

# CHIRGWIN'S CHIRRUP

## CHAPTER I

### SOME EARLY LONDON REMINISCENCES

BEFORE going into any details as to my first appearances as a performer, a few words as to my parentage.

My father was of a family of Cornish folk, living chiefly at Truro, and by his own admissions he was of a wild and roving disposition. A brother of his, however, was quite the contrary to this, and was no less than seven times appointed Mayor of Truro. My father's business, when he had any, was that of a boat builder, and he was at one time in a very good way. But whether he gave up this calling or it gave him up, I am not in a position to state definitely. Suffice it to say that he ran away from it and-joined the travelling circus owned by the late Lord George Sanger's father, and eventually developed into a full-blown clown. From the bills which, in after years, he was very proud of displaying to friends, I imagine he made a name of a sort, for he would point with pride to the line in bolder type than the rest: "Little Joey, the World's Funniest Clown," and remark "That's me!"

After wandering all over the country for some years he married a lady of Scotch descent and settled in Cornwall. They settled in Cornwall, I suppose, for the purpose of searching for tin, and I have been searching for tin everywhere ever since, and not tin vain either. My father being Cornish and my grandmother Scotch, accounts for corns and Scotch (Dewars) being still in my family; but beyond this fact I know very little of Cornish matters except the fact that I have been in Cornhill and cornfields, have sampled cornbeef and cornflour, have listened to Cavalleria Rusty Corno, have sat on the corner of a minstrel show, and we once had a carroty-headed Cornish servant girl whom I called Red-ruth. And, of course, I know that Marconi erected the first poles for his wireless telegraphy in Cornwall, and when asked for his autograph and address by the

curio hunters, would make his Mark-ony (Help). Lest I forget, I will re-tell a little story that I am a bit stuck on.

A friend of mine, seeing the name Chirgwin over a certain shop in a well-known Cornish town, enquired of the lady in the shop (whom he afterwards discovered was the tradesman's daughter) if she had any relations in London.

"Not that I am aware of," was the reply.

"Well," said my friend, "I thought you were probably related to the White-Eyed Kaffir."

"No, indeed," said the damsel indignantly, "We are all white people. There are no Kaffirs in our family!" and with that she flounced out of the shop.

I was born over a cook-shop, or, as it was called by the elite of our neighbours in Seven Dials, "the Pudden Shop." It was situated in Newport Street, upon the site of which now stands the Palace Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London. Avenue been there?

I remember I had many a nice roll in bed at this time, and was very partial to jam puffs. Since those days, however, the newspapers have supplied me with current puffs ad lib, but I mustn't pun-ish you too severely as early as this; so I will be Pudden shop on one side and get on with my washing – I mean story.

The date of my birth, according to family records, the accuracy of which I have no reason to doubt, was December 14th, 1854. The family consisted of father, mother, Elizabeth, Jack, Tom and myself. The world went fairly well with us, I suppose, at this time; but my earliest recollections date from the time I was about five years of age.

It will be gathered from the foregoing outline of the vicinity in which we lived, that we occupied two or three rooms. The calling of my father at that time was doing odd jobs, and our financial status was at low water mark. My sister was then only about sixteen at the outside, and was required to remain at home with mother to help in her household duties, as beyond my father's earnings there was no other source or wherewithal to buy bread and butter and pay the rent.

It was about this time, 1859, that the rage in England became prevalent for men to “black up,” and with an old banjo, fiddle and bones, or, “nick-a-nacks,” and dressed up with long-tailed coats to go round the town, and in a crude way emulate the minstrels that were appearing in the Provinces with such success.

My brothers Tom and Jack, being continually reminded by my parents that it was about time they turned to work of some sort or other, were imbued with the said “nigger fever,” which was now very contagious.

One Collinetti and Fred Biven, of a troupe called “Biven and Higgins’s Minstrels,” whom we joined later, were my brothers’ only teachers. I practically had no teacher, except my brothers.

Engagements being very slow in coming in, and after many expostulations on my mother’s part, it was ultimately decided amongst them that they should try their luck by doing a bit of “nigger busking.”

My brothers and sister having on several occasions in later years told me of this their first venture as “entertainers!” I can accurately set it forth now. My father, as stated, having been associated with the circus business, had kept as mementoes several of his circus clown’s dresses and properties which he treasured and looked upon as something almost sacred. Eventually he was persuaded to trot them out and see if any of the costumes would be suitable for my brothers to wear; and my sister being deft with her needle and scissors, it was at once seen that by reducing their dimensions considerably and adapting them from the clown to the nigger, they would be the very identical thing.

So my sister having manipulated these costumes to the admiration of all concerned, and after the usual brotherly wrangle as to who should rattle a set of bones or “nick-a-nacks,” and who should bang an old tambourine, the next step was – what shall we do? and what songs shall we sing?

The songs having been decided upon, my brothers worked up some gags, and my sister began to strum a bit on an ancient piano, stuck in the corner of our best room, with the assistance

of Collinetti, who could play several instruments quite creditably.

The day dawned when my brothers, blacked-up and dressed nigger fashion, and my sister, dressed in some fancy costume, but white face, sallied forth to try their luck. My sister went primarily to look after the financial part of the undertaking, and also to keep my brothers in order. Although children at this time were far less precocious than they are at the present day, they must have had considerable nerve, or have "fancied" themselves a bit to have had sufficient confidence to go out on the first occasion.

However, it appears they did it very well, or my parents would not have been able to let them continue, especially as my sister was such a little mother in the house, and no doubt their youth appealed to their audiences for remuneration rather than to any ability they possessed.

It must be borne in mind, too, that, owing probably to so few places of amusement being in existence at this time, the streets of London were duly visited by innumerable performers, such as jugglers, knife-throwers, acrobats, fire-eaters, stone-breakers, etc.

There was one strong man, I remember, who used to be accompanied by a donkey, and he would announce that for two shillings he would with one hand lift the donkey above his shoulder, and when the two shillings in copper was duly thrown into his ring, he would never admit the correct amount had been subscribed, but would say, "Tuppence more, ladies and gents, and 'up goes the donkey'," a phrase that was a catch one all over London, and one can even hear it used now.

Then we had the man with cats and mice on an improvised stage. The cats would spar, and the mice run up poles for little flags and race down again and cross a thin rope.

Then there were men who did the rope-tying business, performing dogs, nigger troupes, happy families, conjurers, men who balanced small boys on long poles, men and boys dressed as clowns on stilts some ten feet high, bell ringers, Punch and Judys; and on the first of May and the fifth of November Jacks

in the Green and Guy Fawkes everywhere – these latter being quite elaborate shows – all of which could be seen in our West End streets.

But being continually harassed and moved on by the police, they eventually migrated to the Whitechapel Road, where they could all be seen doing their respective business in one line reaching from Mile End Gate to Charrington's Brewery at the other end of the Mile End Road.

With the exception of a few niggers, this is all a thing of the past, so I will revert to my brothers and sister, merely remarking that perhaps this state of things was an encouragement to and gave them the necessary confidence. They continued this calling for about twelve months, which brings me to the time at which I made my first appearance at the "Goat and Star," now the "Swallow Rooms."

It is evident that I was not satisfied with merely sitting on the platform. My "dignity" would not permit this sort of thing, and taking great interest in the practice at home of Tom and Jack, I too, with the assistance of Collinetti, learned to rattle the bones, and in December, 1860, I became a "performer."

The "Swallow" (or, as it was at this time, the "Goat and Star") is situated at the corners of Swallow Street and Vine Street, and in close proximity to Vine Street Police Station, and, as the name implies, was a public-house.

What was then the room in which these entertainments took place is still in existence, but this is known by the more imposing title of "The Swallow Grand Concert Room," and here at the present day some excellent concerts are given. I think I can safely assert without contradiction that this property is the oldest fully licensed house, viz., for music, dancing and excise, if not in England, at any rate in London.

The name of the "Goat and Star" being changed to that of the "Swallow" was caused by the advent of a purchaser of the name of Swallow, and I take it that by the wonderful improvements that this gentleman made in his property that the name of Swallow Street followed in due course.

The previous proprietor, a Mr. Cottrell, was totally blind, but in spite of his affliction he took a very active part in the management of the house generally, and organized – taking the times into consideration – first-rate entertainments.

The concerts, as they were termed, always commenced with a piano overture which was immediately followed by all the artistes forming a semi-circle and singing a glee or perhaps two, such as “Hail, Smiling Morn,” “Come out, ’tis now September,” or “Oh, who will o’er the downs so free.” Then they would retire to the back of the platform, and each come forward as they were called upon and do their respective business.

We used to commence our part of the performance with a song called “Never wear your braces crossways,” doing a walk round. Then my sister, who had a very nice voice, would sing “Star of the evening” or “I’d choose to be a daisy.” When my turn eventually arrived, I would play the bones, sing some simple little song of the period, and dance, but on one leg only. Then we did our act, namely, Collinetti, my two brothers, self, and sister.

I sat at the corner of the troupe dressed in a little white blouse, Punch and Judy trousers, a horse-hair wig, and a pair of clogs, and when it came to my turn to dance there invariably looked like trouble ahead, for I could only dance with the right leg! and when I had been at this for a time my brother would whisper:

“Now the other leg, now the other leg.”

But I still kept it up only with the right, and sometimes I would hear one of them say, “The little idiot!” and I would stop altogether and rush off the stage.

There was a performance every night, but I only went on at such times as I cried to do so extra special.

The reader may possibly wonder how I managed this dancing on the right leg only, and no doubt at the time I wondered too; and now I wonder why I wondered, for it is certainly nothing very wonderful to do anything right wrong. You see, being only able to dance with the right leg was wrong, for my little left leg was left, which wasn't right. Had I been

able to dance on both legs it would have been all right, or one of them would, but as I couldn't dance with my left leg I only had my right leg left, which, as I have said, wasn't right. Follow me?

The photograph facing page 14 will give the reader an idea of my appearance on my first venture as a comedian, for it was taken at Dewsbury only a few months after we left London, and as I did not then change my business quite so frequently as I did later, the costume is identical. It was one of the proudest moments of my life to have a photo taken "all by myself," although the studio had nothing to be proud about, it being of a most primitive, I was going to say pre-historic affair, being a somewhat cumbersome waggon boarded up all round with a glass sloping roof, with blinds to regulate the light, and drawn from town to town by a poor old emaciated horse.

All this is impressed upon me by the fact that at the same time that I and my sister, who was to "pose" me for my photograph, arrived, a man with a donkey that he wished to be photographed also claimed the attention of the operator, and a heated and lengthy argument arose as to who was to be focussed first – me or the donkey? As neither of us could come to terms or give way, the photographer came on the steps of his waggon, and after hearing both parties exclaimed, "Let me settle the matter, gentlemen," and pointing his finger to me said, "I'll attend to that little ass first!"

As by now I had made my debut, as they term it, in the theatrical world, and been photographed in costume into the bargain, I considered that I had fully established my right to think myself an artiste, and if my brothers raised an objection or obstacle to my "going on" with them I simply yelled till they, fearing I would either break a blood vessel or go into convulsions, had to give in and let me have my way.

My mind being so full of this, I did not take kindly to education, and what little I received at this particular time was of a purely parental pattern. A year or two later, however, I attended a school in the vicinity of our home, and one of my schoolfellows was Willie Clarkson, the celebrated costumier. But I fear I gave very little application to my lessons, so much

so that my teachers gave considerable “application with a cane” to certain parts of my anatomy.

My time between school hours and my “business” at night was spent in the usual way of little nippers, but I was particularly fond of setting traps for sparrows in the roads with twigs covered with bird-lime, and upon the approach of any vehicle I would with all the impudence imaginable stand over my trap with legs parted and would not budge an inch, so diverting the driver’s course; but many a nasty slash of their whips I can remember.

I also used to spend hours flattening my nose against the various bird shop windows, that were very numerous in our district, admiring the birds, dogs, cats, reptiles, and so forth; and for a little change I, with some of my chums, would “do a bunk” from school, or play the wag, as we termed it, and furnishing ourselves with galley pots, glass jars, a few bent pins, cotton, worms and sticks, would betake ourselves to the Serpentine or the lake in St. James’s Park, and have a nice time fishing for the nimble stickleback. I can also remember the “cuffs” I have received from the park keepers when, being so engrossed in our sport, we overlooked our enemies’ stealthy advance.

Ever since I can remember, and continuously from that time, I have always had a liking for “animated nature,” and for the greater part of my life have kept almost every living thing, from a white mouse to a wallaby, and have also been most enthusiastic in fishing, shooting, driving, etc., all of which I shall have something to say about later on.

*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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