

CHAPTER III

SOME EXPERIENCES WHILST BUSKING AND PITCHING IN THE COUNTRY WITH MY BROTHERS AND SISTER AND JOINING OTHER TROUPES

ALTHOUGH this was my first venture as a single turn, I did not follow it up for many years, for the simple reason that opportunities and circumstances did not present themselves, so I joined my brothers.

We still travelled as The Chirgwinnie Family, and our sister used to go about with us. She, being the eldest, kept us in order, and looked after us generally, and besides this, she being able to play the piano “decently,” would accompany our songs if we had the good fortune to take a hall that boasted a piano.

At any rate, there were no orchestras at the small places, and it would have been quite superfluous if there had been, for, of course, we carried no band parts. We used to approach evening dress as near as was possible by displaying white paper dickies, paper collars and paper cuffs. We travelled all over the country, sometimes getting engagements at halls, sometimes taking halls or concert rooms for a night or so, and, when our luck was out in this respect, we had to find suitable spots or “pitching.” Many little incidents, no doubt, will occur to me as I proceed that I hope may be interesting and amusing to my readers.

Before doing so, I will give a brief outline of the first white men emulating the real niggers, and as my informant of this was none other than my old lamented friend George Washington Moore, of the celebrated Moore and Burgess Minstrels, one of the first white-black entertainers of any standing in this country, my account may be taken as authoritative. It must be borne in mind that no entertainment of the variety description, some thirty-five years ago, I was considered complete unless it had nigger turns

intermixed with the programme. In fact, in some halls this class of entertainment, if not actually predominating, was looked upon as the star turn.

In the early eighties I was invariably booked at either the Oxford or the London Pavilion, and on these occasions I frequently met Pony Moore, as he was always called, and, being both white-black men, our conversation would drift into “shop.”

It would appear that the first troupe of nigger minstrels was got together in New York, in about the year 1854, by a performer of the name of Christy, and made an immediate success. After travelling the States, Christy came to this country with like success, and he was soon emulated by many others, who nearly always called themselves Christy Minstrels. This was the name of Pony Moore’s troupe at the St. James’s Hall originally, but, having so many copyists, he changed it into “The Moore and Burgess Minstrels.”

There were many things in common between Pony and myself. We both had very scant education – musical or otherwise; we both made musical instruments, were gifted with particularly keen ears for music, were, of course, in the same business as performers (though, as it has been stated, I have never been engaged with Moore or in his troupe). We both composed melodies for songs.

Although the authorship of my famous song, the “Blind Boy” is doubtful, I have every reason to believe that the melody was composed by G. W. Moore. It was my brother Tom who first sang this song after it had been introduced at St. James’s Hall by one of Moore’s singers, by the name of “Little Willie,” a lad with a particularly sweet treble voice, who is now known as the clever comedian Willie Freear, and brother to Louie Freear, the actress.

I took it up some thirty-eight years ago, and first sang it in the streets, after I had slightly altered and improved the melody, and the first hall I sang it in was the Oxford, London, in 1877, and I have been singing it ever since.

As a stage ballad, the “Blind Boy” holds an easy record for its uninterrupted long life, and I must have sung it many thousands of

times. It became so monotonous to me that I used to sing it as though I were a machine, my mind drifting miles and miles away as it were, when I would suddenly remember I was singing, and would then as suddenly wake up to the fact. But I don't think this absent-mindedness has ever been noticed by my audiences. Its hold upon the public of every class is just as strong as ever, and although I at times naturally get tired of singing it, the audience never tire of hearing it.

I very often try to cut it out of my performance, but it nearly always happens that some enthusiast will call out "Blind Boy," when more will take up the call, "Blind Boy." Then I know the fat's in the fire, and I have to go through it.

I remember on one occasion, when I was engaged at the London Pavilion, Pony Moore, who often slipped round from St. James's Hall, was sitting in the stalls, and I was getting along nicely with my show, expecting to get through without including the "Blind Boy," when he started calling: " 'Blind Boy,' 'Blind Boy,' George; sing us the 'Blind Boy,' go on," etc. At last I stopped in my business and looking at Moore I said:

"My salary won't permit me to sing the 'Blind Boy'; I must get a rise first. Yes, I want more money."

And, looking at my friend, I added:

"I shall want a pony (£25) more, Pony Moore."

The way he roared with laughter at the Joke showed how he appreciated it.

Whilst I am on this subject let me finally kill the oft repeated myth of my being afflicted with a blind son. I have not got, or ever had, a blind boy, and the song had no personal application whatever to either myself or my family. I once had a blind boil, but that has long since disappeared. I have, also had the measles, but I got rid of them – measely (Help!)

We were now, as stated, previous to my introducing George Washington Moore and the "Blind Boy," travelling as The Chirgwinnie Family, and at the halls were billed as such. We,

however, didn't get many engagements, so had to do a bit of "pitching," and eventually we came to London.

After a very short stay we migrated to Eastbourne, leaving Jack in London, and my brother Tom and I joined a troupe there, but it being a poor one we left them. We got a partner named Sefton, and our new troupe consisted of seven – two violins, harp, guitar, bones, tambourine, and cornet. Tom played the flute and piccolo as well, and we were known now as the Chirgwin and Sefton Minstrels.

I may say here that almost from my earliest recollections all stringed instruments never gave me the slightest trouble to become master of, especially as I had my brother to put me through the A.B.C. formula; in fact I took to them as naturally as a duck takes to water.

As Chirgwin and Sefton we visited most of the principal south and south-east coasts' favourite holiday resorts, and did on the whole very well indeed, making on an average one pound a day each. But this would only be during the summer months. Invariably at these seaside towns we would "do" the shops in the town from ten till twelve, but we always cleared very quickly at this hour when the children came out of school, for they had a funny little way of delighting in throwing missiles of various descriptions at niggers, and particularly at their top hats. Then from 4 to 6.30 on the front, or wherever the authorities would allow us to pitch, and then again from 8 till 10.30 – in all seven hours a day.

At some of the seaside places the authorities were very tyrannical, and appeared to think, I suppose, that anything in the shape of innocent amusement for their holiday visitors was a deterrent to their health. The police in such instances were given strict instructions "to move any one on" who attempted to give an al fresco performance. We had the good fortune, as it afterwards turned out to be, to happen upon one of these towns – Eastbourne I think it was – and upon our making our "first appearance" there, we were forthwith summarily informed by the gentleman in blue to

“get.” Upon our asking the why and the wherefore, etc., he informed us that his instructions were that unless any of the residents or visitors “commanded us” to perform, our occupation, like Othello’s, was gone, so very reluctantly we returned to our lodgings.

In talking over this “bolt from the blue,” my partner Sefton proposed that we should get a few of the residents to side with us, and then to club and strike and go to the authorities, when perhaps we should get what we deserved, but when I said:

“Look at the police, they club and strike and they don't get what they deserve!” he agreed with me, having “had some,” I suppose,

I then suggested the following little scheme. One of our troupe, a very respectable and well groomed fellow who was unable through a slight indisposition to go out with us that morning, and consequently had not been seen with us, was instructed to go at once and secure a room (an upper one or attic) in the best position he could find on the front, and to represent himself to the landlady as coming from London. This being done he was to write a note to The Chirgwin Co. requesting them to play before the house indicated at eleven o'clock the following morning, appearing of course to have no connection with us whatever.

This little ruse on my part worked beautifully and the following morning we duly appeared by “special command,” and upon our friend the “bobby” appearing to remonstrate, we produced our “command letter,” and after he had made enquiries as to the genuineness of this letter, and being satisfied, he left us in pitch – I mean peace, and we proceeded with our show. This we continued for many weeks, and our audiences included some of the nobs of the town, as our patron of the attic, whom I fancy the populace looked upon as some eccentric broken down nobleman, would throw coins to us from his window and applaud us vigorously. The crowds collected and followed suit, and we followed suit and collected from them, so that on all sides our seaside venture was a decided success, in fact an £ s. d. sided success.

We paid for our patron's "apartments" about 15s. per week, and he was supposed at each of our performances to pay us 10s., but of course we supplied him with this half "thick 'un" previously. Although we were only allowed a limited time to do our show we did exceedingly well, and I should say that our operatic – I mean upper-attic – PaI never had such a soft job in his life before or since.

I don't wish to appear boastful, but by now I had become, through applying great interest in our instruments, proficient in playing all of those our troupe employed. In the event of any of our troupe being indisposed or away for other reasons! it was fiddle, cornet or anything else, and in also singing the songs of the absentees, whether sentimental or otherwise, and often I would get mixed up a bit.

I remember once taking second fiddle and singing a pathetic ballad, after which I immediately commenced to crack a funny joke, and never realised the fact till I heard the audience laugh loudly and long before I had reached the point of the joke!

It has happened more often than I can remember that we fared very badly in our travels, and my brother Jack now being married, and having re-joined us, we have been compelled to leave his wife at our lodgings in pawn, as it were, while the rest of us went out to earn the necessary money to pay for our night's lodgings and our breakfasts. Again, it has very often hapened that when we have been down on our luck and feeling thoroughly down-hearted and dejected, some good angel would intervene, and lo! our sorrow would be turned into joy.

An example of this I will tell you, although the termination of this story may leave you in doubt if the little episode was advantageous or not.

We had been performing in a town near Reading, with very bad results, so much so that we decided to give it a wide berth and shift to another larger, and we hoped more prosperous town; but overnight we discovered that we had not sufficient money to pay for our lodgings and the railway fare to the town we had in view of

visiting. But my brother Jack, with the financial abilities that would put Lloyd George's genius at finance in the shade, worked the matter out, and found that the only way to manage was for two of us to walk to the town, and after a long wrangle as to who the two were to be to do the "shanks' pony act," my brother Tom and I were the chosen.

At about seven o'clock the following morning he and I set out, taking our instruments, I my 'cello, and Tom his flute, piccolo, and violin. We had to start as early as seven in order to reach the town by about midday, where we could all meet and give a first show.

After my brother Jack had worked out his "Budget," he found he had exactly 5¹/₂d. over, which he handed to us, saying to Tom in his usual cheery manner: "As you two will not be here to join us at breakfast, here's some wealth with which you can get some on the road, but don't make beasts of yourselves." So at the time stated we started for our destination, and after doing about ten miles we entered a little wayside eating-house, where we spent our 5¹/₂d. on our breakfast, which consisted of two cups of some concoction that was supposed to be coffee, some bread and butter, and a bloater which we divided.

After the banquet we proceeded, and at about 11 o'clock we arrived at a little village and found it to be filled with working men of the agricultural calling chiefly, most of whom were dressed in their Sunday best. At the village inn we heard joking, laughing, and horse-play going on inside, so we decided to do a bit of keyhole whispering here (as described a little way back) in order to soothe their savage breasts and make a bit. We had scarcely commenced, when the door of the inn opened and we were literally dragged inside and given such a welcome that was as genuine as it was generous. We sang and played to these yokels, and their appreciation was proved by the lavish way in which they treated us to the best the house could supply, besides making a nice little money subscription for us.

In the midst of all this, a man rushed in and exclaimed, "Pull yourselves together, boys, the Squire's a-coming down the road on

his cob; he'll be certain sure to look in here." The word went round in a moment, and in the semi-silence that now pervaded the place we were able to gather that the reason of all this jollification was owing to the young Squire's (a nobleman, by-the-bye) coming-of-age, and that all his tenants and employees were keeping it up at the Squire's expense. At this moment the Squire entered, and at a signal these yokels and tenants commenced to sing, or rather yell, "For he's a jolly good fellow," to which we accompanied them on our instruments, and I never heard such a din in my life.

After this had subsided the Squire came over to us and enquired who we were, etc., and after explaining that we had been entertaining the company, he said, "Capital! Capital! Now entertain me, and let me see what you can do." So we at once struck up and sang our best number. The Squire was so pleased that he asked us if we would go along with him to his mansion and do something before his people and his household staff, as he would like to spring a little surprise on them.

Of course we readily did so, and his people and servants were so taken with the novelty of the thing that they insisted on our remaining at his mansion for the remainder of the week, which was three days. We were put up in the head coachman's house on the estate. During those three days we performed before the house-party, and when they tired of us we went down in the servants' hall and livened up the servants. When not doing this we occupied ourselves in eating, drinking, and smoking of the best in the land, did a bit of poaching and bird-nesting, and although by my sucking so many new-laid eggs I made myself sick, it was one of the happiest episodes of my boyhood. I would be then about 15 years old.

This jollification, however, was the cause of the breaking up of our troupe, as my brother and I were the only comic performers, and what our partners said when we did meet may, I'm sure, be better imagined than I can describe.

Although we did so badly at Reading about this time, I have every reason to bless the time we visited that town later on, for upon walking through one of the by-streets I noticed a 'cello in a sort of a pawn-shop which I took a great fancy to; but as it was marked up £2 the purchase of it was out of the question. Eventually, however, being a bit flush of coin, I approached the man in the shop to see if I could do a deal with him, and the arrangement we arrived at was to give him five shillings down and pay the remainder in instalments, when he would hand me over the instrument. I tried hard to persuade him to let me have it upon paying the deposit, but I suppose he credited me with having about as much honesty as he could boast of, so that didn't come off. But I got it at last, and it turned out to be one of the best 'cellos I have ever had. I play it now in preference to any of my others, and its intrinsic value is certainly not less than a hundred pounds.

This is not the only instance of my success in picking up musical instruments, notably some fiddles I have. I seem to have a gift at this sort of thing, and I am equally successful in picking up pictures for a mere song. Which reminds me that once when I was thinking of purchasing a picture by an alleged "old master," but finding it to be a very ordinary modern affair, I at once began an uncomplimentary criticism, when the vendor looking daggers at me, said:

"Pooh! what do you know about pictures; you're not an artist!"

"Quite true," I replied, "neither am I a hen, but I can tell a bad egg."

A somewhat strange adventure befel this favourite 'cello of mine some years back. I sent it to an old expert in the North of London to be repaired, and as it was not returned to me by the time specified, I called at the shop for an explanation, and the expert, who had very long hair and a very short temper, didn't seem at all inclined to give me the reason of the delay, but when he saw that I meant business, he said:

"Well, it was like this, Mr. Chirgwin, I had finished the little job once, and it looked first rate; but when about to send it off

yesterday I heard something rattle, and on my making an examination I found that I had left my glue brush inside.”

When I eventually did get it home I was so pleased that I forthwith played on it “For he's a jolly good 'cello!”

At the time I became the proud possessor of this 'cello I began to fancy myself a bit, and with a very independent air I suggested to Jack, who was the “governor,” that he should pay Tom and myself something, and it was agreed that we should receive a half-share of our takings between us, and this resulted in my making about seven shillings a day.

We were all getting on splendidly, when all of a sudden Jack got married. That settled it, and broke us up again, and Tom and I had to return to our people in London, who were living then in Phoenix Street, off Crown Street, which is now taken in by Shaftesbury Avenue.

My parents, it will be noticed, still lived in the west, and although I was born in the west a great part of my early life was spent in the north; but in spite of this I have never laid special claims to being an orther (kill him again!). My parents did not encourage us in living at home, though, so we soon got the “boot,” and got up another troupe, the names of whom I forget; in fact, we hardly ever knew the correct names of each other; they were either Bill, Jack, Tom, or nicknames such as “Lumpy,” “Waxey Joe,” etc. “Lumpy” got his name through his having to go every winter in the lump, i.e., Workhouse. This troupe proved to be a failure, so Tom and I decided to abandon the troupe idea and work “on our own,” and after working up some new songs and gags, etc., we started out as “The Brothers Chirgwin.”

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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