

## CHAPTER IV

### **SOME EARLY EXPERIENCES ON THE STAGE IN THE PROVINCES – I MARRY – HOW I FOUND MY WHITE EYE – FALSETTO VOICE AND A LONG HAT – AND A FEW GENTLE. BUT EMPHATIC REFUTATIONS**

AS Music Halls were being built in the provinces, we managed to get some fairly good engagements, as the times went. We would get as much as £4 or £5 per week. We got these engagements by approaching the managers personally at times, but the late G. Ware, one of, if not the first man to initiate the Agency business, got us others.

Our business at this time consisted of a little sketch called “The Music Professor”; the thrilling plot went something after this fashion. My brother would be discovered amusing himself by playing piccolo solos and passing as a professor of music, waiting the arrival of pupils in reply to his advertisements, when I would sneak on the stage in a horribly ragged make-up – big boots, etc. – and when about to be kicked out by the professor, would explain that I had only called on behalf of my mother for the washing money, we would then chat about music and give an exhibition of trick fiddle playing, with two bows and one fiddle, placing ourselves in all conceivable acrobatic positions, and finish with an eccentric dance, my brother being an exceptionally clever step dancer, whilst I had become proficient in the leg-mania style – a style that the Phoits, Girards, and Fred Vokes, etc., made so popular later.

This sketch caught on so well that we got, as I said, good engagements, not much money for two, but as poor Dan Leno would say, what there was of it was good. Such affluence, for it was affluence in those days, seemed to be too much for Tom, and

he got too fond of the bottle, and this weakness becoming chronic, he drifted away, and I was now left on my "lonesome."

But I soon got as partner Sam Collins, not *the* Sam Collins. He was a good worker, but we didn't hit it, and parted. I then looked up Tom again, and he, promising to behave, we joined forces once more. But it was no good, for the drink got hold of him again, or rather he got hold of the drink, and just as we had got some nice engagements in hand, I was obliged to sever my connection again.

Our next engagement was at the Gaiety, Paradise Street, Liverpool, and managed by Harry de Freece, who was the proprietor, and the father of the present Walter and Jack of that ilk. Thinking it a pity to miss this engagement through no fault of my own, I pitched Harry De Freece a tale, saying my brother could not turn up, and eventually I got taken on at £2 10s., which was half what we were engaged for. De Freece having got out the bills, etc., announcing "The Bros. Chirgwin," and as I appeared singly, the public, or a great many of them, thought "Bros." was my Christian name, and I was frequently hailed with "Hello, Bros, how are you?" etc. This quaint Christian name Bros stuck to me for two or three years after.

I was a success, for it was stipulated that if I did not "go" with the public I should not go on after the first night, and as our original engagement was for one week, I remained there three. From there I went to the Parthenon, kept by the late Mr. Stoll, and stepfather, I believe, of the present Mr. Oswald Stoll. And here again I met with success, and was re-engaged.

From here I went to Pullans, at Bradford, and this was to be my last engagement but one in the country for the time being, for it was at this hall I met Tom Dare, of the brothers Dare, horizontal bar performers, and husband of the celebrated Leona Dare, the aerial gymnast. Dare gave me a letter of recommendation to Mr. J. H. Jennings, of The Oxford, London, this being in the year 1877, when I was 23 years of age.

The next and last engagement I fulfilled before coming to London was at The Star, Manchester, which immediately followed

my Bradford engagement, and I was successful in arranging for my single turn £5 for the week.

Being so elated with my good fortune, I decided to take yet another partner “for better or for worse,” but there was a clause in this agreement that bound us together till death did us part. So on Monday I entered the matrimonial stakes, and I spent that day in celebrating the event in riotous living with sundry of my and my wife’s pals, and no doubt it was owing to a few extra wines I indulged in, that I was to get £5 for this week, and that I had a wife, made me feel a bit independent.

Although I was at the top of the bill at The Star, I decided I would see the day through thoroughly. So when night arrived I went on the stage, and made a little speech, in which I begged the audience to excuse my performance that night, as my luggage, including my dresses, instruments, etc., had not arrived from Bradford. They took it all very kindly, and in good faith.

The next night, however, I saw my name had been covered up on the day bills, and that it was also taken out of the programme, and try how I would I could get no satisfactory explanation from the Management, beyond that I had broken my contract, and was not to go on again. I can only suppose that the Manager thought I was going to get married again each day during the week. However, on the Friday I met Horace Wheatley, whose benefit was taking place at the Star, and he asked me to do my turn for him, as he would like to see what I was made of, and as I was anxious to let the Management see this, too, I readily consented. I eventually went on, and expecting to be on not more than ten minutes, I sent in to Peter Conroy, who was the conductor, only two numbers or items, I intended to give, but I went so well that I was on the stage for half an hour.

After my turn was over the Manager approached me, and expressing his regret that my name had been taken out of the regular programme, wanted me to remain the following week, saying that he had discharged some of his staff, who were responsible for taking my name out. I however, feeling very

naturally, I suppose, “cocky” at my success, told him very briefly that I couldn’t help his troubles, as I was going up to London on Monday to fulfil an engagement with Mr. Jennings, of The Oxford, as I had gained quite enough experience of provincial managements for the present, especially of The Star, Manchester.

Before, however, proceeding to relate my appearance in this year at the Oxford, London, which was to prove my first step to the front rank of artistes, I will relate a few little episodes of my country life, as to how I found my white eye, tall hat, falsetto voice, etc., that may, I hope, be of some little interest.

My white eye and long hat. – In the summer of 1876 my brother Tom and I got an engagement to go to a little place in Gloucestershire. The performance took place on a raised platform in the middle of a large field. Just after I had made up and was ready to go on, I got a small brick or something blown in my right eye. I consequently forthwith commenced to rub it vigorously with my fist, which is the usual thing one does under similiar circumstances, I believe.

My brother at this moment had left the little tent that served as our dressing-room, and was on the platform. As I did not pop up on the other side of the platform, as we had arranged, there was a temporary stage wait, but when I did go up the public simply yelled with laughter, and kept it up for quite two or three minutes. The more I bowed and scraped for this warm reception (for it was absolutely out of the question for us to commence our business with this din going on) the more the yokels roared, and to my surprise my brother seemed to catch the public’s infection of laughter too. Every time he looked at me he was grinning all over his wicked face, and I could see it was with difficulty he suppressed his “bursting out” altogether. Consequently I thought that he and the audience had gone clean off their heads. However, when our show was over, I rushed up to my brother and said,

“My word, Tom, didn’t we go splendidly?”

“I should say we did,” said he, laughing for all he was worth, “but whatever made you think of it?”

“Think of what?” said I.

“You never said a word to me about it, you artful beggar,” said he.

“Explain yourself, you idiot! What the Dickens are you talking about?”

“That,” said he, pushing his finger nearly in my right eye.

By this time I really thought he had been drinking again, and told him so pretty plainly. He then saw I was in earnest, and said:

“The boot’s on the other leg, old boy, this time. Go and look at yourself in the glass, and then come back and tell me who’s been drinking, you or I.”

I rushed down to the tent, and upon investigating, with the aid of the mirror we carried, I was for the moment startled by discovering that about an inch all round my eye was devoid of any trace of black make-up, and it gave me a most comical appearance, so much so that I heartily laughed myself, and for the moment couldn’t account for it. It soon dawned upon me that it was caused by trying to dislodge that half brick with my doubled-up fist. When I returned, wreathed in smiles, to my brother, his first words were: “Well, have you found out which of us two’s been drinking?”

At two or three of our subsequent engagements I purposely left that eye unblackened, and the effect on my audiences was equally successful. This little fluke, was the origin of the White Eyed Kaffir.

It occurred to me that I might, with advantage, add to grotesqueness by whitening a patch round the eye with white grease paint, to make it more obvious still. This didn’t, strange to say, have the effect I had anticipated, the make-up being too pronounced when I made my entry. I tried various little tricks, one of which was to wear a sort of cricket cap, the peak of which covered the eye, but this would invariably fall off. Again I tried an ordinary tall hat, but there was a difficulty in moving the hat to expose the white eye without taking the hat off, so I had a very tall hat made, with a piece of cane running round the inside, and a stiff

top knob on the top of my wig, which acted as a preventative to the hat falling off in coming in contact with the rim of cane.

I could now make my entry with the hat covering the eye at a very acute angle, and expose the eye at will by giving a little jerk of the head, and by this means, as many of my readers know, work the hat in any position I chose. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I should be one of the most conceited men living, for there have appeared before the public numbers of imitators of my original business, not only by their using the tall hat, costume, quaint instruments, etc., but actually plagiarizing my name and title, such as *The Red Eyed Kaffir*, *The White Tied Kaffir*, *The Why Tied Kaffir*, etc., and also my mannerisms, songs, and gags.

The White Eye they possibly might have stolen, too, only this is legally registered as a trade mark. I am mentioning this more in sorrow than in anger, for I don't know any of them who have profited by their piracy. They have a way of popping up all of a sudden, and all of a much greater sudden pop down again. So with apologies to that Napoleon of wit, namely Sir W. S. Gilbert, I can fully endorse his sentiments when writing of my copyists, by saying "that they capsize whilst trying to row in my boat, by their having different skulls."

I am proud to say that at the time of writing there is a Manager in London of West End Halls, and now retired, who some time back engaged a certain black turn, whose business was such a palpable copy of mine that he notified the artiste mentioned, after seeing his first performance, that his contract would be cancelled unless at the following and each successive night he did not announce "Ladies and Gentlemen, I shall have much pleasure in giving an imitation of Chirgwin, the White Eyed Kaffir," with which stipulation the said artiste very readily complied, and I am perfectly certain that all Managers are averse to these sort of copyist, but they probably do not consider it their business to interfere.

*A Mesmerist's Accomplice.* – When I was very young – about eight years old, and consequently did not know any better – I was

persuaded by my sister to join as an accomplice a so-called mesmerist. Spoof Merchant would have been a more correct title.

The Professor, as I will call him, commenced his frauds – I mean experiments – by announcing that he could put any young person in a trance, or send them temporarily to sleep, and during the time his subject was under his will power he would command them to sing, dance, and do all sorts of fantastic tricks. He would then say, “Now will any young lady or gentleman stand up who will be kind enough to assist me to-night,” and I was the kind young gentleman who, for the consideration of 3s. per week, assisted.

When I stood up the Professor would say.

“Thank you, my lad, now kindly (he always used the word kindly) sit down and look me full in the face for a moment or so.” Then I would sit down and the Professor would say, “Thank you, kindly.”

After waving his hands and arms about, make passes, and throw little balls of red fire about him, I would rise rigidly, and stagger rather than walk towards him, and mounting some steps, would finally get on the stage. Then more passes by the Professor, and I would, with eyes fixed and staring, commence to sing, “Father, dear father, come home with me now.”

When I had finished he would put a different quality of influence on me, I suppose, for I would start off in a wild and weird sort of dance, that was taken very quickly. This went splendidly for the first five nights, but alas, for the poor Professor! On the Saturday, for some reason not known to me, there was a new conductor, and when it came to my dance, the orchestra played very much too slowly, and I, forgetting for the moment that I was mesmerised, shouted out to him, “Go on, go on, quicker, quicker, I can’t keep step to that stuff!”

The next thing I remember was receiving a tremendous box on the ears, dosed by the Professor, who, in his turn, had probably forgotten for the moment his part of the swindle. The result of it all was that the Professor was hooted off, and never went again. I

rushed home without my three shillings, and I have never set eyes on that Professor from that day to this. R.I.P.

It has been very often said to me by newly-introduced people, “Oh, I remember seeing you some years ago at the Moore and Burgess Minstrels, when you sang the ‘Blind Boy,’ I suppose first,” or, “Now, Mr. Chirgwin, I want you settle once and for all a little dispute I have often had concerning you, and I hope you don’t mind my asking you, “Were you ever connected and performed on the sands at Margate in the troupe known as ‘Uncle Bones’ Niggers’?”

This first query I have already referred to and denied, and I now also deny the soft impeachment that I performed with Uncle Bones or Boney, as he was called. I have performed at Margate, pitching on the sands, but with my own troupe of seven or eight, and I can only attribute the erroneous impression to my being in Bones’ troupe, to which really we performed in deadly opposition, to the following little circumstance.

The best pitch at Margate at the time was on the sands opposite The Royal Terrace and close to the Nayland Rock Hotel, and in order to secure this pitch, there being other troupes and shows in the town, we had to go down very early in the morning to take possession.

Upon nearing this destination one morning, we saw that we had been forestalled by Bones’ crowd, who, although they had not commenced showing, were hanging about and preparing to do so. Nothing daunted, we proceeded to do the same, when Bones approached me and said:

“Say, you can’t pitch here, it’s ours, you must go somewhere else.”

Very curtly I told him to go – somewhere else, namely, to a much warmer pitch.

He said, “Oh, very well, but I’ll give you ten minutes to clear out, and if you don’t take yourselves off by then, we shall start and break you up.”



I then told him to go and drown himself or hang himself, any way, I know I told him in pretty strong language to go and – do something shocking. When the ten minutes had expired, Bones came up and said:

“Now, the ten minutes are nearly up, and we are going to commence. Are you going or not?”

I replied, “Not in ten minutes, or in ten million years either.”

As he and his troupe came forward and put themselves in position for the usual opening overture, we did likewise, my end man nearly touching his end man. So we numbered, altogether, about fifteen performers, quite an imposing single troupe as it appeared from the front. Directly they started with their opening grand march, we immediately picked it up, and played in perfect harmony with his lot, but as Bones’ troupe only had about three musical instruments, and we had flute, cornet, two violins, piccolo, and I played the ’cello, and in addition were better players, we simply swamped poor Bones’ playing.

When we were through with the overture, I turned to Bones and said exultingly:

“How did you like that, Cockey, for a start? Now I’ll give you three, not ten minutes, to clear out or I’ll break *you* up,” but he didn’t budge, but gallantly held his ground.

Then he started a song.

One of my people started the same song, and as we knew every song, gag, and selection that Bones employed, this was continued through the whole of that performance, and our end scored every time.

Poor Bones’ troubles didn’t end here, for when he started “bottling” (going round with the hat collecting) I did likewise, keeping close to my adversary, and I, being much the taller man of the two, and with a much longer reach, as the coins were thrown, I would out-reach Bones with my top hat, and catching the money by this means I suppose I got seven or eight coins to his one.

This is the only instance in my life in which I ever, knowingly, copied anybody else, but in this case it was do or die, and I

preferred to live, if I had even to do Uncle Bones in the effort. I may say, that after this, Bones religiously left us to that pitch, and gave us a very wide berth afterwards, and we were forthwith the best of friends, and only last year, when fulfilling an engagement at the Hippodrome, Margate, I met Bones, and had a long and pleasant talk with him.

While speaking of Margate, I will relate a little incident that happened in July 1909, in case I may forget it. It is only another instance of the ready wit, or gift of repartee, that flymen and busmen are reputed to be endowed with, and this story is absolutely true.

On the Saturday evening, prior to my opening at the Hippodrome on the following Monday, I was lounging about on the front, and thinking out how I should spend the following day with my wife and family, who were holiday-making there. I thought a couple of hours' drive in the morning would be a good commencement, so I approached a flyman, who had an exceptionally smart landau, and knowing by experience how these Jehus stick the price on, I thought I would strike a bargain, and being alone, have a chat at the same time, and the dialogue, as near as I can remember, was as follows:

Myself: "Engaged to-morrow morning, cabby?"

Cabby: "No, sir."

"What will it cost to take myself, wife and my two children for a nice two hours' drive to-morrow morning?"

Cabby: "Where did you wish to go, Governor?"

"Oh, I'm not particular – Broadstairs, up on the cliffs would be nice, I should say. I'm Chirgwin, you know, and want to know what it will cost."

Cabby (astonished): "Wot, you Chirgwin?"

"Yes."

Cabby: "Then it's like this, governor, the usual price is 3s. 6d. an hour, but as you 'appen to be Chirgwin, the White Eyed Kaffir, it will be five bob an hour to you."

"Why," said I, "a hansom would be cheaper."

“No,” said he, “handsome is what hansom’s charge.”

That settled it, and I told him it was a bargain, and the time to call.

As a parting shot, I said, “I suppose you don’t charge anything for my asking you this!”

When he replied quite seriously: “Oh, you needn’t trouble now, Mr. Chirgwin, we’ll arrange about that when you settle up with me in the morning!” Then I went home to tea.

The incident recorded about Bones is probably the reason it got circulated that I used to work with him, which will be seen was quite the contrary, and to me inexplicable, inasmuch as I had not yet discovered the origin of the white eye which makes me distinctive to all other minstrels.

Mentioning the discovery of the white eye reminds me of another important – important to me at any rate – discovery I made, and I allude to my falsetto voice.

How I discovered my falsetto voice. – We once had the good fortune to engage a young fellow who had an exceptionally beautiful alto voice, and was quite the feature of the show, many people of the better class crowding round us simply to hear his singing. Unfortunately for us, he did not remain long, for a London Manager hearing him, and offering him far more than we could afford to pay, he left us and made a big success in London, eventually singing in the Moore and Burgess Minstrels at St. James’s Hall.

We felt his loss very much, so much so in fact that I proposed, after he had been away a day or so, that I should work up a tenor song (my natural voice, by-the-bye, is light baritone), and see if I could not manage to sing it in a very high key. This was agreed, and when I had rehearsed it a bit, one of my troupe, addressing the crowd, said : “We very much regret the loss of our partner, Mr. L\_\_\_\_\_, but with your indulgence our Mr. Chirgwin will give you an imitation of him.”

I then sang this tenor song in falsetto; the name of it was the “Mocking Bird,” I think, any way it was about a mocking-bird,

spring, and sunshine, and the reception I had was simply terrific, and I had to sing it all through again.

This item was, of course, repeated at each successive performance, and I eventually got other songs, and worked them up in the same manner, till at length I included a falsetto song in all my performances, my stock song being the “Blind Boy.” This fluke, then, was the origin of my falsetto voice.

*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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