

Recollections of Uncle Tom, by Mary Dunhill, daughter of Alfred Dunhill

*Taken from Our Family Business, by Mary Dunhill, Bodley Head, 1979 (pp 50/51)*

The member of the family I particularly remember at these Christmas gatherings was Uncle Tom, a man very different in temperament and character from either of his brothers, Uncle Bertie and Father. Though he could be withdrawn to the point of absent-mindedness, he so obviously enjoyed himself on these occasions and wanted to share his enjoyment with everyone around him. Although he was already a musician and composer of some distinction, you would never have thought so if you had seen him cross-legged on the floor, piping away on a penny-whistle, a twinkle of delight in his eye.

Father, who was inclined to look at people rather severely through his gilt-framed spectacles, probably because he didn't see them very clearly, used to taunt him with the phrase, 'Tom, Tom the piper's son' – a well-worn jibe at the fact that he thought Uncle Tom, as the favourite son, had had an unfair share of Grandfather's resources put into his education; but Uncle Tom only smiled at his brother and went on playing. If further mocked, he probably got up and went across to the piano which he played exceedingly well. This silenced Father who, after all, could only compete with a mechanical organ.

Uncle Tom at this stage of his life was a strikingly handsome man of over forty with a fine speaking voice – he lectured widely on musical subjects – and a charming personality. Having trained under Charles Stanford, and with Holst and John Ireland as his close contemporaries, he had already been assistant music master at Eton and now, apart from organising concerts for young composers, adjudicating at festivals, writing books and gradually gaining recognition for his songs and chamber music, he was on the staff of the Royal College of Music where he had trained as a student.

It was there that he had met and recently married one of his students, Molly Arnold, a great-grand-daughter of Dr Arnold of Rugby and a delightfully gentle woman who, alas, was soon to develop a tubercular condition and die. Father used to say that Uncle Tom could play the piano from the age of three, and since few of us, including Father, could sing 'Three Blind Mice' in tune, I found Uncle Tom's accomplishments very impressive as I became aware of them, and his charm took hold of me from these early meetings.

Although he had little interest in business, Uncle Tom got on with his brothers surprisingly well, despite Father's taunting.