

CHAPTER V

MY BROTHER TOM WINS A CHAMPIONSHIP FOR EXPERT DANCING – HOW I PARODY TOPICS – HARMLESS REPARTEE – MY RETURN TO LONDON – FIRST APPEARANCE AT THE OXFORD – I BECOME AMBITIOUS

IN 1865 we happened to be in Sheffield, and we saw on the bills of a Music Hall that a championship dancing competition was to take place, open to all comers, the first prize being a solid silver belt, so my brother Tom and I applied to be allowed to enter, when one of the judges said: “No, my lads, this isn’t a kids’ competition, but only for men.”

At last, however, we persuaded him to let us “have a go.”

Although the usual Lancashire competition is composed of three steps, executed in various styles and a “shuffle off,” this competition was seven steps and a “shuffle off,” and the complete dance lasted between four and five minutes. Each step had to be danced perfectly with both feet, two judges going underneath the stage to jot down in a little book the accuracy or otherwise of the steps executed, but not knowing who the dancers were whom they were judging.

Other judges would be on the stage, making notes of the style and grace of each performer, and after the last dancer had finished the judges would meet, and, comparing their remarks, would award the prize to the competitor who had aggregated the greatest number of marks for beats and grace combined.

On this occasion there were about a dozen competitors, and it will give the reader an idea of my brother’s abilities as a dancer when I say that amongst my most cherished articles and souvenirs of the past is that silver belt that my brother, though only 13 years of age at the time, won easily.

I was nowhere, my style being, as I have said, of the eccentric nature. My brother was wonderfully quick and accurate in picking up any steps he saw danced once, whereas I was equally quick in picking up and playing almost any melody after I had heard it twice. This gift, if I may so call it, naturally assisted us in making such rapid headway when we worked by ourselves.

Apart from my gags, songs, and instrument playing, I attribute my success ever since I came to London in 1877, in a very great measure to the fact that I have always striven to avoid hurting the feelings or the fancies of my audiences when touching on the topics of the day, whether it be politics, public social matters, or what not. Any item I read in the morning's press that I consider will be interesting or amusing, I look at from the humorous side of it, and work it up into a humorous parody, and invariably set it to some popular or well-known melody, and give it out the same evening. As I like giving instances the following two little items will be sufficient.

During the last General Parliamentary Election I alluded to both Parties in this little rhyme, to the tune of "Pop goes the Weasel."

Everyone has political views,
And everybody backs his.
But whether you win or whether you lose,
Up go the taxes.

Of course in the case of any sporting International event taking place, as a boat race, boxing match, running, cricket, and so forth, I, naturally being an Englishman, lean towards England's triumph, and when the news came up in January, this year, that England had won the third Test Match in Australia, I cracked the following gag the same evening at the Halls I was working: "What's the 'Hobbs' that we don't 'Hearne' the 'Ashes' this time?"

So that concerning this part of my entertainment, it will be observed that at any time and in any time, I am generally up to

time, and on time. You see what time mean, don't you? Thank you.

And now to proceed with just one more narrative, when I tell you of my first appearance in London as the single turn "Chirgwin."

I have found by experience that a little harmless repartee will often disarm, if not absolutely annihilate, a possible hostile critic. I was on one occasion singing an alleged Irish song in Ireland, when a typical Pat stood up indignantly, and called out in a loud voice, with a brogue that could be cut with a knife, "Och ye spalpeen, an wheers yer brogue entoairy," when I stopped in my song and replied, "Why you've got it !"

That had the effect of making him sit up, so he sat down, feeling, I suppose, a bit sat on.

Through the recommendation of Tom Dare I obtained an engagement, to open on Easter Monday, 1877, at £4 per week, with Mr. J. H. Jennings, at the Oxford, London, for one week. Mr. Gray, Jennings' stage manager, put me on the first night at about 7 o'clock, or, at any rate, it was first turn. He had previously asked me what my business was, and I told him I was a black eccentric, danced, sang, and played musical instruments, etc. During the turn this night the people were flocking in, and being too much occupied in finding their seats, etc., did not pay much attention to me.

The next night I attended as usual at 7, but was kept hanging about till the very last, when the audience were thinking of getting out, and again I received little attention on their part. I noticed that the sole occupant of the stalls was Mr. Jennings, who was sitting in the centre of the front row, and who was most intent on my show. This at once had the effect of bucking me up, and I believe I gave a creditable performance.

About ten minutes after I had finished, and was dressing to go, Mr. Gray came to me and said: "Mr Jennings has seen you, and will be pleased if to-morrow, Wednesday, you will take the 9.30 turn." Knowing this to be the very best turn of the evening, and

that Mr. Jennings had seen me, and evidently approved, I verily believe that had not Mr. Gray rushed away that instant I should have kissed him!

I may explain here that it was the custom in those days (and I believe it exists at the present time, with the exception of the larger Halls, as The Palace, Empire, and Alhambra, who employ a Press Agent exclusively for their respective theatres) for proprietors and managers, in the event of their putting on any new or special turn, to notify the Press by sending a special invitation card to the various editors to come and see the turn. I quite believe this was done in my case as soon as Mr. Gray reported my show to Mr. Jennings, which would give time to get out the invitations, and to arrange for me to take the star turn on the Wednesday (which, if I mistake not, was that of Mr. Arthur Roberts).

However, on this night the chance of my life came, and I didn't miss it. My two previous shows played about ten minutes, and I expected on this night to be on about the same time. I occupied the stage for forty-five minutes, and I shall never forget that night, and the reception I received. I was then working my white eyes business, and the shrieks of laughter – positively shrieks – when I jerked my long hat back, disclosing the white eye, lasted quite two or three minutes, and every time I winked that white eye there were fresh outbursts.

My burlesque of an operatic prima donna especially tickled the risible faculties of the ladies present, and I used to make up and dress as an operatic singer, with little bits of business, including putting on corsets, powder puffs, golden wigs, hand mirror, etc. They were correspondingly silent when I sang a pathetic song, accompanied on my 'cello, or any item played on my one-stringed fiddle, the latter being at the time a distinct novelty.

On this occasion the house was literally packed, which included principal press men and agents.

When at length I had finished, Mr. Jennings came to me and shook my hand, saying in a stage whisper, "There are a lot of agents who want to do business for you, but do nothing till after

you come and see me in the morning, at 11 o'clock, please, and tell them I have told you this." The first words Mr. Jennings said to me the next morning, after the usual greeting, were:

"Well, Chirgwin, what are your terms if I prolong your engagement?"

Having, I suppose, the Scotch blood of my grandmother still running in my veins, I went out for what was then a pretty stiff figure, and replied: "I will accept £8 per week, and a week's notice on either side to terminate the agreement."

Jennings replied: "No, that won't do at all, so I'll make you an offer. I will give you £7 per week for your exclusive services for eight weeks, commencing next Monday."

And in less than ten minutes I was making my way home to tell my wife the good news, with that contract in my pocket.

Before, however, I had time to speak of my success, my wife said: "You needn't trouble to tell me, for I'm sure you have had bad luck, and so you will have for the next seven years."

"What on earth do you mean?" said I in surprise at her evident seriousness, when she explained that directly I had left home she had smashed the best looking glass on the mantel shelf at our lodgings, which was a sure omen that we should have bad luck for seven years.

I at once put her at ease by telling her my good fortune, and showing her the contract, added, "The man who predicted that rot was talking through his hat, as far as we are concerned, and as to the best looking-glass, don't worry, for I'll soon buy another, and in the meantime I'll look at you, for you are a better looking (g)lass than the one you've smashed, after all."

In talking over my previous night's show she was very anxious to know how I got on in fastening the corsets I used in burlesqueing the operatic lady, as in rehearsing this little bit of business at home I was very clumsy at fastening the hooks into the eyes, and she said: "How did you get on, George, with that dreadful hook and eye business?"

I said, “Oh, that was all right, but what is bothering me now that I have got his nice little engagement is, hook-can-I-take out to dinner on Sunday.”

Then I think I got my ears boxed.

This little burlesque bit was a very big success, and I continued it in my performances for months and months without its waning in the least. The song I sang in my falsetto voice was, “Silver Moonlight.”

During this two month’s exclusive engagement I was billed and announced in the programmes as “Chirgwin” pure and simple, but when this terminated I was still kept on at the Oxford for many weeks, which is, in itself, proof of my success. I put myself in the hands of Hugh J. Didcott, one of the most influential agents of the time, and he got me several engagements. I was not satisfied, nor did I like the look of that plain Chirgwin somehow, especially as most of the principal turns had at least one initial in front of their surnames, so scanning a full company bill one day outside the London Pavilion, I read A. G. Vance, J. W. Rowley, T. W. Barrett, J. H. Hanson, W. B. Fair, and the biggest star of the lot, G. H. Macdermott. This last name did it, and although I am only plain George, I decided upon affixing G. H. in front of my name there and then, and G. H. it has remained ever since. But why the H —! I am unable to explain, beyond I thought it gave my name a more important appearance on the bills.

Although Didcott was a good worker, I discovered that he was in various little ways working to get rich quick, so with a little manoeuvring and diplomacy on my part I got off his books, and as I had now been working at the Oxford, also the principal Halls in London for the past seventeen months, I was approached by Parravicinni, the agent to big Continental turns, Blondin, etc., etc., who offered me an engagement in Spain.

Having, fully established myself as a favourite (as Rouse, the Chairman of the Oxford, used to announce, “Ladies and Gentlemen, your old favourite, Chirgwin, will appear next”), and wishing to see foreign climes, I accepted.

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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