

Memories of Mayfield



by Nigel Thomson

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Revd J K Thomson with his father-in-law the Very
Revd Dr R J Drummond, 1936

MY first memory of Mayfield dates from 1929. My father, James McKyd Thomson, had been minister of a busy downtown church in Aberdeen, East and Belmont; my mother had died at the age of thirty-nine, leaving him with three young boys. Carrying the burden of his wife's long illness through all his pastoral and preaching work had been immensely stressful for my father, so when a call came to him from the quiet suburban church of Mayfield North in Edinburgh, he gladly accepted it, particularly as his parents-in-law, Dr and Mrs Drummond, lived near at hand.

We went to the manse at 18 West Mayfield, which is now Church House, and arrived while it was in the process of being redecorated for us. Pots of paint and rolls of wallpaper were dotted about the floor, and I remember picking my way between them, singing the while 'Twilight is falling o'er bonnie Loch Leven' – which, I suppose, was a rather unexpected song for a three-year-old to sing.

Obviously my father had to find someone who could look after him, my two older brothers and myself, and who could act as the lady of the manse. Advertisement and consultation with my grandmother eventually brought forth a lady who was prepared to respond to this formidable challenge.

A number of ladies had looked after us in Aberdeen during my mother's illness, and some were more agreeable to me than others. My second Mayfield memory is of standing on the steps at the front door of 18 West Mayfield, watching a taxi draw up, and as Miss Lucy Low stepped out, I said to myself, 'Well, I wonder what this one will be like?' Well, she was wonderful, a veritable godsend, and even as my father quickly became known to the congregation as 'JK', so did my surrogate mother quickly become known to me and my brothers and to many in the congregation as 'Aunt Lucy'.

She would take me to church to sit in the manse pew with a book or a toy to comfort me. Later it became time to go to the Primary Sunday

School, which met in what is now the Lower Hall, then divided into two by a large brown curtain. ‘Clink, clink, clink, hear the pennies dropping’ we sang, during the collection, as we trooped up to a table and duly dropped our pennies into the plate.

The Sunday School flourished. Children were quite prepared to listen to what their teachers taught them, even when the Sunday School met at 2 pm. And there seemed to be no shortage of teachers. They were such a loyal number that they had their own summer picnic at Dalkeith Palace. This was where the children’s own picnics took place, and these were magical occasions. The sun always shone. The races were fast and furious. The teachers were not in their Sunday best but looked quite human in their summer frocks and open-necked shirts. Holding it all together was the Church Officer, Sergeant Porteous, who tended an enormous tea-urn to such effect that he was duly promoted to Sergeant-Major. He called on my father every day to see if there was anything that he wanted done, and then before going home retired to the manse kitchen, where our resident maid plied him with tea.

The Sunday School teachers of the 1930s merit special attention. Chief among them was Mr James Tait Watson, who acted as treasurer for no less than fifty years and was known simply as ‘Uncle Watson’. There was Miss Netta Shierlaw, a saintly but nice lady, who left a handsome legacy to the Kirk Session, the income of which has been applied towards the benefit of young people. And there were the unforgettable ‘Poppo’ Edgar and Robin Inglis, two good men if ever there were good men. They were highly evangelical in outlook; everything ‘went to show’ God’s purpose, and a moral was always ready to hand. On one occasion my brother Kenneth was driving a Vacancy Committee delegation to Glasgow (Poppo was a member of this delegation), and Kenneth determined to avoid any morals by immediately changing the subject whenever a moral was likely to appear. He got as far as Newhouse before Poppo eventually succeeded in finding a moral.

Brother Kenneth also featured in a Sunday School party, leading a dance

band he had formed in his last year at school. Of the line-up I can remember Kenneth on the piano, one of Poppo's sons playing the violin, and two others playing remarkable instruments called 'Swanee Saxophones', which I think were really souped-up kazoos. Deciding to keep the band going after the party he had them meet to practise in the Church Hall. A jazz band in the Church Hall? Horrors! The Kirk Session got to hear of this, and, if you'll pardon the pun, the band was banned.

The Kirk Session grew greatly in size. When the church was built, in 1875, what is now the hall kitchen was the 'Session House', sufficient to hold some twenty to thirty people. The church as a whole can accommodate the same number of people as it was built for, yet the Kirk Session multiplied to not far short of ninety! Such is the exponential march of ecclesiastical bureaucracy ...

The communion service was always dignified and impressive. In the 1930s the elders, all of them men in those days, were instructed by my father to wear rubber-soled shoes so as to minimize the sound of footfall during the distribution of the elements; and all were solemnly attired in morning dress. The question of morning dress was a perpetually thorny one in the Kirk Session of Strathaven East Church to which I later belonged – so much so that it was eventually resolved that the question should not again be discussed for five years! But in the course of one of the many stormy meetings in Strathaven I told the Kirk Session what my father had once told me – that he had asked a humble old man in Mayfield to be an elder, and received the reply, 'Aye, Mr Thomson, I'd like fine to be an elder, but I couldny afford the suit.' Although I appreciated the dignity of morning dress, I felt it was not right that men should be required to spend money on it which many could ill afford, or receive second-hand clothes as a charitable gesture.

The present choreography of the distribution of the elements was, I think, devised by Mr George Robertson, the headmaster of Watson's, who was the Session Clerk in the 1940s, and it has remained largely

unchanged. It was effective but intricate, and many an elder anxiously studied his instructions up to the last moment before taking part. But it all worked very well, and I do not remember a time when there were any mishaps.

One of the things to have left the scene, however, is the pre-communion service. This was a regular institution, a devotional service on the Friday evening before communion Sunday, but it did not attract large attendances, and was, of course, an added burden for the minister, who already had to prepare two sermons for Sunday, the morning service at 11 am and the evening service at 6.30 pm. I always felt that a minister should only be expected to produce one sermon each week, and preach it at both Sunday services. A minority of members always attended both services, but if they enjoyed the sermon in the morning, why not let them enjoy it again even more in the evening? Or, if they hadn't understood it in the morning, let them have another go later on!

The formal children's sermon from the pulpit used to be a standard feature of church services throughout Scotland, and many ministers, including those at Mayfield, were very good at them. Excellent stories were often told and these were invariably followed by a moral. The trouble was that children could see a moral coming at twenty paces, and would switch off before it actually arrived. I used to think it would be better if the ministers did it the other way round: start with the moral, while the children have peak attention, and then follow it with an attractive story, which would leave them with a warm glow (as well as a moral!). Alas, the children's sermon is no longer with us. This is a great pity, because for many people it was the best part of the service, and the part which people remembered. With a children's sermon and an anthem, the standard morning service before the war was longer than it is now; one hour twenty minutes was then the regular length as opposed to just one hour today.

But back to the Kirk Session, which I first joined in or around 1955. Session meetings were normally very pleasant. I do not recall any

acrimonious moments, and consensus was normally the order of the day. However, there were those among the Session who tended to be an ‘awkward squad’, there were those who tended to be ‘trusties’ (who could be relied upon to say the right thing when required), and almost always there were one or two who could best be described as ‘the conscience of the Session’, ready to say the right but unpopular thing, recalling the Session to its path of righteousness if it showed signs of laxity. Indeed, when I rejoined the Session in 1980 I remember enquiring (informally) which was the government side of the house and which the opposition!

Over many years the Kirk Session made heavy weather over the question of drink. It had, of course, like gambling, always been a vexed question in the Church of Scotland as a whole. ‘The demon drink’ was a familiar demon, and in the nineteenth century various temperance and teetotal movements took place, to the extent that, despite the wedding at Cana, the feeling became strongly entrenched that drinking was something that Christians should not do, and that included the members of Mayfield. From time to time, however, the question reappeared before the Kirk Session and greatly agitated it. ‘Government’ and ‘Opposition’ were easily recognized, and eventually a somewhat feeble compromise was reached, whereby it was agreed that alcohol could be served in the church hall in certain circumstances (which I have now forgotten!).

A good deal of Kirk Session business was administrative and routine, but a very good feature was eventually introduced, that of ‘Session study’, where elders were asked to discuss moral and social questions of the day in small groups. Another very good feature of Session life in Mayfield was the occasional ‘retreat’ – to Carberry or Dunblane; good bonding took place and there was time for Session study in greater depth. At one such retreat, placards each bearing the name of one of the seven deadly sins were placed around the wall of the meeting room, and we were asked to stand beside whichever placard bore the name of the sin which particularly troubled us. Most elders stood beside

‘respectable’ sins such as ‘gluttony’ or ‘sloth’, but there was at least one honest man who stood beside ‘lust’!

Ladies always formed the majority of the congregation. There was a Women’s Guild and also a Ladies Work Party, which was largely concerned with sewing. But political correctness arrived long before its time when the Women’s Guild requested that the Ladies Work Party should no longer be called the ‘Ladies Work Party’. In 1932 ‘Ladies’ were duly dropped, and the Work Party continued as the ‘Women’s Work Party’.

My father, being a widower, and a charming one at that, inevitably became an object of interest to various ladies in the congregation. Indeed, a number of them became collectively known as ‘The Band of Hope’. But Aunt Lucy kept a watchful eye on them and successfully protected him from them.

In May 1939 my father died, at the early age of fifty-two. He had been greatly beloved, and when one of the elders heard of his death, he said, ‘I felt as if I didn’t have a friend left in the world.’ He was succeeded by one of his personal friends and fellow classmate at New College, Dr Donald Ross. One of Dr Ross’s children’s sermons still sticks in my mind. During the war street lamps were extinguished, but sandbags were hung from the lampposts for use if an incendiary bomb dropped nearby. The point of the sermon was that although we may not be able to do what we would like to do there may still be something else worthwhile that we can do – just as the lampposts said, ‘We can’t shine our lights just now, but we still can carry sandbags.’

In September 1939 Dr Ross was on holiday, and the minister of Fountainhall Road church, the Rev. Magnus Nicolson, was officiating in his place. The crisis with Germany was coming to a head, and on Sunday 3 September the church officer was asked to sit in the vestry and listen to the wireless at 11 am, when the Prime Minister was due to address the nation. The congregation was well aware of this, and at

11.15 tension was high as Sergeant Porteous solemnly ascended the steps to the pulpit and handed Mr Nicolson a piece of paper. Mr Nicolson then told us that we were at war with Germany. We had all been half-expecting bombs to fall within a few weeks of the outbreak of war, but it came as a considerable shock when the air-raid sirens began to sound just a quarter of an hour later! Mr Nicolson then said, 'I think in the circumstances I should now pronounce the benediction.' Which he did. There was no panic, and the congregation dispersed to seek shelter where it might. Aunt Lucy and I were whisked off by Mrs (later Lady) Illingworth, a wonderful character, who had been our neighbour over the wall when we lived in the manse. But it had been a false alarm. No bombs fell and no sandbags had to be taken off the lampposts.

I sometimes think of my father and Dr Ross as being the last of the piston-engined Mayfield ministers, and their successors, Jim Whyte and Bill McDonald, as the first of the jet-engined. All were great preachers; all conveyed a sense of deep spirituality and were tender in their pastoral care. The latter two were quite remarkable for following in each other's footsteps. Both were extremely handsome, both were intellectuals, both had been dux of Stewart's College and both became Moderators of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Jim Whyte was Dr Ross's successor as minister in 1954, and he served at Mayfield until 1959. During his Moderatorial year, in 1988, he received nationwide acclaim for his sermon at the service to commemorate the victims of the Lockerbie disaster; and in the same year he coped excellently well with Mrs Thatcher during her visit to the Assembly (where she gave what became known as 'the sermon on the Mound'). Jim Whyte was succeeded at Mayfield by the wonderful Bill McDonald. He was the very model of a textbook Scottish minister – spiritual, intellectual, and yet wholly conversant with the ways of the world. His preaching was powerful, his 'Thought for the Day' radio talks were little masterpieces, and he remained our minister for over thirty luminous years.

I enjoyed teaching in the Sunday School, and in 1960 I was appointed Superintendent. For some time there had been dissatisfaction with the teaching material provided by the Scottish Sunday School Union. It was unsystematic, repetitive and largely consisted of the retelling of 'bible stories'. I felt that a radical change could be made, and with the help of a strong committee set out to construct a coherent six-year course of teaching. It took four years. We read through all the Sunday School material produced by all the various denominations and noted the parts which seemed particularly good. It was fascinating. At one extreme the Roman Catholic material appeared to consist of 90 percent Christian doctrine and 10 percent bible stories, while in the Presbyterian churches it was the other way round: 90 percent bible stories and only 10 percent doctrine. We found the best material to be produced by the Baptists, Methodists and Episcopalians. So we adapted and rewrote what we found, and allowed for a vast amount of visual aids, tape recordings and film strips. And for Old Testament history we constructed army-style sand tables on which town-signs and model hills and rivers could be placed at appropriate moments. Each lesson was set out in a lesson plan, showing the teacher at what points tape recordings should be switched on, bible readings made, pictures or film strips shown. And with every lesson there came a handout for the children containing the main points of the lesson, lines to learn by heart and a cartoon illustration of the lesson theme by the very talented graphic designer Alan Victor.

It was all designed to make it as easy as possible for the teacher and as interesting as possible for the children. But it may well have been too highly organized, and of course all that could be done was to give children the factual framework of Christianity. What it could not do was to turn the children into Christians. As is well known, Christianity is something which has to be caught, not taught.

Just after the whole scheme was completed, in 1966, I had to leave Edinburgh to work in the West. So I was not able to attend its launch or teething troubles. My successor as Superintendent, Ian Dodds, nobly

undertook the task, and it all proceeded as intended for a number of years. I had a good staff of teachers, and will only mention one, Jimmy Scobie. I mention him because I would never have thought of asking him to be a teacher if I had known that he was the headmaster of Gillespies Junior School. But, good man that he was, he never mentioned this, and served loyally on the Sunday School staff as an ordinary teacher.

From the Sunday School, children graduated to the Junior Bible Class which, in the 1970s, was run by the excellent Sandy Brown, another good man if ever there was one. (Children in earlier days had progressed from Sunday School to the minister's own bible class, which led to his first communicants' class.) The Bible Classes were succeeded by what was called the Youth Council, which catered for young people up to twenty-five years old, and this was initially presided over by George Crichton. But it never really settled down, and it was not until the mercurial Christine de Luca and John Sturrock came along that young people were adequately and sympathetically catered for with relevant material and activities.

The choir was always interesting. Originally they sat in two sets of pews facing each other at the front of the apse, and at the start of the service they entered the church in procession from the hall. This could be uncomfortable for the ladies of the choir, as they knew that all eyes were upon them – evaluating the hats they were wearing. The ladies were therefore greatly relieved when it was no longer obligatory for them to wear hats. I remember the relaxation of the rule being given the memorable headline in the *Daily Express*: 'Archbishop says no-hat girls OK in church.'

The quality of the choir's singing was of course variable, depending on the age of the available singers and the quality of the choirmaster. In the 1930s professional leaders were introduced for choir-stiffening and for solos. I can't recall if there ever were leaders for the four sections all at the same time, but I do remember the leader of the tenors, a rotund

and happy man called Harry Brodie. As boys, we sometimes sang the opening of the 'Hallelujah' chorus with his name 'Harry Brodie' instead of the word 'Hallelujah'. Try it!

The organ console was then situated behind where the lectern now stands, and when the organ was relocated to the gallery the choir went there too. But although this was musically quite effective (the congregation down below hearing the sound of singing swelling up behind them), it was not particularly popular with choir members, who felt they could neither see easily nor be seen. When the organ was again relocated to its present position, the choir moved to the south transept, and now they are in the excellent position of being at the back of the apse, facing the congregation after a procession in from the front door.

Anthems were a standard feature of services in the 1930s and 40s. Anthem books were to be found in many pews, their owners following the words and music as the choir sang. But when the anthem books disappeared (perhaps after the fire in 1969), the congregation simply had to listen to the singing of the anthem, and seldom had any idea of what was being sung. This struck me as a bad thing, and it has been heartening to find the words of anthems appearing more and more often in the printed order of service.

The congregation has never been very good at making vocal responses during services, apart from saying the Lord's Prayer together. Its worst moments in this respect came during a vacancy shortly after the war, when an excellent former moderator of the Australian church, Dr Blanchard, acted as *locum tenens*. He wanted to encourage vocal responses, and for a start asked the congregation to join in his 'Amen' at the end of prayers. Perhaps the congregation felt that it was not appropriate for a temporary minister to foist such a liturgical innovation upon it, but for whatever reason the response was so half-hearted that after three or four weeks Dr Blanchard got the organist to play 'Amen' chords but still we found it embarrassing to join in, and eventually he gave up altogether, keeping the 'Amen' to himself.

In 1957 a union took place between Mayfield and Fountainhall Road church. There had been a close association between the two congregations, and when Fountainhall Road became no longer viable, a union with Mayfield was inevitable. This went through on an amicable basis, and the combined congregation benefited from the presence of Fountainhall stalwarts such as James Symon, Marjorie Matheson, John Victor and Alf Hannay. The church changed its name to ‘Mayfield and Fountainhall’, but after a few years it reverted to being simply ‘Mayfield’.

A further change of name, however, was made in 1993, when the congregation of Salisbury united with Mayfield, and we became Mayfield Salisbury. This union also went through on an amicable basis, and among other things brought the admirable Eileen Watson and Alan Paterson into the Kirk Session.

In 1992 Bill McDonald retired, and was followed by Sandy Young, who was at his best in well-crafted prayer and as chairman of the Kirk Session. Scott McKenna came in 2000, and his happy smile and positive outlook is very much still with us. I think of him with much pleasure – for the ‘wow’ factor he gives the children and for the many and varied high-level quotations with which he punctuates his compelling sermons.

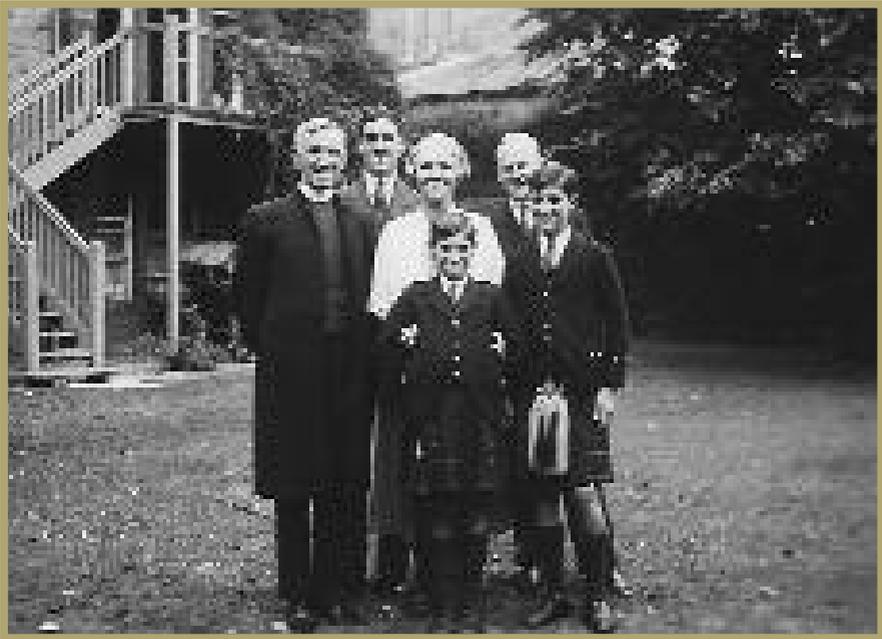
I remember all our organists from 1930 onwards: James Stephen, Hugh McLean, Tom McCourt, Terras Wallis, Fred Davidson, Jimmy Douglas, Norman Shires, Philip Hacking, and now Damien Mason. The organ itself was replaced with an electric organ, which offended purists, but was a world away from the first electric organs that came upon the scene. And I remember a time when there were pews in the South transept; when the organ was replaced after the fire it was a good time to replace these pews with individual chairs and to install a grand piano.

But in the old days, if you sat in a pew you were expected to pay your way. One of the regular office-bearers was the seat-letting convenor, who allocated places (or ‘sittings’) and fixed the rent to be paid for them. While it was an accepted form of fundraising, it was not a happy system

because those who rented a pew often resented other persons seeking to sit there for free, and sometimes made it plain that they resented other persons so doing, and that they were not welcome. It was a good thing when the system was scrapped and was replaced by the free-will offering scheme, where members agreed to contribute a certain sum each week whether they were in church or not.

Ladies took a back seat in the running of the church from my earliest days, but they were eventually admitted to membership of the Deacons' Court in 1947 and of the Kirk Session in 1967. Two women in particular were pioneers, Helen Tweedie and Jean Brown, and they were followed by many more who, like them, became 'pillars o' the kirk'. And many of the great Mayfield families likewise stick in my mind – the Andrew Stewarts, the John Stewarts, the Houstons, the Bartholomews, the Maclachlans, the Hay Smiths and the Crichtons to name but a few. And let me mention some of the members whom I remember as being particularly significant in their time, and whom I have not already mentioned: Andrew Rankin, Ean King Gillies, John Houston, Edwin Kelly, Robin Brown, Robin Maclaren, Tom Melvin, Alexander Reid, Malcolm Crawford, Sandy Hunter, Principal Watt, Tom Turnbull, Ewan Brown, Peter Brand and Kenneth Palmer; and among the ladies, Mary Robertson, Mrs Fairweather, Mrs McLuskey, Miss Dobie, Lila Miller, Miss Bruce, Anna Cameron, Miss Herdman, Miss Goodenough, Anne Mathams, Peggy Wilson, Patricia Ahrens, Marjorie Grant, Elsa Inglis, Zena Burgess, Diana Tudhope and Alison Harvey Wood. These and so many more fill my mind with the pleasure of remembrance.

'Here endeth the lesson.' These memories have of course only touched upon a fraction of the life and work of Mayfield over my decades with the church – and I apologise to those who may have been aggrieved by not having seen their names here. I assure you that I love you all!



Revd J.K. Thomson with Aunt Lucy and sons Kenneth, Nigel and Alastair.



Nigel and the Revd J.K Thomson in the car.



Sunday School picnic 1936? Kneeling left, William Frier, church officer in the early 30's; sitting beside him Sergeant Porteus



Nigel with his 1955 Bible Class



Sunday School teachers picnic



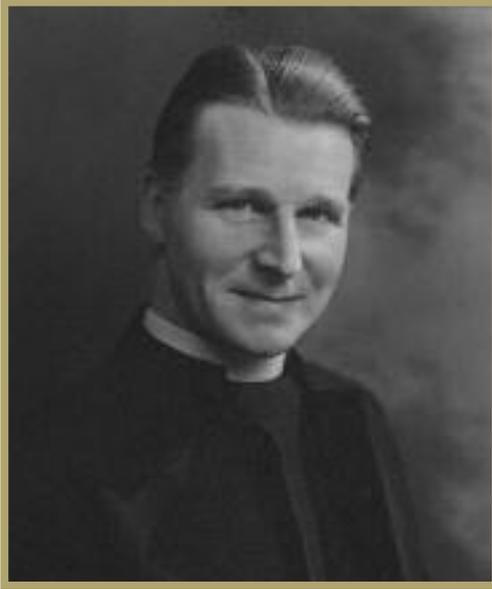
Pillars of the Kirk: from the right, Miss Bowman
Miss Tweedie, and Miss Jean Brown



Sunday school teachers picnic in the nineteen thirties



Sunday School teachers picnic. JK Thomson on left; 3rd from left; Miss Netta Shierlaw; standing left Tom Melvin, Sunday School Superintendent



Revd. James A. Whyte



Revd. W J G McDonald

APPENDIX

Four Ecclesiastical Love-Lyrics

Some fifty years ago I read an analysis of where married couples had first met. Twenty-five percent had met in connection with their church. The analyst pointed out that fifty years earlier this group would not only have been much larger, but could have been accurately divided into substantial sub-groups. To illustrate what this meant I wrote the following four verses, to be spoken by four hopeful brides-to-be. I wonder if they ever applied in Mayfield?

The Uniformed Organizations

I was a wee girl in the Guides
 And he was a wee boy scout.
 We met on Friday evenings
 When the Guides and Scouts were out.
 He was only a tenderfoot
 When first my eye he caught
 But he had such a tender heart
 He tied me in a knot!

He took me to the sweetie shop
 His good deed for the day.
 He stood me a ha'penny soda lunch
 And said that he would pay.
 Then he said that he cared, and would I be prepared
 To be his ain wee bride?
 Och, but he was just a wee boy scout
 And me a wee girl guide!

The Badminton Club

Badminton night! What jolly good fun!
And maybe I'll have a game with the one
That I fell in love with right at first sight –
So hurry on, hurry on, badminton night!

I think he's feeling out of sorts,
But oh, he looks so sweet in shorts
And in a bad light almost slim,
I must go up and speak to him!

'Sorry, I don't know your name,
But would you like to have a game?'
'Thank you, well at least I'll try –'
'Then we'll be partners, you and I!'
'I'm afraid I'm not too hot –'
'Never mind, just have a shot.'
'But I should explain, the fact is –'
'Oh, I'm also out of practice.'
'Hard luck, partner, never mind,
Don't think we're too far behind.
(No) – surely that is not the score?
Heavens, thought we'd got much more.
Leave it partner, this one's mine,
Dash it, better luck next time!'

We've lost the game, but I don't care,
We really make an ideal pair!

The Choir

He was all my heart's desire
 Ever since he joined the choir.
 And I always lost the place
 Gazing at that bass's face.
 Thinking of him, I couldn't sleep,
 Yes, I was shallow, but he was deep.
 It's Thursday night, the choir's in form
 Practising for Sunday morn.
 The organist's annoyed with me
 I'll get a telling-off, you'll see.
 'Altos, keep your tummies in,
 Never mind your double chin;
 And kindly cease from making faces
 At the better-looking basses.

Now please let's have that bit again,
 A great deal softer, gentlemen.
 I really must again point out
 That *forte* doesn't mean a shout.

Tenors, at your heights sublime
 Try, oh, try to keep in time.
 And ladies – do remember that
 You all are singing very flat!
 Will sopranos please refrain
 From looks indicative of pain?
 Let your girdles out a bit,
 Just relax and let it rip!

On and on he used to go,
 We're much too fast or far too slow,
 But I didn't take it in,
 I was listening just to him –

Who's been all my heart's desire
Ever since he joined the choir.

My mouth is shut, my lips are closed
Speechless, now that he's proposed
And made me the happiest girl alive –
For though he's very *forte*, I was forty-five!

In the Body of the Kirk

I'm in love with the man who takes the plate!
He does it so well, he's simply great,
And he's near my pew now, I can hardly wait –
He's a wonderful man who takes the plate.

Now the collection's just begun,
Hands are in their pockets fumbling,
Children's pennies all are tumbling
Bright and shiny, one by one.
I've my shilling out and ready
But my hand is none too steady
Because – it's *his* turn today
He's going to bring the plate my way!
Here it is; he hands it to me.
I nearly drop it through my finger.
Did he smile as if he knew me?
Does my glance a moment linger?

Now he's marching up the aisle
In the very grandest style.
I dream – he's marching down again
With me beside him – ahem – Amen!



