

CHAPTER VI

I TOUR SPAIN – SOME QUEER CUSTOMS – I FORESTALL A WOULD-BE COPYIST – I GO TO A BULL-FIGHT

I first appeared at the “Theatre Alphonso,” Madrid, for a month, at £16 per week.

I may point out that in those days the less salary you accepted the better, for if one stood out for a good salary they would get you there, and would go out of their way to make you so jolly uncomfortable in various ways that you were either forced to give up the engagement or take the hint that they were constantly throwing out, viz., to take less money.

These pleasant little tricks would be, firstly, to give you one of the worst turns in the programme, and then get the waiters and some of their pals to create a little disturbing approval. The genuine audience didn't seem to mind, or at any rate they didn't interfere, being unaware that these dissensions were the outcome of a trick.

Fortunately, as I accepted this small salary, this trouble did not occur in my case, as Parravicinni put me up to it, but it has happened to many English artistes of my acquaintance. I was consequently given a star turn.

The audience liked my performance, because I entertained them, and the Management took pains to show that they liked me because I was cheap. I was usually referred to as “Negro Blanco Chirgwin” whilst in Madrid.

I arrived just in time to save a gross and palpable crib of my business by a little clown whom I had previously met at The Oxford, and who had then come to Madrid. He was billed as doing entirely new business for his benefit, but this new business was all mine, including the white eye, long topper, one-stringed

instruments, and so forth. But unfortunately for him, and fortunately for me, I arrived three days in front of this gentleman, and was just in time to have all his posters covered up, and so “crab his pitch,” as we used to say. Yes, the foreigner, like most of us, is a bit of a copyist at times.

Reverting to my Alphonso engagement, I was the first negro performer from England that the natives had seen, and I used to dance a lot in those days, which they liked immensely. Occasionally I would appear made-up one of my sides, including face, wig and hat white, and the other half black. Then again I would make up entirely white, with the exception of the eye, which would be black, but somehow I didn't care for that so much. I thought, you know, that it might bring back painful memories to my audience. Of course these were the only occasions on which I ever had a black eye, or at least as far as I can remember.

This black eye and white body business reminds me again of the innumerable copyists I have had, but the story I am now going to relate beats the lot of them.

In the years 1885-6, I was frequently engaged at the London Pavilion, and on one occasion, when I called to enquire my time for the following Monday, I met Mr. Villiers, the proprietor, in the entrance, who exclaimed:

“Ah, my boy, I've found another Chirgwin since you were here last, and he's great; different business to yours, all white, and black eye.” With that he stepped into his brougham, and drove off.

Upon my making enquiries I found this to be only too true. Not content with my white body and black eye, he even had the audacity to call himself, or rather to be called, Chirgwin, and he must have impressed the Management of The Pavilion considerably, for his services were retained exclusively for that house for a continual run of two years, and he would probably have remained' longer, only he died. He performed every evening during his long engagement, but he did his business very late in the evening, and so I very seldom met him, as my turn was usually about 10 at this house.

I shall not forget the first time I met him. I was just entering the stage door, and I saw, coming towards me from the dressing-rooms, this black-eyed Chirgwin, and wishing to make friends, I said:

“Hullo, Chirgwin, old chap, how are you?” and put out my hand to see if he would shake hands, but not a bit of it, he simply stared up in my face in a very ugly way, and passed on out into the street without opening his lips.

I said to myself, “Disagreeable hound!”

I never really made any objection to him, for I considered his business was so different to mine. I should have looked foolish to have done so. For instance, although he played, he didn't play any of the instruments that I did, and he didn't dance, and his was a turn, if it can be so called, that rather kept people out instead of drawing them in, as far as I could judge, and strange as it might appear, I got quite to like him before long. He had a very sad end though, for he developed softening of the brain after about two years, and the doctors had him sent to some sort of Home, but he got worse, and eventually got raving mad, and it was rumoured at that time that owing to his violence he was put to a painless death in the lethal chamber.

This Chirgwin, I may perhaps just mention, was one of the handsomest and biggest Bull Terriers I have ever seen. His business at the London Pavilion was divided by catching rats in the cellars and accompanying Parker, the fireman, in his rounds at night for companionship and protection, and they called him “Chirgwin, the black-eyed Ratter.”

In Spain, and I believe other countries, the audience expect and insist on the performer carrying out every item on the stage that he is represented to perform on the bills and advertisements. In fact they can claim, and get damages – to say nothing of getting their money returned – by law, should they decide to take this course.

I remember on one occasion, at Barcelona, I had been on the stage for quite 40 minutes, and had pretty nearly exhausted myself, but still the audience kept on calling for more. I took several

curtains, shook my head, and so on, but all to no avail, and the turn who followed me emphatically declined to go on with all that row going on. Upon that the Manager came to me and said: "You must go on again and do something else, Mr. Chirgwin."

I explained I could not, as I had done all I could think of. He then pointed to the programme he had in his hand, and said: "There! you haven't played a bone solo!" which I was advertised to include, and although I explained that I hadn't done this for years, and not thinking the public living in the country of castanets would appreciate it, I was not prepared. However, a set of bones or nick-a-nacks were forthcoming, and on I went again, and gave them another five minutes with the bones, when they became perfectly pacified, and I had to include this item on each succeeding night. What price the Englishman wanting his money's worth after this!

The proprietor of the Teatro Alphonso was a particularly nice fellow. I frequently visited him at his house, went for drives, etc., with him, and he took me to bull fights on Sundays, and on one occasion let me off my performance in order that I might see an extra special bull fight, at which I remember the Matador killed three or four bulls.

Were I a betting man I should be inclined to wager, that out of every fifty people who return to England upon visiting Spain, one of the very first questions their friends put to forty-five of them is: "Did you go to a Bull Fight?" It isn't: "Have you brought home any nuts from Barcelona?" or oranges from Seville, or a monkey from the rocks at Gibraltar (the only place in Europe, by-the-bye, where wild monkeys exist). No, it's, "Did you see a Bull Fight?" At any rate this was the first question put to me on my return, so perhaps I shall be forgiven if I give my impressions in my book.

In the first place if one sees what I may term a professional bull fight, I don't think they will discern any cruelty attached to it. The cruelty comes in where a clumsy or an amateur Matador makes mistakes, and bungles in his thrusts to kill the bull, and also in the class of horses that are employed in these amateur or second-rate

fights, they being only emaciated animals. It is not infrequent that when the bull is quick enough in his rush he will disembowel the horse. Then the horse is dragged out of the arena, the stomach sewn up, and the poor wretch is led in again to continue the sport. I will not dwell longer on this ugly side of the picture, however.

Matadors, Torreadors, Picadores, and Banderilleros learn their respective businesses by practising in the winter time with very young bulls and heifers, which have large India-rubber balls fixed on their horns in case. . . I say winter, because bulls at this season are not nearly so vicious and fiery as they become during the hot summer, which consequently minimizes the chances of fatal accidents.

The first part of the programme consists of a sort of procession, or as it is termed, a quadrille, headed by a somewhat fatherly-looking person on horseback, who is evidently a sort of boss, and carries the key of the door from whence later the bulls are let through. Then follow some young athletic men on horseback, then come the Picadores, then the Banderilleros, then the star of the show, namely, the Matador. All of these are most elegantly attired, and as they march round the arena they present a very pretty picture.

At a certain signal the Matador comes forward from the rest, and with a graceful, swaggering, little strut, approaches the fatherly-looking individual alluded to, and bows very graciously once or twice to the President, who occupies a private box, when he, the Matador, is handed a key. He then goes to a large door, opens it, and quickly steps back. Almost immediately the bull, which is foredoomed to die, makes a short rush into the ring, then stops dead, apparently surprised to find himself free, and temporarily dazed at his surroundings.

The quadrille, or those of the procession who do not actually take part in the fight, have now taken their departure. Then a Picador approaches the bull, and waves a red cloth or capa, as it is termed, in front of the bull, who, shutting his eyes, makes a dash at his challenger. The Picador, just when one expects to see him

bowled over, nimbly steps on one side, and the bull, seeing he has missed his marks, pulls up, looking about him as much as to say, that't d—— funny.

Then another Picador will approach, and repeat this performance. After several Picadors have done likewise to tire him out, the horsemen, armed with long shafts, with spikes at the ends to keep the bull off the horse, further irritate and tire the bull by approaching him, these horses being blindfolded on one side only. It is thus part of the show that Toro gets a bit of his own back, either by stabbing the horse or unhorsing the rider, and when he succeeds in either of these movements, the men with the capas rush up, and waving them in front of the now infuriated animal, divert his attention, which gives the horseman time to remount, or perhaps to get his horse placed on a hurdle and removed from the ring.

At the big fight I saw a bull catch a horse under its stomach, and lift it and its rider bodily off the ground, when both crashed to mother earth in a heap. These accidents are all very exciting, but make one's flesh literally creep.

The bull being now thoroughly roused, the horsemen, give place to the Banderilleros, who, armed with shorts darts, gaily coloured with flowing ribbands, take their turn, their part of the game being to plant these darts or banderilleros on the shoulders of the bull when he makes his rushes.

The Banderillero who places his darts at equal distance from each other in the neck of the bull takes the cake for dexterity, or rather the audience throw him cigars and caps to show their approval. On the other hand the Banderillero who misses or does this badly, gets the bird – namely, potatoes thrown at him.

The bull by now has been worked up to a white heat rage, and is evidently tiring, so the great Matador comes forward, armed with a long rapier and a red cloth, and we know now that the star turn is on. After making some wonderfully active movements round and about his victim in avoiding his rushes, he, at a signal from the audience, thrusts the long rapier up to the hilt in the bull's

spine, and withdrawing it like lightning, stands aside whilst the bull for a second or so stands, shivers, then drops dead without shedding a drop of blood, excepting a little through the nose perhaps, which shows that the killing has been done well, and the bull has succumbed to internal haemorrhage. In this case shouts of bravos go up for the Matador, and poor Toro also gets applause with shouts of “Bravo, Taro!”

A team of mules now enter, which are hitched on to the bull, and he is dragged out, and so ends one of the most thrilling, exciting, and interesting spectacles in the world. But as to the interesting description, if words could be put into the mouth of the bull, it is just possible he might say, “I beg to differ.”

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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