Castle, but would not because criminals were hanged there. Of flogging he said that instead of curing offences it demoralised the criminal and made him worse rather than better. He was extraordinarily clever at remembering a prisoner's face. A man who murdered his wife in Liverpool and afterwards escaped to Melbourne, was arrested there. Webster, who was in Melbourne at the time, was asked to identify the man, who had been in Hull prison during Webster's governorship. He was able to do so at once, although he had not seen the man for many years.

CHAPTER II.

TAMBOURINE TARGET.

I COME to York and the years I spent in that old and delightful city. My grandfather, grandmother, and Aunt Mary, their only daughter, lived at 21 Penleys Grove Street, a house my grandfather had built a year or two before I went to live there. It seemed a larger house than the one in Coltman Street, but whether this is so or not I cannot tell for I have not been in it since my grandmother died in 1876. I well remember that first journey from Hull to York with Aunt Mary. It is not a long run, but to me it seemed unending. Aunt Mary tried to keep me interested by telling me of a toy—a little boy in a swing—which was awaiting me. "Where's the swinging boy, grandpapa?" were the first words I remember—they came from Aunt Mary—on our arrival at Welton House. (My grandmother's native place was the little village of Welton, near Hull. Shortly after my grandfather died she named 21 Penleys Grove Street "Welton House," and so I think of it.) But the swinging boy did not interest me much. There was not sufficient mechanism about it for my liking.

Let me try to give an impression of my Aunt Mary. She became as it were my mother, taking a place which could not afterwards be taken by either of my two stepmothers. I do not attempt to describe her features, for one who has never seen cannot tell what facial appearance means. But there is something that quickly reveals to the blind a pleasant and kind expression. Speaking for myself, it is not merely the voice that attracts or repels, and what reveals the attractive personality I cannot say with certainty. I believe blind people acquire a habit which enables them to form a mental impression of one who is or may become a friend.

Aunt Mary was little of stature and, I would say, sturdy-looking. She was thirty-six when I first went to York. At about that time rheumatism began to show itself, and as the years advanced she became greatly crippled by it and her hands much deformed. She would not perhaps be generally called a lovable woman—for there was something hard in her voice and manner—but she made friends quickly and kept them. She had a habit of asking questions which made one feel rather uncomfortable, but I am bound to add that those who were put in the witness-box did not seem to object. It was "just Aunt Mary's way," and there was no guile in her. She was touchy and quick-tempered, and I was a little afraid as well as very fond of her. More than once she boxed my ears when giving me my piano lessons. Nevertheless, to sum up fairly, she was kind and good to me to the day of her death, and I owe a great deal to her care and early training.

My grandfather was only sixty-six when I went to York, but he seemed very old to me. Nor was this merely the natural impression that age makes on the mind of a child. He suffered from bronchitis and died in the following year (1872) on Aunt Mary's birthday (9th November). He was very good to me. I often heard Aunt Mary say, "You'll spoil that boy, grandpapa." In the angle between the front and back sitting-rooms was a low marble-topped cupboard containing the gas meter. Above, on the wall, was an American clock. It was not a spring clock like "St Paul's," but had weights and a long wooden case. Here the spoiling comes in, and history repeats itself. Grandpapa not only stood me up on top of the cupboard so that I could feel the clock, but opened the glass door and allowed me to "strike it round," which was done by pressing up a little ball behind the underside of the dial. Then he would let me wind the clock with a crank key. It was pleasure and it was education. My grandfather held the same position in the York Stamp Office as my father held in Hull. He never came home from the office without bringing me what he called a nest-egg. His greatcoat pocket was the nest, and I soon acquired the habit of going to it

to see what I could find. The eggs were usually oranges or apples. I cannot have been more than six or eight months at York when he died, but I was with him long enough to grow very fond of him. The back room on the ground floor was furnished as a drawing-room, and I remember thinking it strange when this room was made into a bedroom for my grandfather, so as to spare him the effort of going upstairs. Sometimes I used to sit beside his bed and sing hymns to him. His favourite hymn was "My faith looks up to Thee," to the old tune, and I never play that tune at service now without thinking of those days and of my grandparents. I used also to say "The Lord is my Shepherd," and although I did not realise it at the time I believe it gave him comfort.

My grandparents and their children were Congregationalists and attended Salem Chapel. Shortly before my going to York the old minister, the Rev. James Parsons, had retired. I believe he was a very fine preacher of the evangelical school, and my grandfather had a great admiration and respect for him. Mr Parsons was succeeded by the Rev. John Hunter, who afterwards became famous as an intellectual preacher of modernist thought. He came to Salem straight from Spring Hill College, Aberdeen, and his advanced views were very decided even at that early period of his life. The younger members of the church welcomed him gladly, but the older ones, my grandfather among them, having imbibed the simple teaching of Parsons for many years, found it difficult to reconcile themselves to Hunter's modernism. On the other hand, my Uncle George, grandfather's eldest son, and his wife—being of the younger generation—were devoted to Mr Hunter, as were all who really got to know him. He had a peculiar delivery and spoke in a very low voice until he got well into his sermon. I remember his coming to Welton House and talking to me. In later years Aunt Mary told me that on one of his visits I said to him, "Mr Hunter, why do you pray low and preach loud?" I remember nothing of his sermons, but I have never forgotten that he nearly always began the morning service with that beautiful collect, "Almighty God unto Whom

all hearts be open." Strangely enough, after three or four years at Salem Chapel Dr Hunter (as he became) went to Wycliffe Chapel, Hull. I did not hear or see him again for many years, but when at last I did (at Trinity Congregational Church, Glasgow, where he spent the greater part of his life) the voice and manner came back to me with a startling thrill. I knew that neither had changed and that my childhood's impression was perfectly correct.

It is remarkable that although in those early days at York I liked playing at ministers and conducting imaginary services, music did not enter into my religious scheme of things. My idea of a pulpit was a kind of deep square box, inside which the minister stood, and my own pulpit was formed with the end of the piano for one side, the wall for another, a large bookcase at right-angles to the piano for the third, and the back of a chair for the fourth. Another favourite preaching spot was the top landing. The banister turned at right-angles immediately at the top of the stairs and thus made a good reading desk, although it was not a proper pulpit because it only had one side—i.e., the main wall. But I liked to go up the stairs in a slow, meditative fashion as I imagined ministers would do, and find in the open space formed by the well of the stair an image of a big church with a crowded congregation in front of me. Any child who is alone and does not mix with other children must of necessity invent strange methods of amusement, and much more is this so with a blind child.

Someone gave me a tambourine, but no one showed me how to play it properly. First I treated it as a drum, beating it with a stick, but there was not much fun in that. Then I bethought me of a spring gun lying idle amongst my toys, a very real gun which shot out a small stick or ramrod. The kitchen at Welton House was approached from the hall by going down two or three steps, at the bottom of which were two doors right and left with the kitchen door between them. The door on the left led into the garden and was set slightly back ; that on the right led into a cupboard under the stairs. These two doors were

exactly opposite each other and perhaps eight feet apart, and on the cupboard door was a fixed knob at a convenient height for me to reach. I used to hang the tambourine on this knob with the drum-head outwards, load my gun by pressing the spring inside the barrel down with the ramrod until it clicked, and place the muzzle of the gun right on the centre of the tambourine, as near as I could judge, raising the butt to my shoulder. Then I walked backwards to the garden door, keeping the gun pointing to where I had placed the muzzle, and as stiff and steady as possible, until my back touched the garden door. And then I fired. I could tell by the sound whether I had hit the tambourine, but not the exact spot where I had hit it. There followed a grope on the floor—sometimes short, sometimes long—until I found the ramrod. Sometimes I took aim on chance, just guessing the height. I hit the door as often as I hit the tambourine, but if my shooting marked the paint I was never scolded for it.

Before my grandfather died we went to Boston Spa for the sake of his health, but stayed there only a short time. The weather was very wet. Either going to or coming from Boston Spa we visited Harrogate where my Uncle Thomas (great-uncle, to be exact, for he was my grandfather's brother) had a stationer's shop and post office at 26 Park Parade. My uncle and aunt had one daughter, Mary, who must have been twenty-one at the time, for I remember being told that she was born in the year of the great Exhibition. She lived with her father and mother in a high house behind and above the shop. There was not room for us in the high house, and we lodged with Mrs White (or maybe Wight), who lived, if I remember rightly, in one of two houses built together on the Stray, facing Park Parade. Mrs Smart, her next-door neighbour, had a lodger, Herr Max Blume, a pianist of considerable ability who made a name for himself as a teacher in Harrogate where he lived until his death a few years ago. I heard him play, and his playing made a very strong impression on me. It was different from anything I

had heard before. It was my first experience of real piano playing.

But strong as that impression was—and is—what I remember most vividly is Uncle Thomas's shop and Cousin Mary's showing me the telegraph instrument in a little room off the shop. I have no words to express the intense pleasure this experience gave me, the more intense because Mary understood what I wanted and answered all my questions carefully and not in the manner of one who is merely amusing an inquisitive child. There is a wonderful art in explaining, or, more correctly, showing anything to one who is blind, and few even among trained and experienced teachers of the blind possess it. The telegraph instrument at Uncle Thomas's was that known as the "needle" instrument. It consisted of a dial with a needle like the hand of a clock, which was moved either to right or left by pressing one of two levers something like piano pedals, except that they were moved by the hands. The needle clicked against two pieces of metal, one on either side, and as each piece made a different sound the operator could tell without looking to which side the needle went, and so read by ear. I cannot say which side represented the dots and which the dashes, but I remember that the Harrogate call—which Mary taught me to give—was HG. This was, if my memory serves, four lefts, two rights, and one left.

Another source of pleasure was collecting the letters from the letter-box or basket. The box, or rather the posting slit, was let into the shop front. When collecting time was nearly due I used to go to the basket and bring out just a few letters, hold them behind me and pretend there were none. "Empty-handed little kid!" said my uncle. This was the signal for me to produce the letters from behind my back, and my uncle would then express great surprise that I had found any. This process went on till I had brought out all the letters in the basket.

Uncle Thomas was one of the wardens of Christ Church and showed me his staff of office in a socket at the end of his pew. The organ at Christ Church was old even at that time, but

I think it was a year or two later when I tried it. What most interested me on that first visit was its water-engine, which, when it was started, made a bumping and rushing noise. In my desire to know what this meant I asked many questions.

Among our friends in York were Mr and Mrs Thistleton, who lived in the Minster Yard. They had no children, but a niece—Miss Lizzie Ridding—lived with them. She was quite grown up—at least so it seemed to me—although I doubt whether she could have been more than sixteen or seventeen. She was my first sweetheart, and I adored her. She used often to take me to spend the afternoon with her uncle and aunt, and it was she who first took me to the Minster. What a revelation it was! Evensong was at half-past four, and immediately after the Minster clock had struck the quarter two bells began to chime. The first thing that puzzled me when we got inside was the faintness of the bells. My only standard of comparison must have been with a small church where the sound of the bell was almost as loud inside as out, and at that time I had no knowledge of the thickness of the masonry or of the position of the bells in a high tower.

From the first the Minster bells—and especially Great Peter—interested me. There seemed something wrong about them and I couldn't make out the correct notes. Long afterwards I learned that they were not in tune. In those days—and I think it so still—the quarters were struck on two of the bells, C and F, and the hour on the tenor bell, C an octave below the first-quarter bell. To me it was a flat C. Warners recast them—all except Great Peter—some years ago ; and in 1928 or 1929 all, including Great Peter, were recast by Taylors, who lowered Great Peter from F to E flat and tuned the others in B flat. Until Taylors recast it. Great Peter was not hung but fixed in a frame and struck by a heavy hammer attached to a long lever. Now it is hung, and besides the striking hammer a clapper has been attached. In the old days, after the clock struck at noon. Great Peter was struck twelve times by hand. The repetition of the hour on the deep bell was very impressive.

On my first visit, what impressed me after the faint sound of the bells was the vast, open nave without pews, for I had hitherto been used to the comparatively narrow aisles of Wycliffe and Salem with their non-resonance. The massive choir stalls were also a new experience. In a low voice Miss Ridding explained how the organ was blown by a gas engine, and I plied her with questions about it until service time. Then the organ began, and the effect the rolling pedal notes produced on me can better be imagined than described. After the choir and clergy were in their places and the organ had stopped, a curtain was drawn across the central entrance to the choir, and those who came late had to enter from the side. To me the sound of the drawing of the curtain was impressive, for it was the signal for the service to begin. It is very many years since I heard the service at the Minster, but when I was last there I listened for the curtain and there it was.

I was so impressed by the rolling effect of the organ that I often tried to imitate it on the piano by keeping the loud pedal down and playing voluntaries which I invented on the spur of the moment. These must have been crude affairs, but they kept me amused. Grandmama and Aunt Mary could not always make out what I was getting at and not unnaturally they used to stop me.

I had two uncles living in York, Uncle George, who was then second-in-command in a bank, and Uncle Joe. Uncle Joe, Aunt Agnes, and their three children were great favourites of mine, and I spent many happy hours with them in their house in the Haxby Road. Uncle George was the eldest of my grandfather's family, and after my grandfather died became my grandmother's man of business. Many years later, when his daughter, my cousin Alice, was left alone after the death of her parents and two brothers, I got to know and be very fond of her.

Uncle George's wife (Aunt Elizabeth) was said to be musical, and when a girl was, I believe, organist at a little church in York. After they were married he bought her a small one-manual pipe-organ which on rare occasions I was allowed to

play, and I remember spending an afternoon at Uncle George's and standing at the bass end of the keyboard while Aunt Elizabeth played some voluntaries.

I learned to find my way alone to and from Uncle Joe's house in Haxby Road. Once I fell down an open hatch outside a public-house, where barrels of beer were being lowered into a cellar. Fortunately there was an inclined ladder which reached from the cellar to the street and broke my fall. A man was standing below and I fell on to his head. "Hey!" he exclaimed, "what t' hangment art ta doin'?" Beyond a fright, I was not hurt and went on to Uncle Joe's as though nothing had happened. And one Sunday morning, when Aunt Mary had sent me with a magazine or newspapers to Aunt Agnes's, I came to grief again. A few doors from Uncle Joe's a woman was washing her doorstep or the flags in front of her house. Usually I took a stick and kept fairly near the railings or wall, but on this occasion I must have forgotten it, and before I knew what was happening my knee went into the bucket of water, the newspaper I was carrying went flying, and I fell all my length on the pavement, carrying the bucket with me. It was a sorry little figure that presented itself to Aunt Agnes. I was soaked through, and my clothes had all to be dried before I could return to Welton House.

But these were the only accidents, and I was not nervous about making the journey alone, for there were no dangerous crossings and in those days there was practically no traffic. I was, however, frightened of certain extraneous things, one of which was a military band, and especially the big drum. Some of the soldiers from the barracks attended Salem Chapel. They wore swords, and the clanking of the swords against the pews as the men walked into church terrified me. To this day I do not care to touch a sword, even in its sheath. It is not that I am afraid of cutting myself, but simply that I had and still have a horror of the sword. Nor could I bear coarse or rough voices, not because they were unrefined, but because I thought that all people with gruff, hoarse voices must be either gipsies or bur-

glars. We always went into Salem by the back entrance in a street called Auldwark. I had heard that this was a slummy, dirty street, and I hated going through it, particularly if I heard any of the people talking. Psychologists have now made us understand that early impressions for good or evil on a child's mind last all his life, and that those who teach or train young children should save them as far as possible from being frightened. Fear was a very real thing to me. Those who brought me up did not seek to frighten me with silly fables such as the carrying off of naughty children in the soot-bags of sweeps, but I could not help hearing about burglars and other ogreish people, and my young mind suffered much unnecessary dread.

This leads me to record an incident which, amusing enough in retrospect, made a painful impression on my mind at the time. Our back garden was divided by a wall from a poor street called, I think, Jackson Street. I had heard something about burglaries in the neighbourhood and imagined that burglars could easily climb our garden wall and get in through the kitchen window. We had a maid, Jane, who had been with the family some years before my coming to Welton House. She was quite a friend, and after tea, her work finished, she used to bring her sewing to the dining-room and sit with us while grandmother or Aunt Mary read aloud for an hour or so before my bed-time. I slept in a little room over the kitchen and was put to bed at half-past seven.

I thought that a burglar could easily break in at the back without anyone hearing him but myself, and that if I crouched on the mat outside the dining-room door I would hear the first sound and be able to warn those inside. So when all was quiet I slipped out of bed and took my place on the mat. All went well for a night or two. I do not know how long I waited on the mat, but as soon as I heard Aunt Mary say, "You might bring in the supper, please, Jane," I scampered upstairs and into bed. But suspicions must soon have been aroused, for when one of them on going to bed looked in to see that all was right, I was found wide awake and the clothes disturbed. "Why, Alfy, aren't you

asleep? What have you been doing to get the bed-clothes in such a mess?" And one fatal night Jane, coming out to fetch the supper, found me fast asleep on the mat. As the dining-room was close to the front door and I had nothing on but my nightshirt, I caught a cold which kept me in bed for some days, and the experience cured me of any further desire to mount guard.

All this time Aunt Mary was giving me music lessons, but I have no recollection of her method of teaching or what was the first piece she taught me. How I learned my notes I cannot tell, but I certainly knew them before she took me in hand. I think she got an instruction book, for I remember her teaching me the lines and spaces, both treble and bass, but although I could soon say them by heart, I did not realise till long afterwards what bearing they had on music. I remember learning little tunes, one of which was called "Lily's a Lady." These I picked up by ear; but later, as the pieces became more difficult, Aunt Mary taught me each hand separately, in small sections at a time. She used to play the entire piece over first, perhaps two or three times. She had had no real technical training and played in a style very common to amateurs in those days, putting full arpeggio chords in the bass. This did not sound right to me, and I did not try to copy it. The first real piece I actually remember learning was a set of variations on an air called "In My Cottage Near a Wood." It was in F, and I can still remember the first half of the air.

My cousin Annie was studying the piano at school under Thomas Hopkins, a brother of Dr E. J. Hopkins, the organist of the Temple Church, London, who afterwards became my organ-master. Annie must have had some little technique. She played what I called "runny pieces," such as those by Sidney Smith and Brindley Richards, which were then greatly in vogue. Aunt Mary thought it would be good for both Annie and me if we learned to play duets together, and began to teach me the bass. The treble would have been easier because of its having the tune, and at first I had to learn the bass without knowing the melody it accompanied.