

CHAPTER XII

SOME SONGS OF MINE – PRIVATE RECEPTIONS AND HOBBIES – DIGGINGS AND LANDLADIES

MY songs are my own property, and when not of my own composition are especially written and composed for me, invariably by Charles Osborne, though Joseph Tabrar and the late Harry Hunter, of the now defunct Mohawk Minstrels, have turned me out some excellent work.

Next to the “Blind Boy” in popularity comes “My Fiddle is my Sweetheart.” The words are by Harry Hunter: the melody I composed and originally sang it to another song, the title of which was “When I was a Little Nig,” but with slight improvements I adapted it to “My Fiddle.”

Then comes the “London Town Girl,” written and composed by Charles Osborne, this being the first of a series of well-known songs containing well-known whistling phrases, such as “Half-a-pint of mild and bitter,” “Get your hair cut,” “Over the hills and far away,” all of which caught on with the public and were immediately copied by professionals, even down to a talking and whistling starling that I read about some time back.

Other ideas of mine have also been “pinched,” as “All Scotch” (Osborne), “He’s been a good old pal,” “The girl upstairs” (Tabrar), and hundreds more. I am particularly fortunate with my parody songs, and being very fond of this class of work I am always on the look out for ideas in this direction, my latest successes being “Asleep in the deep” and “Sweet Louise,” both by Osborne. It has not been infrequently remarked in astonishment by musical directors and others, how I, having a light baritone voice, can reach the lower register of “Asleep in the deep” in the refrain so comfortably, and I must confess I can only explain it by saying I get there all the same.

My nonsense songs, as I call them, always go well. I allude to such effusions as “Italiana Multimagarnacan Saffronhillo I scream alone,” “Will you gang awa, Jimmie,” “In a Farmhouse near to Regent Circus,” “It never could happen here, etc.” Nothing very “brainy” in them, but still they amuse, so I frequently introduce them and others, as my mission on this little planet is to amuse.

In my earlier days I pitched before many Royalties, including the Queen of England, Duke of Gloucester, Prince of Wales, George IV., and other Public Houses too numerous to mention. But joking apart, I have had the honour of performing before the late King Edward VII. when he was Prince of Wales, the occasion being some swell function that was held at the Grafton Picture Gallery, Piccadilly. I remember, too, that the late Sir Henry Irving, after seeing my performances at the Oxford, wrote asking me if I would appear at an entertainment one Sunday at the Lyceum Theatre. I did so, and gave a very long performance. Two days later, to my surprise, I received from Sir Henry a most complimentary letter, enclosing a cheque for £25 as a small token of his and his guests’ appreciation. Shortly after this I got a letter from Mr. Walter Joyce, who was a very great friend of Irving’s, in which he said he was writing in the name of Sir Henry and other leading lights, requesting me to appear again at a similar special occasion at the Freemasons’ Tavern, Great Queen Street. He made the special request that if I consented, would I be sure to include my dancing pipes!

I quite forget what this function was, but our late King was present, and Dukes and Lords galore. I am always very willing and very pleased to give my services at a benefit performance, either for those of my profession or for any other cause, providing it is purely of a philanthropic nature. To speak more plainly, I don’t see the fun of blacking up and appearing at a “Grand Concert” (they are all grand concerts) simply to put a few pounds in the pockets of speculators who perhaps are a great deal better off than myself.

Which reminds me that I feel it incumbent, as it were, to devote a few words upon what I and most of my brother and sister artistes consider a most “deserving case,” as the papers put it. I am alluding to The Music Hall Benevolent Institute, the offices of which are situated at 18, Charring Cross Road, W.C.

If my readers will be good enough to read on for just another few lines, I have confidence that they will, when they have thrown this little book on one side, put their hands in their pockets, and extract any superfluous coins that may be lurking where “moth and rust do corrupt.” Or pop their pen in the ink and write out a nice little cheque and send it along to the White Eyed ’Un, or to Joe Elvin. Not that I am asking for anything, mind you, but if it is ever such a little, it would —

Joking apart, my old friend, Joe Elvin, is the founder of the Music Hall Benevolent Institution, and its object is this: To build near London a Home where artistes of both sexes who have arrived at the sere and yellow leaf age, or through misfortune are no longer able to follow their profession, may find a home.

In a like manner, orphan children of Variety artistes are eligible for election, to be educated and taught a trade or be trained, if showing any aptitude, for the Variety Theatres. And those adults who through misfortune or advanced age are not in the running with their more successful and junior sisters and brothers, will be assisted to secure work other than the stage.

A part of the Institute is to be set aside as a Convalescent Home, where artistes recovering from illness can be received at a small weekly charge. These, then, are the main objects. Mr. Joe Elvin has kindly given £500. I have given £100. I have previously stated that my pet aversion is the copyist. I hereby avow that neither Joe Elvin nor George Chirgwin will feel the slightest little bit hurt if their brother and sister artistes will copy them in a like manner in this instance, or do something similar in proportion to their standing and income. (This Home is now open at Twickenham).

This, then, is my chief hobby,

Next comes fishing (fishing for fish, I mean). In my time I have kept greyhounds, trotting ponies, have hunted, done a good bit of shooting. I have abandoned all these, but have stuck to my rod and line from the time I poached for minnows in Regent's Park when a nipper to the present time.

And mentioning the word poach reminds me of a little incident that happened some few years back. I was driving along a country road when I noticed a splendid lake in some very beautiful private grounds. Said I to myself, "I'll come here tomorrow and see if there are any fish in that lake." So on the morrow off I went with my fishing kit. I had just commenced fishing, and sitting on a little portable stool I took with me, was soliloquizing something like the following:—

It's nice to sit and think and fish
And sit and fish and think,
And think and fish and sit and wish
That you could Dewar drink.

when I saw in the distance a man rushing towards me, waving his arms, and gesticulating wildly. I was up in a jiffy, grabbed my paraphernalia, and was off, thinking if that chap catches me it will mean six months' hard. I did him easily, and at the time thanked my lucky stars for my escape. Two nights after, while fulfilling a London engagement, I received a letter, which ran something like this:—

DEAR MR. CHIRGWIN,—

In your violent and sudden hurry the other day on leaving my grounds, when fishing, you evidently inadvertently dropped a card of yours, which I picked up. Presuming that you took me for one of my keepers, and was about to arrest you for trespass, I wish to inform you that I am the owner of that estate, and to say it will give me great pleasure if you will accept from me an open invitation to fish in my waters whenever you like,

when I can promise you some excellent sport, as that piece of water is well stocked with some grand pike, etc. I should have told you this at the time had you not been in such a d — hurry to avoid me.

I am, dear Mr. Chirgwin,

Yours, etc.

I need hardly add I took advantage of this very kind invitation, and have frequently enjoyed some capital sport there.

I have frequent “billiards” attacks in my billiard room at Streatham, after which I take a long “rest” on the “cushions.” It may seem “cue-rious,” and I’m “jiggard” if I know why I do it, but being on the “spot,” it saves time in retiring to another room for this purpose.

When young folks are in my billiard room I have distinctly heard “kissing” going on, but remembering I was once young myself, I never “break” in and attempt to “baulk” them, for like my coat that’s hanging in the hall, there’s no ’arm in it! But – and it’s a long but – it might be very “hazard”-ous for them if this were heard by their parents. And I’ve no doubt it has happened that a gentle “Jenny” had “scored,” and won not only the game, but a husband as well in a billiard room. I don’t play a particularly brilliant game myself, and have never played a professional for any high stake, although I have made breaks of 5, 7, 9, and once 11. I invariably “manage” to win, though, when I meet a partner who plays a similar game to myself if he gives me points, and I look after the scoring board.”

I have kept some very good trotting ponies in days gone by. One, “Fanny,” which I bought at Leeds, did the journey from there to Scarborough and back once in nineteen hours, a good performance, the distance being 124 miles. Another one, “Punch,” used to take me from London to Brighton in six hours easily.

I have also kept greyhounds, and about twenty years ago I was training one (given me by a well-known bookmaker) at Tufnell Park. I had got a couple of wild rabbits for the purpose, but some

of my pals played the following little game on me, for directly I had released a rabbit, and it had got nicely away, and just as I was about to let my dog free, imagine my surprise to see half a dozen young dogs tearing after it! They had been slipped just outside the gate, and in getting up in a few seconds to their quarry, they disposed of it rabbitly! (Hare! hare !)

After this I took my dog to fresh fields and pastures new for his training, and just as he was shaping nicely, and getting efficient for coursing, he was bitten across the back by a huge mastiff, and was ruined.

In my professional travels I have sampled innumerable professional landladies and lodgings.

Pros. always call landladies “Ma,” and lodgings “Digs.” Both are often excellent, but there are others, and I have had some of each. One of the “others” objected to my bringing gorgonzola cheese in at Christmas time, on the ground that it prevented her from “hearing the waits.” Another tried to light the gas with some sticks of maccaroni I brought home, thinking they were tapers.

But “Ma’s” visitors’ book, as an epitome of her visitors’ opinions of her catering, etc., is a gem.

Here is one testimonial in poetry:

This is to certify
I’ve never seen a dirty fly
In the diggings
Of Mrs. Higgins.

And another rather dubious:

As an artiste I am not ashamed to own that I
owe a lot to dear Mrs. H ——.

Another:

Mrs. Blanks’ beds are ripping,
And nobody can touch her cooking.

But “Ma,” on the whole, is a good sort, kindly and considerate to a degree as “Pros” who “con” this will readily admit. And I, as a “star,” treasure many a kind “message from Ma’s.”

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I will bring these little episodes of my life of the past years to a close, with the sincere hope that in depicting them, however feebly, I have been able to raise a smile here and there, my object being to amuse you, as readers, as I trust and think I have amused and

[2 pages appear to be missing from the book – pages 129 and 130]

to lead the singing at his chapel. At a given signal at the first service the Secretary turned the wrong crank, and failing to change it, solemnly marched through the shocked congregation carrying the organ, which was playing fortissimo the tune of “When Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah, hurrah!”

I MAKE A BARGAIN

Whilst driving home from Portsmouth some years ago I put up at a village Inn, and taking a stroll in the Market Place, I happened upon a man selling kid gloves at a remarkably low figure. Scenting a bargain I bought up his entire stock. Upon arriving home I triumphantly displayed my bargain with pride to Mrs. Chirgwin, who immediately discovered what I had overlooked – those gloves were all odd ones!

A PHOTOGRAPH

During an engagement at the Palace Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London, one of my gags was to pretend to take a photograph of the late Mr. Charles Morton, the Manager, by pointing my long hat horizontally (the end of which was covered by a handkerchief) at that gentleman, who was invariably seated at the back of the stalls. After requesting him to keep very still for a

moment, and the other little bits of business, I would remove the handkerchief, and say, "got you," at the same time producing from inside the hat a photograph (previously concealed there) of Mr. Morton, and would throw it into the stalls. One night a gentleman, who had been dining, got up and asked me to take his photo. I exclaimed that I was only prepared to take one photo a night, but if he would come in the next night I would be pleased to oblige him, and as he promised to do so, I was prepared, as the reader will learn. The next night, sure enough, the gentleman arose from his stall, and said:

"Now then, come on, take my photo, you said you could, and I defy you."

"All right, Cocky, don't excite yourself; half a mo, Cock," and then I went through the same tomfoolery as with Morton's picture.

When I said the words "got yer," this impatient gentleman called out:

"Let me see it, let me see it, I say."

"Half a mo, Cock, you shall see it." I then produced a large card from my hat, and held it up for everyone to see, and on it was a large head of a donkey! and no one in the house enjoyed this little joke more than my sat-upon sitter on satin.

A LONDON PAVILION CHARACTER

On the stage at the London Pavilion there was employed a youth by the name of Wickens. His calling was that of a general utility, in carrying in artistes' baskets, running messages, etc. One evening, having all my instruments, etc., at the side in readiness to be put on the stage, I said to Wickens, "stop here a bit and see that no one monkeys about with those two pipes, my dancing pipes." I was met on my return by Wickens, who was out of breath, and he said he had only turned his head away from the pipes for half a minute, and now there's one.

"Sufficient!" I said. "What do you mean, man. One is not sufficient!"

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Wickens, “but it is sufficient. Come and see for yourself.” And there, lying on the tray was only one pipe. It dawned on me later that he meant one was deficient. On another occasion this Wickens, whose forte was the twisting up of words, was present when a lot of us were deploring the very sudden death of one of the Pavilion’s stage hands, and commenting upon the robust health this poor chap had, when Wickens said: “I was at dinner with him to-day, and he was quite well then, in fact he looked the picture of health, and anyone would have taken a relief of his life.” Lease of his life, was, I suppose, what he meant.

A BRACE OF CHIRGWINIAN CONUNDRUMS

What are the differences between what you say to a cat who in the night has disturbed your peaceful slumbers, what the cat does, and an old boot? When the cat disturbs you, you pop out of bed, open the window, and shout “pshist, scat!” and throw at him an old boot, the cat scatters, and the old boot’s the scatterer:

What are the differences between the relish you take with your chops and steaks, – what you drink your coffee out of in the morning when you in a hurry to catch your train to go catching fish, – and a conjuror? What you take with your chops is sauce, what you drink your coffee out of is a saucer, and a conjuror is a sorcerer! (Cries of Oh! oh! and help!)

THE THREE DEGREES OF GOLD MINING

Gold-Mine – Gold Miner – Gold Minus.

FINIS.

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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