

# BLIND TOM AS HE IS TODAY\*

## (1898)

BY JOHN A'BECKET

**A**FTER THE Johnstown flood a colored man, who was one of its victims, was identified by a woman as Thomas Wiggins, and was buried as such. That the writer spent the day with Thomas Wiggins a few weeks ago is proof that the inscription on the Pennsylvania tombstone is singularly incorrect.

The name Thomas Wiggins means nothing to the majority of readers. But Thomas Wiggins is "Blind Tom," a name familiar to hundreds of thousands in this country and abroad, who have heard the piano played by this wonderful Negro. The impression that he is dead is a pretty general one. As a matter of fact, Blind Tom has never been ill a day in his life, and is now enjoying an existence more full of comforts and happiness than fall to the lot of most mortals.

On the banks of the Shrewsbury River, in a domain of over two hundred acres of woodland, stands a picturesque two-and-a-half-story wooden house with a broad veranda. Here Blind Tom is at home. It is an ideally beautiful spot, but Blind Tom cannot see the beauties which Nature has woven about his home. Even the powerful lights of the Highlands, which send their helpful rays eighteen miles, make little impression on his nearly sightless orbs.

The day the writer called, the Negro pianist was expecting a tuner who would correct a faulty A in his concert grand. When I reached the house and pressed the annunciator button the door was flung open by Blind Tom himself.

For a moment he stood there, a big, burly fellow, of nearly fifty, his black broadcloth trousers braced up high on his capacious girth, over a white outing shirt with a narrow pink stripe. His head raised, his large dark eyes uplifted, he waited till I announced myself as a visitor who had an appointment with Mr. A. J. Lerche, his guardian. My voice told him that I was not the tuner. With a childlike droop of disappointment he shut the door in my face. He will always be a child, and his actions are sometimes saved from rudeness only by his simplicity.

Mr. Lerche soon appeared. He suggested that it might have a pacifying influence if I would hear Tom's explanation of the piano's shortcomings, and promise to let the tuner know about them, so that he would come promptly to remedy them. This I accordingly did.

"The A is wrong," said Tom, pressing his finger on the note; "and then this high A is a little out, too," sounding another, two or three octaves above the first. He put his finger on each note without any hesitation. He spoke in a rich, full voice and with much simple dignity. There was a respectfulness in his air and pose, however, which recalled

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the fact that he had been a slave for nearly twenty years.

Then at Mr. Lerche's request he seated himself, and for the first time I heard Blind Tom play. It was indeed a wonderful exhibition. He seated himself on the square, horsehair-covered stool which stood before the piano, whose lid was raised, and began playing at once a brilliant composition with which I was unfamiliar. His hands are not at all "piano hands." In place of the slender, long-fingered hands which one so often sees in great pianists, Tom's hands are small and plump, with the thumbs and tapering fingers quite short. They seemed too small to do octaves effectively. Later it was proven that they were not so by any means. His technique is good. He executes runs with perfect ease and fluency. Whether the composition is difficult or simple he sees no difference in it. He plays everything with the same absence of effort.

Tom's head and face are not wholly unattractive. He has often been described as a repulsive imbecile except during his moments at the piano. This is not so. His head is small but well shaped. His features are of a strong African type, with low forehead, large eyes, nose and mouth and a general heaviness rather than weakness. His skin is not perfectly black. In his appearance, and in his manner of speaking when addressed—and during the whole day he made no remark to any one actually present except when addressed—he shows intelligence and dignity, with quite a pride of his own at times.

While playing, he moves his body very little; his head is at an angle of forty-five degrees, the eyes upturned, the heavy lower lip pendulous, and there is a sense of utter absorption in the music. He has an odd way of bringing this lower lip up and letting it fall at short intervals, as a fish works his mouth while breathing. He uses only one foot in pedaling—his right—and nearly always it was the loud pedal that he pressed. When the passage called for no pedal he stuck the front of his foot under the pedal. This was invariable. After finishing his piece he stood up and his right hand habitually went up to his face.

Tom played one of his own compositions next, "something that the birds and wind told him." It was a simple, fresh, melodious thing, with a good dash of the sprightliness which colored people are so fond of in music.

"When did you compose that?" asked Mr. Lerche.

"That, sir, I composed when I was seven years of age," replied Tom with the same impressive gravity.

"Do you play anything of Rubinstein's?" I inquired.

"I play Rubinstein's melody in F," he replied, and then, as usual, began at once to play it. His technique, expression and correctness were perfect, but in nothing that he played was there evidence of any interpretation of his own of the piece. But it was marvelous enough without that. One need not exaggerate the wonders of this simple Negro's mastery of the piano. They are miraculous enough in a weak-minded man who knows theoretically nothing of his art.

Tom never drinks, swears, nor shows any vicious inclinations. He is scrupulously neat, and most regular and methodical in his habits. He

rises at seven, has breakfast at nine, dinner at half-past one, and supper at six. He goes to bed at a little after nine. He has an attendant who looks after him at mealtime, as he has to have his meat cut for him. He finds his napkin and tucks that in around his neck himself. He has a good appetite although by no means is he a heavy eater. He is fond of fruit—watermelons preferred—likes all kinds of pie except mince, and is very fond of sugar. He never drinks coffee. He is sensitive to cold. Sometimes when he feels a strong breeze blowing on him he will say: "Tom's in a draft. He may catch cold and die. Wouldn't that be terrible?" He has this artless fear of death, yet he has composed a funeral march for himself, in which there is one movement so cheerfully bright as to be almost pathetic. This march was played at the funeral of his master, John G. Bethune, who was killed in a railway accident in 1883.

Tom is of a religious turn of mind. He will play only sacred music on Sunday. He says the Lord's Prayer in his room aloud, and is fond of reciting passages from the Holy Scriptures, being especially fond of Saint Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians.

Tom can only dimly distinguish objects. When he was in Paris as a young man an operation was performed on his eyes with only this measure of success. He has the habit of turning his eyes up when he plays, or when he walks about mumbling to himself. He likes to let the sunlight fall directly on his eyeballs. When he talks to himself he will repeat a word or phrase several times, either to emphasize it, or through pleasure in the sound, or else because he is filling in time until some other idea shall come to his mind. For instance, he went on in this way for some time as he strolled up and down with his rolling gait on the veranda: "Wagner. Yes. Wagner. Mr. Wagner. Richard Wagner. Wagner. Mr. Wagner is dead. Yes. He is dead. Dead. His last opera. Yes. His opera. His last opera was 'Parsifal.' 'Parsifal.' His last opera." Then he indulged in a peculiar sort of movement, which he frequently employs. Standing on one foot, he raised the other behind him, and with body and arms bent forward he jumped around, turning on his foot like a ballet dancer practicing a *pas seul*.

Being unable to play anything on the piano which he might repeat I tried Tom's mimetic ability by quoting some verses from the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. He listened attentively. He failed to repeat the line after me in its entirety, but when I said it a word at a time he would repeat the Latin or Greek word after me with not a little pride and satisfaction—for Blind Tom is childishly vain.

It occurred to me that the verse in which Virgil aims at the onomatopœic effect of a horse galloping over a hard field might catch him, and I asked him if he would like me to say it.

"Yes, sir. At once," he replied with an imperious air.

One pleasure which has a healthy side to it, and is in keeping with Blind Tom's cleanliness, is his daily bath in the Shrewsbury. In warm weather when the tide is favorable, he dons his bathing suit, walks down to the shore from the house and ducks and paddles about and splashes in the water. He can take a few strokes, but he labors under



BLIND TOM IN 1898.

Courtesy W. C. Bradley Library, Columbus, Georgia.

the pleasing illusion that he is a peerless, long-distance swimmer. At first he did not take very kindly to this agreeable diversion, possibly because he felt unfamiliar with anything in the water, but he has come to be very fond of his bath, enjoying it hugely.

Before I left, Tom played other things for me. I asked him if he had ever heard Gottschalk, and he said: "I play 'The Last Hope.'" This is a composition of Gottschalk's which is better known than any other. He played it at once. Then, with a purpose, I asked him if he played "The Maiden's Prayer," a question one would hardly put to an intelligent pianist to-day. But I wished to see how his memory would carry a piece as old as this, which he could not have played for years, and I also wanted to see whether he would show any disdain for this old threadbare thing which it was the proud ambition of our mothers to play at their graduation exercises. Without a moment's hesitation he played it.

When I rose to go he shook hands and bade me good-by, and as the carriage bore me off I heard him again at his beloved piano, the unwearying solace of his life. The soft music from the weak-minded Negro escaped through the shades of the room, and the breath of the honeysuckle was wafted in upon the blind child of Nature as he sat there in the dim apartment alone, yet companioned as few mortals are.

The strongest impression I bore away was that of the sweet, contented life the poor, blind Negro is leading. There was pathos in it. I had expected to find a wonder at the piano, and I did, for his untaught mastery of the instrument is marvelous and admits of no explanation. It is a gift of Nature pure and simple. From the time when the Bethune family left the dinner-table to see who could be playing on the piano, and discovered the sightless pickaninny of four years perched on the stool, his little hands plucking uncanny melody from the keyboard—from that time until now he has had an unwavering devotion to the instrument whose music is his life.

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When he was eight years of age he was taken through this country and Europe, and played in public to the wonder of all who heard him, and to the stupefaction of pianists. He met Meyerbeer in Paris, and he has heard most of the celebrated pianists of the day. Josef Hofmann, a musical phenomenon himself, but an explainable one, afforded him the greatest pleasure. Paderewski's playing affected him so strongly that they had to take Tom away.

He has made fortunes, first for Colonel Bethune, who bought his mother, Charity Wiggins, when the blind baby was "thrown in"; then for John S. Bethune, and lastly for the widow of John Bethune, who is now the wife of the lawyer, Albert J. Lerche, at whose residence I saw the wonderful Negro.

Blind Tom has all that he wants. Of how few of us can as much be said. There is even dignity, pathos and sweetness about this big, fleshy Negro, now in his forty-eighth year. His old mother is still alive, a withered, wrinkled "mammy," eighty-five years old. There is no reason why her gifted son . . . should not attain even greater longevity.