

CHAPTER VII

SPAIN CONTINUED – I BECOME A MATADOR – VISIT GIBRALTAR – I SAVE A FIRE PANIC IN THEATRE – RETURN TO LONDON AFTER APPEARING AT BERLIN – TRICKY MANAGERS

ALTHOUGH a bull fight in the main depicts courage, nerve, great danger, sometimes tragedy, it would be difficult, no doubt, to most people to see anything funny in it.

But on thinking over my experience the next day I distinctly saw a humorous side to it, and very often, when I am being told of some calamity or something of a pathetic nature, I will interject some joke or other. Then I am abruptly told to desist, and asked if I can ever be serious. I admit it is very hard for me to be in a serious mood very long at a stretch.

This happened after I had seen my first good bull fight, and I at once thought I would be a matador with rapier, etc., and bull complete, and would show the public what I considered to be the only proper way to fight and kill a bull. I accordingly secured the services of a couple of low comedians, who were to be my bull, and I had a skin made with head, legs, tail, etc., complete, to represent as near as it was possible the outward appearance of a bull, the comedians, of course, being out of sight, and representing Toro's innards.

This being done, I fished up some gaudy props, into which I got to represent the Matador. I also got a property long rapier made which acted after the fashion of a telescope. By releasing a spring in the hilt I could make it close up, as it were, upon the tip coming into contact with my bull, giving the appearance to the audience that I had actually stabbed the bull and thrust my deadly weapon up to the hilt in him.

For the red cloth to excite my bull to combat I substituted a bunch of deep red luscious carrots. Being thus equipped, we made

our appearance, after one or two rehearsals. I was billed as “Negro Blanco Chirgwinino, Spain’s Champion Matador.”

We made an immediate success, and I continued the item in my show until my engagement terminated, which was prolonged for another month.

After I had chased the bull, and in turn the bull had chased me all round the stage, falling down by tripping over my rapier, and the usual business, I would stab my bull with my trick rapier. Not in the front of him, but into his hind-quarters, and through a slight mishap to my rapier on the second night, it is a wonder I did not kill my bull outright, or the man who played his hind-quarters. For upon my making the final vigorous thrust, I forgot to release the spring, and consequently my rapier, although it had a blunted point, penetrated the skin and entered about half-an-inch into the hindquarters of the poor chap inside. The roar of this end of my bull which followed was the nearest approach to the impressions of a bull that my fellow entertainers had ever given.

It was comical to hear these two chaps wrangling after this little episode as to who should play the head and who the tail; but after my promising my tail man an extra two piestas for every time this accident happened, he decided to continue risking his life for me, I stipulating that he should repeat his roar at the proper time, which he did, but it was never so realistic as on that first occasion.

I should have continued this burlesque in London on my return, but as one or two turns were already working similar property animal burlesques I decided not to do so, in case they and the public might think I was imitating them.

During my engagement at the Alphonso I met a combination by the name of Linton, Dare and Gavetti, and having no standing contracts to fulfil at home, I joined them, and we toured Spain, visiting Barcelona, Seville, etc., and Gibraltar. The latter place we appeared at several times. The last occasion was one Christmas, where I remember we spent a very happy time.

By now I had been in Spain for some months. Arriving at Gibraltar late on the Sunday (which is the principal day for

amusements on the Continent, the night performances lasting till past two in the morning) I commenced my business by rolling out a few sentences in Spanish, not thinking of the English soldiers and British visitors present. I was very soon made aware of this fact by a wag calling out to me, "Hello, Cocky! how are you?" Then another looked up with, "Good old Chirgwin; how's London looking?"

Realizing now that this was a part of the British Empire, and that I was in Gib., I started at once to jab in English some of my old gags and wheezes. Then I went back to Spanish, but the Spaniards, would have "none of it," and sent round to the stage to ask Negro Blanco Chirgwin to speak in English, and although they didn't understand a word of it they liked to listen to it.

On another occasion, at a hall where we were performing on this Spanish tour, I was the means of saving a situation and possibly some lives as well, for a panic looked imminent.

The incident occurred this way. A strong lady, one of whose feats of strength or tricks was bending a bar of iron by striking it across her arm, but previous to her doing this it had to go through a certain process to make it pliable, and to be made red-hot, which preparation was of course unknown to the audience. I was just finishing my turn when I noticed the people quietly leaving the building, and smelling fire and noticing a little smoke issuing from the wings, I went to the side and told the stage manager, and advised him to come forward and explain the smell and smoke, or he would have the house empty, or something worse might happen.

Fortunately, he took my advice and told the audience that Madam was merely having her bar of iron heated, and a piece of rag had got into the fire which caused the smell, and in order to show there was no danger he would prove it to them if they would keep their seats. He then rang up the back cloth, when lo! there, sitting before the improvised fire, was a man faking this massive looking bar of iron.

It satisfied the people, but of course gave poor Madam A.'s show away. The stage manager then turned to me upon going off

and said, “Do something else, for heaven’s sake, please, Mr. Chirgwin, and make them at ease and in a good humour, for I’m afraid as Madam A. follows you they will throw things, etc. So, feeling sorry for this artiste, who was really clever, I picked up my mandoline and gave off two or three lines like the following, to the air of “Little Bo-Peep.”

The Lady, you know,
Has spoilt her show,
That’s plain to her warmest admirer.
She’s “fired” her bar,
But don’t go too far,
Or the Manager here will “fire” her.

This had the desired effect, and Madame A. had a splendid reception, but she relegated that bar of iron to the scrap-heap, and never did this trick again.

After this engagement I made tracks for England, home, and – contracts, and came up through Spain, went on to the Folies Bergere, Paris, at which place I “went” with my audiences very nicely. Later on I went to Berlin, an engagement which I obtained through my friend, that King of Jugglers, Paul Cinquevalli, at a very good salary. At this Berlin engagement the tip I had received from an agent, re sticking out for big money, came only too true.

This is the little trick the Berlin manager played me up with. My first two or three performances having been received with enthusiasm, the management got the waiters and their satellites to hiss, stamp their feet, and call out “Don’t want you!” “Don’t want you!” and other cat-calls. I put up with it as long I could, but eventually it became too unbearable, so I went to the manager and told him that I preferred him to pay me up to date and cancel my contract, but did not tell him I knew it was a put-up job. He replied (exactly as I thought he would):

“You see, the people don’t like you; I like you, but your salary very big, very big, and as I like you very much, if you will take less money, I should prefer you to stop on, and I will make a better

turn for you; and the next people who interrupt you I will have ejected.” I could have eaten him.

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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