

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **SOME INSTRUMENTS I PLAY – SOME INVENTIONS – DANCING PIPES AND DOLL – I DISCOVER THE SCOTSMAN AND LEARN THE BAGPIPES – I RETURN TO THE OXFORD, LONDON – SOME ANIMALS I HAVE KEPT AND A FEW JOKES**

DURING these experiences on the Continent I had many opportunities of studying various musical instruments, some of which I had not even heard of before; but I had very little trouble with any of them, and I added at least four to my already pretty big stock. The cornet, flute, etc., I was studying, also, at one time. I can play the cornet tolerably, but some time ago, having trouble with my vocal chords, I was advised by my doctor to abandon wind instruments if I wished to retain my singing voice, as the strain was too severe, especially as I sing a good deal in falsetto.

The instruments I can claim to be master of now include the piano, violin, violoncello, mandoline, guitar, banjo, phono-fiddle, harp, organ, dulcimer, euphonium, concertina, xylophone, sleigh bells, harmonica, bassoon, bagpipes, zither, harpsichord, kettledrums, Japanese one-stringed fiddle, and last, but by no means least, my latest creation, the bombass.

Without wishing to appear bombastic, I have every reason to believe I was the first man in London to introduce the sleigh bells, which I first played about twenty years ago at the Empire, Leicester Square, also the one-stringed Japanese fiddle. The first one I made myself out of a cigar box. I improved on this by substituting a half cocoanut shell for the cigar box.

My “sweet-toned” bombass was also invented and made by myself, and it is composed of a long bit of – well – any sort of

wood, half-a-dozen little bells fixed on the top, a bit of old rope does beautifully in place of the usual gut string, a pig's bladder for the bridge, and for the bow I use a shark's jawbone, which does not require any resin.

My favourite instrument (after the bombass, of course) is the 'cello, which I usually employ when singing any special song composed by myself, and also when I sing the "Blind Boy," which, by-the-bye, reminds me. A famous 'cello virtuoso was one night holding his audience in rapt attention by his masterly execution of one of Chopin's Nocturnes, when the deathly silence that could almost be felt was broken by a "god" shouting from the gallery: "Blind Boy-oy!" Complimentary, perhaps; but hardly so to the Maestro.

In addition to my originating the white eye, long hat, one-stringed fiddle and sleigh bell in London, xylophone and the bombass, I must mention my dancing long Churchwarden pipes, which I manipulate by tapping the bowls on a tray held between my knees. It has the same effect as the legs of a ballet dancer, step dancer, or Irish reel dancer, etc., and I go through long dances, keeping perfect time to any music.

Of course, figures that were made to dance by tapping with the hand the spring-board on which they stood existed long before I did. But the idea of working the figure by means of a strap suspended to the manipulator's foot, was my own. My nigger is literally and "figure"-atively a "strap-hanger."

Again, my dancing doll is another innovation of my own, and I put him through a dancing performance also. I originated these dancing pipes on the tray – "Churchwardens" that dance and never "miss a beat." Champion dancers have testified to the accuracy of the steps they execute, and asked how the deuce it was done. But – why the "deuce" should I be-"tray" one of my "trump tricks?"

Then, again, the burlesque Scotchman was first done by me at the Oxford in 1879. I got this idea by going one Sunday morning with the present Mr. Joe Elvin's father to Petticoat Lane, Whitechapel (now called Middlesex Street) to look for some

properties, and I espied a man dressed Scotch fashion, and it struck me there and then to duplicate this comical-looking chap on the stage. So I bought his rig-out complete for 2s., and added little extras, such as a large whitewash brush to take the place of the sporran, a little boy's Scotch cap, etc.

Then I had to get hold of the bagpipes and learn them. This I very soon managed by getting a Scotch fellow, who paraded the streets playing the bagpipes, to come to my house and teach me. They were very cheap lessons, too, costing me the price of about half-a-pint of whiskey each time he called; and what this man didn't drink of it in my house he poured into the bag of the pipes to keep him from fainting on his way home!

I also originated the phrase (which very soon became a classic): "Half a mo'," and is an abbreviation of "Half a moment," with which I used to curb the impatience of my audiences in calling for "Blind Boy" or any special number which, perhaps, at that "mo." I was not prepared to give.

Whilst at the Folies Bergère I wrote to Mr. Jennings, saying that I was leaving shortly for London, and would arrive on a certain day, and asking for a re-engagement. On arriving at the Folies Bergère I found a telegram from Mr. Jennings offering me a long engagement, to commence as soon as I arrived in London.

As nothing of any moment occurred in Paris, I will bring myself back to the dear old Oxford in 1879, and tell you a few little stories of what took place during the period I was working at this hall, the London Pavilion, Metropolitan, etc.

Mr. Jennings had evidently heard of my successes on the Continent, for he went to the extent of advertising my re-engagement in a most lavish manner, and although there were several star turns already appearing at the Oxford, including Jenny Bill, Fred Albert, Fred Coyne, Pat Feeney, etc., Mr. Jennings had erected a huge glass transparency about a yard high and five yards long running the whole length of the Oxford's frontage announcing "The return of 'Chirgwin'." I have every reason to believe I

merited this outlay, as my success was instantaneous, and I remained there for quite ten months without a break.

By now I had acquired by judicious living a nice little pile of the best, and invested a portion of it in the purchase of some freehold house property, and installed my father in a pretty little house, and allowed him an income, which the dear old boy enjoyed till the last curtain was rung down on him.

As I have said before, I was always particularly fond of “animals and things.” By now I had got such a variety that I was given the name of Farmer George, which later on was changed into Uncle George, and by which I am called at present by my pals. The list of animals and things that I have kept include ponies, horses, monkeys, rabbits, ferrets, pigeons (I have at the present a flight of about 150), dogs, goats, all sorts and conditions of cage birds, a wallaby, starlings, parrots, magpies, jackdaws, jackasses, etc.

One of the few animals I have not kept is the common or pigstye pig. This may appear to some of my readers as pig-culiar, others perhaps it may strike as pork-culiar, anyway we’ll let it go at this. I have also kept two wives and two families, motor cars, poor relations, servants, seaside landladies, my temper and bad company.

I didn’t keep the first motor car for very long. Two accidents that I started with cost me a pretty penny, one of which was colliding with an electric light standard, which wrecked the car, my present wife, little daughter and myself. The next car I had was better behaved and the new chauffeur was a better driver, but the bills that chauffeur incurred for repairs, etc., were shocking. One bill for twenty pounds decided me to put my foot down and get rid of my motor and chauffeur. I didn’t mind the twenty pounds so much, but there was absolutely nothing to chauffeur it.

Yes, I have decided that boot mending is cheaper and more lasting. Besides, motoring is a very fishy pastime, for if you don’t kipper good look out on the valves, etc., you may bloater Jericho. I am not a particularly nervous man, in fact am full of grit, for once

when my first car got beyond my chauffeur's control, I yelled out to him, "stop it, can't you, stop it?"

"No, sir," yelled back my chauffeur.

"Then for Heaven's sake," I implored, "run into something cheap."

The donkey I kept was a pretty little fellow about the size of a St. Bernard dog, that I used to take about London in a hansom cab with me, and frequently to the London Pavilion on Saturday afternoons when I went to treasury. But one day at a time when the men were laying down new asphalt opposite my house, the donkey got out of his stable into the road, and galloped all over the burning asphalt, and it consequently must have burnt its poor little feet and fetlocks terribly. I remember when I caught him at last a big crowd came up and asked me how the asphalt. I sold him soon after I got over this shock, but what became of him I've never ascertained.

I shortly after bought a mustang, but he bucked too much for me, and I couldn't keep my seat by holding the reins in the orthodox manner, so I had to hang on by the pommel of the saddle like grim death. Not good horsemanship, I'll confess, but to keep your seat on a bucking young mustang you must hang on somewhere, I give you my word.

*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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