

## **CHAPTER XI**

### **I VISIT AMERICA AND AUSTRALIA – DIME MUSEUMS – PITCHING – ON BOARD SHIP – REMEDY FOR THE RABBIT PEST**

ABOUT fourteen years ago I accepted an engagement at Koster and Bial's, New York, and took with me my wife and my representative, Mr. Charles Osborne. We had a very pleasant passage out, but I can't remember that anything unusual happened aboard worthy of recounting.

I had just got in "touch," as it were, with the New Yorkers; the song by Charles Osborne, "My Town Girl," especially appealed to them, and it went better and better each night. I had only been playing about ten days, when all my hopes of making a big success were shattered by my receiving a cable informing me of the death of our little son, and requesting Mrs. Chirgwin to come home immediately. Not wishing to return alone under the circumstances, she implored me to return with her, and by coming to an amicable arrangement with Messrs. Koster and Bial, I succeeded in cancelling my contracts, and so, after only about two weeks' performance we all embarked for London. Consequently, I have nothing but sad memories of my visit to New York. I may say, however that I was billed and advertised in America as "Chirgwin, the Cockney Nigger," in case, I suppose, some of the audience should think I was a real Kaffir!

I always regret that my American tour was cut short (for reason I have stated). New York is a land of gold, and most New Yorkers wear gold in their teeth. They may be "dollar-ous," but they are always cheery, and their criticisms are like their footwear, very "pointed." Everything there is heated – arguments included – and American hospitality is proverbial. Amusements are very plentiful

and cheap, particularly the Dime Museums, or in English, penny gaffs.

Concerning these the following story is told. Two Dime Museums opened on the same day on the same street of the same town. One came out with the flaming poster:

“On show, the Original Axe of George Washington.”

The other went one better by announcing:

“Walk right in, and see the Original Axe of the Apostles!”

It is just possible that by referring to the loss of my little son the reader’s curiosity may be aroused concerning my father, mother, brothers, and sister. If such is the case, I regret to say that they are all dead. My mother died in 1875, dad in 1877, Jack in 1880, Tom in 1881, and Liza 1891, and I am the only Chirgwin of the original stock left, but I have many nephews and nieces.

I have been married twice, and have had ten children, six of whom are alive and well, namely one girl (by my first wife), and George, Rita, Jimmie, Joy, and Joe – George, the eldest, being nearly sixteen years old, and Master Joe, six months! I am not decided as to whether any of them will follow in their father’s footsteps, and enter a professional career, but I am giving them all a thorough sound musical education, with the exception of Master Joe, who is quite musical enough for me at present without any encouragement or educating whatever.

Upon my return to London I found plenty of contracts waiting my signature for various London and Provincial Halls, and I have consequently been busy ever since, and my bookings now extend, over a period of many years hence, in fact, when looking over my date book I am reminded of the song written on the poem, “The Brook,” namely, that “men may come and men may go, but I go on for ever.”

As the majority of my readers will be conversant with my appearances, etc., during the last eight years of my career, I will now come to the close of my “little carryings on” during my lifetime. But before doing so, I feel it incumbent upon me to express in a few words my appreciation of my old friend and

collaborator, Charlie Osborne, the erstwhile performer, and now the famous song writer, composer, and as he has most rightly been designated, the King of Parodists. I have the good fortune to retain the services of Charlie as my manager, in various little speculations that I from time to time venture upon, such as my concert parties recently at The Happy Valley, Southend, etc.

In addition to “pitching” at the seaside, etc., I have run many “pitches,” including one at a well-known seaside resort. This was so successful, that the light fingered gentry got busy among the crowds that assembled, until my Manager posted up a warning: “Beware of Pick-pockets.”

One morning posters announcing my appearance at a special matinee were conspicuously exhibited immediately above the warning notice, which consequently read as follows:

“Special appearance of Chirgwin, the White-Eyed Kaffir.”

“Beware of Pick-pockets.”

Another time in our programme, the advertisement a local pork butcher, through a misprint, read thus:

“Try our Pork Sausages. Warranted our Own Moke.”

(There’s a pig-ture for you)!

But al-fresco pictures depend on the weather and the climate, and now-a-days our climate? well, you can’t climb it.

Out-door pitches have undoubtedly lit up many matrimonial matches, in which both parties have “burnt their fingers,” like the lady who said to me once:

“Mr. Chirgwin, I first saw my husband at one of your pitches.”

I said, “Oh. That’s where you met him?”

“No,” said she, “that’s where he overtook me.”

“Well,” I said, “how is he. Is he here?”

“No,” she replied, “I’m sorry to say that he’s escaped!”

Not wishing to make my exit too abruptly, I will now set forth briefly a few of my hobbies, past and present, and any other little incidents that may occur to me, which perchance in the previous pages I may have omitted to narrate, that may be interesting.

About sixteen years ago I had plenty of offers from agents to go to Australia, but they could not get me the money I wanted, and there was the 10 per cent. So I waited until the late Mr. Harry Rickards came over, and met him at the Palace, Shaftesbury Avenue, and fixed a six months' tour up for £100 a week, and passage there and back.

From a sociable point of view things were at first rather strained in the saloon, so one night I got the 'cello out for a little practice, and we also had one or two duets. Next morning, when taking our exercise, a clergyman came up all smiles with:

“Good morning, Mr. Chirgwin, when do we have the pleasure of another little impromptu entertainment?”

“Oh, may be to-morrow night, sir,” I said, and passed on.

Well, we impromptued the next night, and the next, and gradually we made friends with everybody. Eventually I was unanimously elected to stage manage the Saloon entertainments.

I fairly abhorred ships until I went aboard ships to Australia, America, etc. Sea voyaging I like. Equality reigns aboard ship. Directly a “Heavy Swell” arrives, everybody's on the same level. The food is good – particularly the “Gold Soup,” which is stamped “9 Carrots.” Officers and crew are invariably polite and attentive, and get up all sorts of games and concerts for the general amusement. I arranged several of the latter – all of which greatly benefited the funds of the various seamen's charities – and my own special pet – “The Variety Artistes' Benevolent Fund.” I chummed in with one enthusiastic concert patron – a retired sea captain who invariably got “half seas over.” One night I gently hinted to him that he would do well to follow a ship's example, as she, although christened with wine, ever after took to water

“Yes,” said he, “but she takes good care to keep the water outside.”

We had performances for various charitable objects, such as the “Orphanage” and the “Sailors' Home.”

In the last week of the voyage I gave an entertainment myself of 75 minutes, and got the children passengers to go round

collecting. In this way I was able to send to London a cheque for £16 for the Music Hall Artistes' Benevolent Fund.

Before we landed I was given a "round robin" of thanks, with the signatures of all the saloon passengers, which included Sir Henniker Heaton and other notabilities.

Before leaving England I said to an old friend that I wished I hadn't signed, because it was such a long way. Said he, "You will be sorry, my boy, when the time comes for you to get off the boat." I must admit that what he said was all too true, for that six weeks or so on a passenger boat was one of the jolliest holidays I ever spent. Happily we had no dirty weather. Indeed, the voyage back was also ideal, and as there were a goodly number of those who went out returning, they called me their mascot. About half-way we had one little roll, and I was at once inundated with queries as to the reason of it! Good weather and a jolly good company will make any sea journey pleasant.

I was to have stayed on board till we reached Sydney, but got off at Melbourne, and made my first acquaintance with the Australian Music Halls at the Opera House in that town. I found it much the same as in London, for a great many knew all about me, and had got a great many of my expressions and wheezes quite pat. Calls for "Blind Boy" were just the same.

I stayed there for a month, and then went to Sydney for a like period, after which I did another six weeks at each place. That completed my six months, and as I did not intend returning to the old country for three weeks, I agreed to do two weeks up country – one at Bendigo, and the other at Broken Hill. The last week at Melbourne I had to fulfil private engagements, which I had promised that I would accept. It was a case of two or three parties each night. Everyone was so nice, kind, and affable, and the number of little gifts of big value that were thrust upon me was astonishing.

When at Bendigo I was prevailed upon to go rabbit shooting. Anticipating good sport, you can imagine my surprise to see swarms of little tails bobbing about. One had only to fire on the

ground to get a bag. The place was alive with them. Indeed, the hotel where we stayed seemed to be standing on one big rabbit warren.

Concerning the Australian rabbit pest, the following remedy may be worth trying. Rabbits have a keen scent for danger, and always sniff the air upon emerging from the burrows. That being so, you plant some large stones at the entrance to their runs, and sprinkle the stones with snuff. Then you yell. Out pops Mr. Rabbit, sniffs the air and the snuff, sneezes violently, and dashes his brains out on the stones. (Australian papers please copy). Good old "Cornstalks!" I often think of you, especially when my corns talk in wet weather.

At Broken Hill I was taken down the deepest gold mine in the world, and it was a sight to see the veins of gold.

Australian horse racing did not attract me, but I heard that at one meeting a horse had been named after me, "Chirgwin." I never saw it, and think it must have turned out a "dud."

The inhabitants of Australia, taken generally, are the nicest people in the world, anyway, those I met were.

I had some good shooting of native birds. The first one I brought down was a wild pigeon, but when I went to pick it up I found its claws were like those of a hawk, but in other respects it resembles the English wood pigeon. There were plenty of lovely white cockatoos, too, but I hadn't the heart to fire at them. The love birds, or Budgerigars, flew about in hundreds, and one could bring down a dozen or so at each shot. I tried the taxidermist act on some of them, but was not successful in preserving them. Wild cats were very plentiful where the rabbits were plentiful, and being spotted, looked like small leopards.

I bought a lot of lovely parroquets to bring back with me for friends; also a few wallabies. I had a very unfortunate adventure with one of these. I got him out of the box, but evidently was not holding him by the tail in the proper manner, for he struggled so vigorously I had to let go. Away he bounded down the passage of the hotel, and into a lady's boudoir, where he played terrible

havoc, overturning tables and whatnots, etc., before a waiter could secure him. I can assure you it cost me something very considerable to put that room into a presentable state again, and pay for the damage done. Those wallabies died the second day on board on my return, probably as the result of shipping, and though I was much disappointed thereat, it was perhaps just as well, or the boudoir incident might not have been the last I should have heard of them.

I also had many happy hours fishing in the Harbour at Sydney, and on one occasion had the satisfaction of landing a shark – a true fisherman, I believe, would have said it was a whale, but I always was a firm believer in sticking to facts – otherwise I might have made a much better raconteur.

At the hotel where we were staying at St. Kilda, I remember going out one morning early, top-hatted, etc., when I heard a good deal of laughter, which I put down to the servants, and was accordingly annoyed at being guyed. Subsequently I discovered that laughing jackasses were resting on the top of the house, whence came the laughter. On our return we named our own house “Coogee,” being told that interpreted it meant “Cosy Corner,” but we afterwards learned it meant “Stinking Fish,” and it has another less high sounding name now. Oh, yes, I’ll admit the Australians can spoof quite as well as we can.

Close to the Hotel in Coogee there was an ideal bathing place – quite a bath in the rocks, a place which in by-gone days had been hewn out by convicts. One day I wended my way thither in pyjamas, it being close to the hotel, and came across a crowd of “larrikins,” the equivalent to our hooligan having a sun bath. Seeing in me some sport for their gibes, they began “remarking,” in the way those knowingly clever youths will do. I like a bit of fun myself, so standing and murmuring a lullaby I fell backwards into the water purposely. It was pretty deep, and they laughed uproariously. I went down once or twice, and aped the drowning man to such effect that they thought I was drowning, came to my assistance, and dived in, and after a struggle got me ashore. At that

I began to sing the refrain of the “Blind Boy” in my usual falsetto. Exactly what they said, even if it could be put into print, never mind, but It was something about that “blooming white-eyed Chirgwin,” and then in disgust at being had themselves, I suppose they threw me in again!

My tour having come to an end, I returned to good old England, and the passage home was also most enjoyable – fine weather, fine company, and a fine little pile of the best in my cash-box.

That I had an enjoyable time in Australia the foregoing is sufficient evidence. That I made an artistic success it is only necessary to say that shortly after my landing I received a most flattering letter from Mr. Harry Rickards complimenting me on my success, and offering me splendid terms to renew my visit to him whenever I chose. Much as I should have liked to accept his offer I could not do so, as I was then booked up in London for many years ahead.

*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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