

CHAPTER II

MY EARLY LIFE CONTINUED

AFTER about two years off and on at the Swallow Room and other small places in London, such as the Cosmotheca, off the Edgware Road, which was not much better than a penny gaff, but still under the tutorship of Collinetti, who worked with us, my two brothers, sister, and not forgetting self, started on our own as “The Chirgwinnie Family,” Chirgwin being our real name.

There are many families of this name in Cornwall, and I think we all originated from the same stock; but away from the South-West of England the name is rarely to be met with. I have also been called Chirwin, Sherwin, Chigwin, Kergwin, Chirgwini, and other names of an uncomplimentary kind, and atrocities on my name have also been perpetrated, such as “Look at that cher g’win out of that door,” “Ain’t cher g’win to sing us a song?” “Let that chairgoin’,” etc., but I only know of one name that really rhymes to mine, viz.: that of Mrs. Burgwin, the kind and highly-respected lady who works so hard in connection with “The Referee” Children's Dinner Fund.

Concerning the Sherwin pronunciation, the following true story is told by a friend of mine who happened to witness the incident.

Madame Amy Sherwin, the celebrated Australian singer, was proceeding by train, and at a certain station where tickets were collected and examined she discovered, to her consternation, that she had lost hers, but the ticket inspector would not allow her to proceed without producing it. The guard coming up at the time, Madame Sherwin handed him her card, and (having frequently travelled the same journey) exclaimed,

“Oh, Guard, you know me, don’t you? I’m Madame Sherwin.”

Mr. Guard replied, shooting a glance of contempt at the inspector,

“Of course I do, mam.”

Then to the inspector: "Don't you know, you blitherer? This lady is Mrs. Sherwin, the White-eyed Kaffir's wife!"

And the whistle blew and the train shot out of the station before Madame had time even to "think things."

Now having established ourselves, we succeeded in getting engagements at the Old Mogul in Drury Lane, afterwards called the Middlesex Music Hall, and just recently re-named the New Middlesex Empire, under the management of Mr. J. L. Graydon, now a director of the Palace. Our performance was very similar to the one we gave at the "Swallow," beyond that by this time I had become master of my left leg, and could dance a clog dance very creditably; and in order to add to our salary we devised the following little "move."

After I had been dancing a minute or so, one of my brothers, who would be standing in the wings, would throw a penny on the stage in such a manner that it made a loud ring upon falling. The audience, thinking that it had been thrown by one of themselves, would follow suit, and as long as I heard the merry ring of coins falling around me I would from time to time stop dancing to pick up the coins, and then proceed. Sometimes we would gather up as much as three or four shillings.

The success of this soon made itself apparent to other juvenile performers, and there were many such even in these days, and in a very short time many were adopting this "gag." In fact children were encouraged by the managers to adopt this little wheeze of mine, as it amused the audiences besides helping to swell the salaries of the nippers.

The orchestra consisted of a piano and cornet only, which were played by the brothers Solomon. Edward Solomon, who played the piano, was subsequently to become a most accomplished musician and the composer of "Billee Taylor." He held for many years a very high position at Drury Lane Theatre. "Cocky" and "Teddy," as he was familiarly called by his friends, took a great fancy to me, and he tried to teach me the piano; but for some reason I did not take kindly to his efforts, or appreciate his kindness, I fear, for I neglected practice and finally gave it up.

The engagements at the Old Mogul would run for as long as three years in those days, and when I was between nine and ten years old, I suppose there was either scarcity of work in London, or we wished to seek “fresh fields and pastures new.” At any rate, we all moved into the country, knowing that music halls of a kind were established there, and as we were all pretty proficient as performers, although of course still in a crude state, we could always fall back on Pitching.

For the edification of my readers of the younger generation, and also for those who have attained “years of discretion,” and again for those who are in the “sere and yellow leaf,” a few of whom possibly have not experienced the extreme joys of following the calling of Wandering Minstrels, I will explain the term “Pitching,” and also other terms that they may not be familiar with.

Pitching. – Selecting a suitable spot where to “pitch,” or establish oneself for performance, and nothing whatever to do with General Taropitch, or any other Russian General – s'cuse me.

Cellar Flap. – Dancing or flapping outside public-houses on the cellar flaps where the brewers lower their beer, not down the throats of the flappers, but down the flap upon which the flappers flop. Savvy?

Keyhole Whispering. – Singing and playing through the semi-closed doors outside public-houses, into which not even we black angels dare tread. Rumble?

Busking. – Meandering around anywhere and anyhow in streets, on steam-boats, and in trains, etc. Now with these lucid definitions, sweet people, I'll B-usking you to let me proceed.

The halls just mentioned would be better described perhaps as “free and easies,” and many of them I believe exist even now in quiet towns and villages, and performers would remain at such places for as long as a month or six weeks.

I remember when we went to Belfast in the year 1864 – anyway it was the time when the Fenians were keeping the police busy, and the inhabitants lived in fear and trembling – we

got engaged at one of these small halls, but for several days we could not perform owing to the state of turmoil the town was in.

Our principal occupation – not a lucrative one by any means – was to watch the soldiers parading the streets with drawn cutlasses, accompanied by detachments of police, and from the incident which I am about to relate it will be imagined what terror was prevalent.

On our arriving at our lodgings, I noticed a particularly handsome and rich-coloured canary in a cage at the back of the room, and taking pity on its being in the dark I procured a piece of string and forthwith proceeded to hang the cage in the window. The poor little beggar hadn't been there ten minutes when the landlady entered the room, and I thought when she saw what I had done she would have had a fit.

First of all she made a wild dash in a bee-line as the crow flies to the cage and pulled it down. Then looking at me, she poured out a volley in Irish, that we afterwards learned meant to convey her fear that if the opposition saw that yellow or orange bird in the window, her windows would all be broken and perhaps the house wrecked. Orange, acting as a red rag to a bull, would be taken as a direct challenge to combat.

It can readily be imagined that we did not remain long in Belfast, under the circumstances. Being in Ireland, we thought we would not show the white feather and return to England at once, but went on down to Dublin. Matters here as to rioting were little better than in Belfast, the students of Trinity College entering with great gusto into the spirit of the rows that from time to time occurred.

One of their little hobbies was to get mixed up in a row, and in the confusion to snip off the coat tails of the police (the Irish police wore tails to their coats at that time similar to those of our waiters of the present day), and he who succeeded in collecting the greatest number or parts of these coat tails was acclaimed the hero of the hour, and they were kept in the College as mementoes of the fray.

We got an engagement here at a place with the high-sounding name of Crampton Court, on the site of which now

stands Moss's Empire, and I well remember the interior of Crampton Court. It enjoyed a sawdust pit, and very rough forms did ample justice to the surroundings generally.

As an extra attraction to get good houses every Saturday night they erected in the middle of the hall a huge pole smeared with grease or some such compound, on the top of which would be a leg of mutton, or some prize, for which the audience competed by trying to climb the pole during an interval been the turns.

It must be confessed that it was a bit bewildering to the performers on the stage to be able to discern whether the yells of delight and encouragement were directed to a competitor as he approached the top of the pole, or the booing and decisive remarks as he slipped down again, or whether they were meant for the artiste who had just left the stage. At any rate, it was all done in the best of humour, and even the artistes joined in the spirit of the thing.

I also remember on one occasion at this hall that during our dancing we noticed a small black-looking object on the stage. Fortunately we avoided even touching it with our feet, for upon its being examined after our turn, it was discovered to contain explosives of a very powerful nature, and had we trodden upon it, we were told by the authorities that it would have – well, there might never have been a White-eyed Kaffir!

Before I leave Ireland another episode of the terror that seemed to be instilled into the majority of the people many amuse.

I was performing at a certain hall, and had just finished my turn, when I noticed a commotion and a heated argument going on in the wings opposite to where I had come off, so I popped round to see what it was all about. And I saw that one of the principals of the argument was an elegantly-dressed lady in a ballroom costume of a lovely orange colour. The stage manager was almost on his knees imploring her to return to her dressing-room and make a change of costume, declaring there would be Holy Moses to pay if the audience caught sight of that splendid dress!

By this time we had severed our connection with our Master Collinetti, but my brothers meeting Biven and Higgins, known as the Ethiopian Entertainers, they, in fact, all of us, were enabled to learn many useful little bits of business.

After our engagement at Dublin terminated, we came back to England, but couldn't get very much work to do, and when out of actual engagements we had to fall back on pitching.

However, about now, when I would be about thirteen years old, another proud moment of my early life occurred. We were in London at the time, and one morning my brother got a letter from a Mr. Drayton, proprietor of a sort of music hall situated in one of the streets of Margate. By what I can remember of it, it resembled the interior of a big shop more than anything else. However, it appeared that this proprietor had either seen our party, or I had been recommended to him, for he made an offer for me to go and open at his hall to sing the stories to "Living Pictures."

In due course I was bundled off to Margate, where I made my first appearance as a "single turn," for through my pleasing Mr. Drayton, by my rendering the aforesaid songs in describing the "Living Pictures," I was given a turn to myself.

I am not certain, but fancy that this was almost the first introduction of singing the plots of, as they have more recently been called, "Tableaux Vivants," and which my friend, Mr. Charles Osborne, the writer and parodist, made so famous by his burlesquing the idea in writing the song, "Tableaux Vivants, or there's a picture for you!"

One of the tableaux, I remember, depicted a neglected family at home whilst the husband was having a high old time at an adjacent public-house, I, the son of the said family, being supposed to be pleading to my father to remember his responsibilities at home, my first lines being:

Father, dear Father, come home with me now,

The clock in the steeple's struck one.

You promised, dear Father, that you would come home

As soon as your day's work was done, etc., etc., etc.

Come home, come home, come home,
Father, dear Father, come home.

And between each verse an hour evidently was supposed to have elapsed, for the first line was always the same, but the second was: “The clock had struck two,” then three, and so on, through the series of verses.

In my single turn I did black business, and had the good fortune to possess a very excellent song entitled “Old Nigger Ben,” which “went immense,” as we say. This song was written expressly for the great E. W. Mackney by Edward Solomon, senior, but between these two gentlemen there was some dispute (about the purchase, I suppose), and so my friend Edward Solomon gave it to me. I must have made a good impression at the time, for I was only engaged for a week or so originally, but I remained there the whole of that summer.

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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