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A TRIBUTE TO "BLIND TOM"

"Blind Tom," the pianist died recently. The following from the pen of Henry Watter-son appeared in the Louisville Courier-Journal:
 "BLIND TOM"

Tidings of the death of "Blind Tom" at Hoboken, "where he had been living in retirement," the wires tell us, "and subsisting on charity," reach at least one heart that loved and pitied him, and summon from the land of shades and dreams many a ghost of days and dear ones long since departed. I must be his oldest living friend. It is not true, as I have sometimes seen it stated, that I taught him what little he knew of music; but I was in at the outset of his strange career and am familiar with all its beginnings.

I first heard of him through Robert Heller—William Henry Palmer—best known in his day as a popular magician, but a most accomplished pianist. It was at Washington and in the autumn of 1860. Palmer had just come up with "Blind Tom" in Louisville, I think, and had been of course and at once perplexed and amazed by his extraordinary characteristics. His crude, often grotesque, attempts to imitate whatever fell upon his ear, either vocally, or on the key-board, were startling. He had heard Judge Douglas speak and graphically reproduced a few sentences. He had heard a reigning prima donna sing and repeated her soprano in a few bars. The Bethune girls, daughters of General Bethune, of Columbus, Ga., his old master, had taught him a few jingles, which he rattled off upon the piano. He knew nothing very complicated, or very well. But he was blind and clearly an idiot; in short, he was a prodigy.

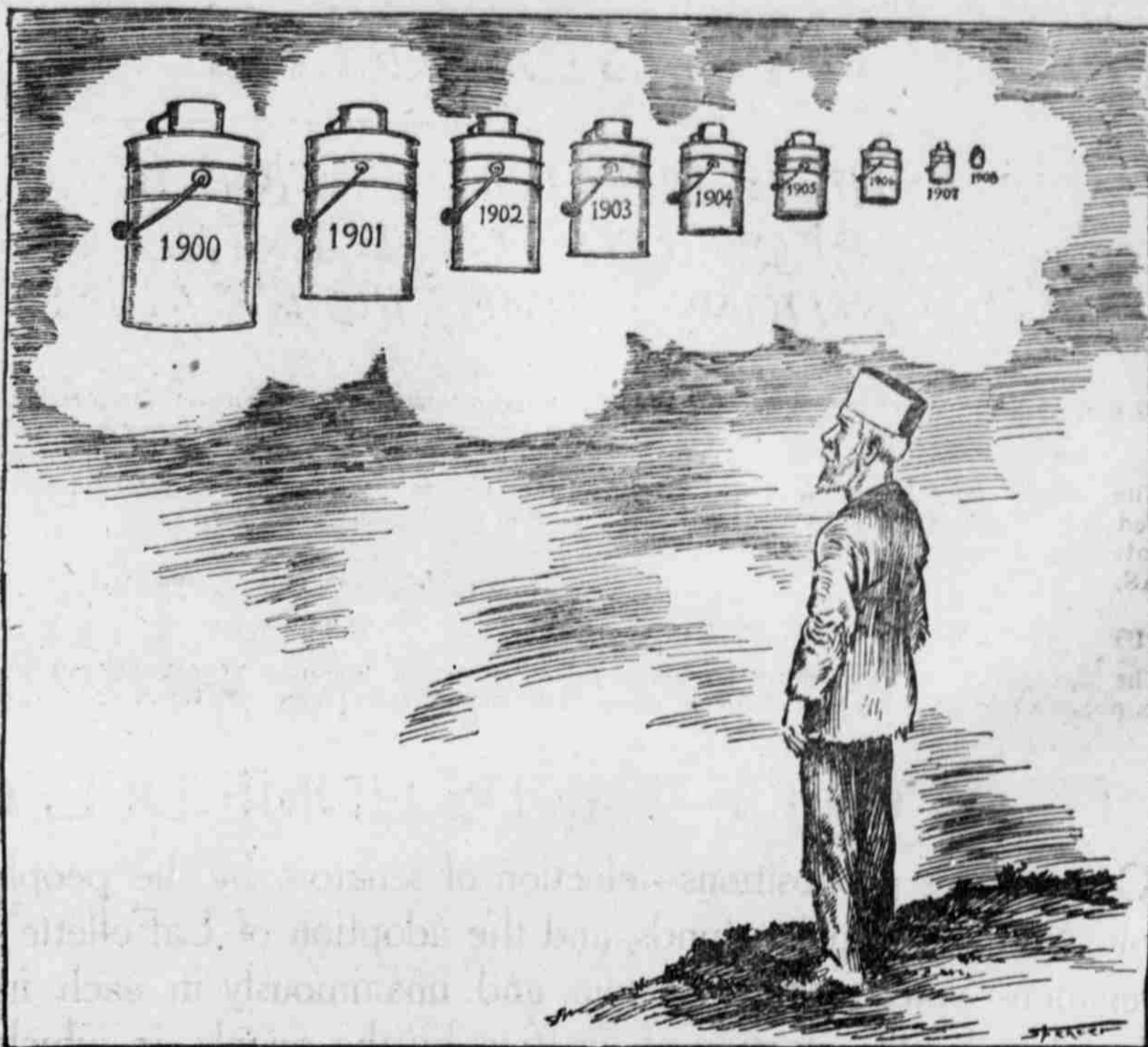
Palmer gave him several "lessons"—that is, he played over and over for him such pieces as Thalberg's "Home, Sweet Home," Mendelssohn's "Spring Song," and the salient passages out of some of Liszt's transcriptions. Excepting a few additional "lessons" of this kind he had later along from Eugene Baylor, who taught him his famous "Margrave Danse," Tom made little further progress and learned nothing new.

He would spin about the piano, like a baboon, mumbling to himself whilst Palmer, or Baylor played, and, if they stopped, he would rush headlong to the instrument and try to follow them precisely as they had phrased. Two, three, of such "lessons" sufficed, and though he learned nothing accurately, nor played with any other expression than they had rendered, what he did was surprising even to those who knew the process and the limitation.

There was in the Tennessee line a certain Major Macconico, who had a great barytone voice. He taught Tom to sing "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep," very much as he sang it. There was a tailor in Griffin, Georgia, by the name of Hanlon, whose tenor voice was fetching, and he taught Tom two or three love ditties, which Tom repeated in rich though rather guttural tones, yet in undoubted tenor. It was something more than a phenomenon of memory. Though blind, he could handle the key-board readily, whilst his vocal imitations from bass to treble, from deep barytone to mezzo soprano, were sufficiently accurate and individualized to be recognized.

Tom seemed a woman-hater. Whether it was pure misogyny, or a kind of shyness manifesting itself boorishly. I know not. I well remember in Atlanta, where a party of us had him with us off and on for two or three months, a young lady one day sat down at the piano and began to play. Tom was at the dark end of the chamber, spinning upon hands and heels, and mumbling to himself. He caught the sound of the instrument. He stood for a moment still and upright. Then, like a wild animal, he made a dash and swooped down upon her. Terrified, the poor girl shrieked and ran, whilst the rest of us held him, writhing and trembling with what seemed to be rage. "She stole my harmonies," he cried over and over, "she stole my harmonies," and never again did he allow her to come near him. If she were even in the room he knew it somehow and became restive and angry.

In the autumn of 1865, Tom reappeared at



As the Working Man Sees It

the north under the management of his old master's family, quite impoverished by the war, and an attempt was made to "liberate" him from what some mistaken and over-zealous humanitarians called his "enslavement." Happily, this failed. The case showed for itself, and Tom was left with those who had cared for him from his babyhood, had been most kind to him, and knew, as none others could, his real wants and needs.

The notion that the Bethunes had a gold mine in his performances was not true. They made at the height of his popularity hardly much more than a living, and I suppose that eventually this failed them. They must be all of them dead now. How Tom came to live in want at Hoboken, just how he was separated from his old friends, and how he dropped out of public notice, I can not say. His mother was alive as late as the early eighties; but I doubt if she, or any of the Bethune family survive.

The last time I saw Blind Tom was in London, away back in 1866. General Pinckney Howard and one of the Bethune boys had brought him over. It had been then nearly three years since I had been with him in Atlanta. From the beginning of our intimacy Tom had been greatly impressed that, with a maimed hand, I could still strike a few chords and run an octave on the keyboard. To his poor, half-hit mind it seemed a miracle. Upon a Sunday afternoon I came into the little hall on or near Leicester Square, where Tom was to appear. He was back of the scenes spinning as usual hand over heel, and mumbling to himself. As we came upon the stage General Howard said, "Let us see whether he knows you." I called him. He slowly uncoiled himself and listened. I called him again. He stood irresolute, then ran across the boards, seized my hand, assured himself of the withered stump and joyously called my name.

What was it? Memory? Yes, it was memory, without doubt; but what else? Whence the hand power that enabled him to manipulate the keys, the vocal power that enabled him to imitate the voice?

When he was a tot of four or five years old he strayed from the negro cabin into the parlor of the mansion and hid himself whilst the children were having a concert. When they had gone, leaving the room, as they supposed, quite empty, they heard the piano tinkle. They

ran back, and there, to their amazement, sat the chubby little black monkey on the stool, banging away for dear life, yet not without sequence and rhythm, trying to repeat what they had just been singing and playing. From that time onward he was the pet of the family.

I can not trust myself to write of him as I feel. It is as if some trusty, well-loved mastiff—mute but affectionate—closely associated with the dead and gone—had been suddenly recalled to be as suddenly taken away. The wires that flash his death lighten a picture gallery for me of the old-familiar faces. What was he? Whence came he? Was he the prince of the fairy tale held by the wicked enchantress; nor any beauty—not even the Heaven-born Maid of Melody—to release him? Blind, deformed, and black—as black even as Erebus—idiotcy, the idioy of a mysterious, perpetual frenzy, the sole companion of his waking visions and his dreams—whence came he, and was he, and wherefore? That there was a soul there, be sure, imprisoned, chained in that little black bosom, released at last; gone to the angels, not to imitate the seraph-songs of heaven, but to join the choir invisible for ever and ever.

H. W.

Mansfield, June 15, 1903.

CHICAGO—MANILA

On the same beautiful June day that the Chicago convention was adopting a platform which tells us how pleased the Filipinos are with our unselfish efforts in their behalf, the ungrateful Filipinos, through their chosen representatives, were demanding independence and submitting the reasons therefor. We say "ungrateful Filipinos," because they should have waited a little longer and not thus embarrass the g. o. p. just at a time when it is experiencing more and more difficulty each day in convincing the people that the injunction, protection, revision and currency bricks it offers them are pure gold instead of brass plated base metal.



IT'S GOOD, GOOD!

* This is an Associated Press dispatch: New York, June 19.—J. Pierpont Morgan, who arrived from Europe today, expressed his pleasure at the choice of Secretary of War Taft as the republican nominee for the presidency. "It's good, good," Mr. Morgan said. He declined to talk further upon politics or any other subject.