

CHAPTER IX

SOME FRIVOLITIES – I SAVE THE LIFE FROM DROWNING OF EDWARD COLLEY, THE AGENT – I APPEAR IN BALLET AT THE EMPIRE, LEICESTER SQUARE

I AM not infrequently asked which is the easier, to get on or to get off the stage, and my reply is to get on, for it is decidedly easier to walk on than to be thrown off, and in stage parlance to get off means “Exit,” and if “eggs ’it” you that have “gone off” your exit must be harder for you than your entrance.

Experience has proved to me that amateurs who by their so-called friends are egged on to the stage, very frequently get egged off, but some amateurs have such unwarranted cheek and impudence that they don’t care a straw about the public showing their disapproval in this way, which to me is eggstrawdinary (eggsactly).

You’ll pardon a few puns perhaps, and in this respect I’m sure you can’t say I’ve inflicted many upon you, now can you? Mr. Oswald Stoll dubs me the violin punster. I can’t help this, and if I could I wouldn’t, for in my estimation harmless puns are a pungent form of “capital” punishment for cynics and other malefactors. Dr. Johnson is credited with saying that “a man who makes a pun would pick a pocket.” I beg to differ from him, for though he’s the dead lion, I’m the live donkey. Concerning logical puns what’s the matter with this?

The high price of coals means that coal sellers are doing our coal cellars no good – so I advise – burn oil, for oil is as good as coal, in fact oil is coal or rather co(a)l-za-oil. Then again, if I call your attention to a soldier who isn’t there you look for him. Well, what happens? Nothing beyond that I’ve “sold yer” (chestnut?)

Again, some localities specially adapt themselves to jaw-jerking puns. Take for instance Newport, Mon. and the Wye Valley. This immediately suggests a “New-Port-Mon-tea-u” and a Wa-vally novel.’m (Great Scotch!)

Shortly after the result of the first Shamrock yacht race came up I asked, “When did the Shamrock?” and getting no satisfactory reply, told them it was when Sir Thomas Lept-on, and remarked that there’s many a “slip twixt the cup and the lip-ton. This was denounced as being unkind of me and unpatriotic, but notwithstanding these puns were annexed by the denouncers.

However, if they shared the credit I got the cash. I started my chequered career in a check suit, and a cheque suits me still, providing there’s cash at the bank to meet it. Nearly all my pigeons are like myself – “checkers” – and are musical, or should be anyway, for they carry their own bands with them (round their legs).

I suppose my fondness for birds is by my having been reared on “part-Ridge’s” food, appeared first in public in Swallow Street when I was but a mud-lark. Although I am now a “dead homer” or home bird, I have played larks like many other cuckoos, but having feathered my nest, I have nothing to “grouse” at, as I am only saying this little bit for a lark. Of course, there’s very little linnet, and as no doubt the majority of my readers have heard me let off little volleys on the stage similar to the foregoing I had best cry “halt.”

But to those who may not have suffered in this way I promise them I can do even much worse than this. And as my bookings in the principal London Variety Theatres extend over a period of some seven years, if they are at all sceptical and anxious to judge for themselves, and not being chicken-hearted, I hereby challenge them to do so.

I cannot for the moment recall anything in particular that occurred during my re-engagement at the Oxford in 1879-80 that would be of sufficient interest to relate, but from time to time I broke my runs in London by getting provincial tours fixed up.

It was during one of these tours that an incident occurred, the outcome of which I am exceedingly proud of, inasmuch as that I was the means of saving the life of a friend from drowning who was a prominent and universally respected member of my profession.

In August, 1886, I was appearing at the Hall by the Sea, Margate, where I met Edward Colley, who for many years was managing clerk to Ambrose Maynard, the agent. Having left Maynard's employ to start an agency of his own, he was celebrating his venture by taking a holiday at Margate.

One morning we went bathing together. We managed to secure adjacent bathing machines. We had returned to our machines, and in two or three minutes or so I, having donned my pants and vest, heard a loud splash, and I thought what an awful dive, and upon opening my door to look, I saw, some fifteen yards out, someone floundering about – larking I thought – but I soon discovered it was someone in distress.

I may say that our machines had only just been drawn out as far as possible, as the tide was receding very rapidly. Being a very good swimmer, I immediately plunged in and swam out to the bather, who was by now carried out a considerable distance. To my utter astonishment and dismay I saw the upturned face of my friend Colley, with mouth and eyes wide open. He was rapidly drowning, and had evidently been seized with a fainting fit, and fallen from his machine, which I took for a bad dive.

I clutched hold of his head, and, turning on my back, kept his head above water by holding it with both hands, using my legs only as the means of propulsion. I got him safely to shore. (by no means an easy task owing to the out-running tide), but had he been conscious and struggled, it would no doubt have been all u-p with both of us. However, with the aid of some people who had flocked round our machines, in about half-an-hour I was overwhelmed with joy to see he was coming to, and he was very soon safely landed at his apartments.

The poor chap was so profuse in his thanks to me for saving him that I thought he would never stop, and as a memento of the event he presented me with a particularly handsome chased silver cigar case, with an appropriate inscription, which reads: "Presented to G. H. Chirgwin by Edward Colley as a small memento of his heartfelt thanks for saving his life at Margate, September 1st, 1886."

The townspeople and visitors at Margate were not unmindful of this little act of valour on the White-eyed 'un's part, for shortly after I was publicly presented on the stage by Mr. Foster, the manager of The Hall by the Sea, with a testimonial and a gold medal, "From a few admirers of the Town," as is set forth on the medal.

This adventure "by the sea" was, as it happened, to be the forerunner of another adventure in the following summer "by the sea," in which a bathing machine took a prominent part, and although I was never in fear of losing my life, it might have cost me my engagement. I am alluding to my appearing at the Empire, Leicester Square, London, where they were playing a ballet entitled "By the Sea," and in which for one night only I appeared. (This is the only instance in which I have appeared in ballet as a Coryphee).

My engagement at this theatre was, if I remember rightly, an exclusive one of three months, and of course to do my usual act, but finding the time hang heavily on my hands and feet, I was up to all sorts of pranks. For instance, as my turns immediately preceded the ballet I would take on a watering can and water the stage to lay the dust after I had finished, followed by the janitor with the broom, prior to the rising of the curtain.

Nothing very funny in this, the reader may think, but the roars of laughter which this little act caused proved that it must have looked quaint from the audience's point of view. Encouraged by this, I did not let the matter rest here. No, I must get on in that ballet by hook or by crook, and one night my opportunity arrived. One of the scenes depicted a very pretty sea beach with about

seven real bathing machines, out of which stepped dainty Coryphees, who, after looking shyly around them to see they were not observed, would throw off their white silk wraps and execute a dance.

On this particular night, having squared the stage hand, I popped into the centre machine before it was drawn down the stage, in which was the principal lady Coryphee, Miss L. Watkins, who, after had explained matters, fully entered into the fun of the thing. After several of the bathers had taken the water, or stage, it was the principal's turn to step out. The cue was given to me when I flung the door open, ejaculated a wild war whoop, and jumped on to the stage, did a couple of steps and then bounded off, the whole business not taking more than half a minute.

The shrieks of laughter it caused were simply deafening, which were increased when it became apparent by the fright of the ladies dancing at my sudden appearance, that the "spoof" was known to no one. As this was a very dainty and quiet scene, the ladies in elegant bathing costumes, and me in all black silk tights, the reader may gather a slight idea of the general effect.

Upon my coming off Mr. Charles Wilson, who, I believe, was the stage manager at the time, informed me that Madame Katti Lanner, that clever ballet mistress, wished to speak to me immediately in her room, and that she was in a fearful rage at my spoiling her beautiful scene. I at once proceeded to her room in fear and trembling to apologise for the great liberty I had taken, etc., but as soon as I entered her room she looked up and burst out laughing too, and said: "Oh, Mr. Chirgwin, I intended to be very cross and to scold you, but how can I be cross with such a comedian! You dreadful bad man, it is impossible, but please, please Mr. Chirgwin, never do that once more, promise me, won't you?" Which of course I was very pleased to do, for had Madame Lanner made a fuss and been nasty about it to Mr. Hitchins, the manager, my innocent little joke might have – well, might have been a serious matter for me.

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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