

CHAPTER X

I PERFORM BEFORE JUDGE AND JURY IN THE LAW COURTS – SOME PANTOMIME EXPERIENCES – THE PRIVATE DETECTIVE v. CHIRGWIN – I HAVE TO PAY DAMAGES FOR ENTERING MY OWN HOUSE – EAR-BITERS

SOME twenty-seven years back I bought a house in Green Lanes, which I subsequently let to an erstwhile private detective. We became very chummy, and many a jolly evening I have spent in his company in this house. One Sunday evening I called, but could not get any answer to my repeated knocking and ringing. I went round to the stables at the back, but there was not a soul about.

Finding the back door open I stepped inside and called the man's name, but the only answer I got was from a neighbour over the garden wall, who shouted that there was no one at home. With that I left.

Exactly one week later I was served with a writ issued by the private detective for trespassing. I at once went to see him, but he would not be seen, and sent a message saying I could consult his solicitors. At first I thought this a joke on his part, but nothing more happened, and eventually the case came on. I conducted my own defence, thinking I could easily manage to explain things; but the neighbour who was subpoenaed pitched a delightful tale of how I mysteriously approached the house at night, scaled a wall at the back, and surreptitiously entered the house, and generally put a most remarkable construction on my behaviour. I got a bit of fun out of the case when I gave my own version of it, and pointed out the close friendship that existed between us.

Counsel for plaintiff had the cheek to ask me seriously if I went to take anything, and said I probably would have done had I not been disturbed by the witness shouting over the wall. I could not resist a little bit of sarcasm now, for I replied: "Of course, I went in

to steal the piano and other small pieces of furniture,” when the Judge evidently saw the humour of my remark by sternly pulling me up with “This is not a place for chaff, Mr. Chirgwin.”

In the end it was shown that I had broken the law (which is a hass) by unlawful entry. A verdict was given against me with one farthing damages. I meant to have another shot, so I said as innocently as I could: “Shall I have to pay the farthing now, or when am I to pay it, mister?” and was promptly squashed again by the Judge, who said “Will you please remember, sir, that you are in a Court of Justice, and you are qualifying yourself to be charged with Contempt of Court.”

That settled it, but I didn't care a farthing for justice after this. All I can say is that I hope my farden helped my opponent along a bit. He subsequently renewed his lease of this house to another three years. The case was widely reported in the press, with headings like “Chirgwin fined a farthing for entering his own house.”

A week or two after I was appearing in pantomime at Brighton, and my first gag was “I haven't got a farden.” But I had plenty before long, for one of the audience came well stocked with farthings for the purpose of having a bit of fun of his own, and as soon as I said the words, they commenced flinging their farthings at me.

I was at one time fond of pantomime engagements, but it's too hard work for anyone who wishes to keep a decent voice. Yes, I prefer now working the two merry little shows a night. I have appeared in three Brighton pantomimes, and six at the Britannia. My first success was at Birmingham twenty-eight years ago, where I played Idle Jack in Dick Whittington. Idle Jack was then only a super's part, but I worked it up as it is now played, viz., the first comedian's rôle.

The late Sir Augustus Harris wanted me to play at Drury Lane a Cannibal King part in pantomime, and made me a tempting offer; but I refused it. I suppose he thought a Cannibal King and a White-Eyed Kaffir were first cousins, and as I played the Kaffir all

right I would play the Cannibal also well, but as I've said I didn't Kaffir his offer.

Successful artistes receive thousands of letters of all kinds. Love letters, begging letters, threatening and abusive letters, etc., and I have had my share. After I've read 'em, my wife burns 'em, and I let her.

One begging letter writer waited for me one night at a stage door, and told the tale.

"Why, you're drunk," I said. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

"I dunno," said he, "I've only been here five minutes."

Another, a well-dressed man, absolutely demanded his fare to Edinboro'. I suggested that he should try "Attenboro." Strange to say, only the "class" halls and theatres are infested with stage door "ear-biters." Never once during my many engagements at the old Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, was I waylaid in this way.

Speaking of the "Old Brit." reminds me that I once gave away a "donkey" there on my Benefit Night. The next night, the winner, a typical coster, said to me as I came out:

"George, that moke is obstinit, he won't go. Wot's the best fing ter do?"

"Well," I said, "put a pinch of snuff in his ear; that will make him go like lightning."

"Right," said he, "then I shall want a pinch in me own year, cos I've got to catch 'im."

At a suburban hall on my birthnight I was standing drinks round, when an old "toaster" said to me:

"No, George, how old are you, really?"

"Well," said I, "I was born on December the fourteenth, '54."

"Ah!" said he, "I suppose you mean Eighteen Fifty-four!"

This Chapter, from the book 'CHIRGWIN'S CHIRRUP' by the late George Chirgwin, has been transcribed by D & I Flaxman for online reading only.

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