

Won For the Church, But Not Lost To the Stage

How Fred Stone Decided He Could Remain a Comedian and Still Be a Good Christian After Hearing Curious Old Legend of the Juggler Who Won Heaven's Favor With His Tricks and Comical Capers



Mary Garden as the juggler in "The Juggler of Notre Dame," an opera based on the legend which convinced Fred Stone that it would not be wrong for him to continue on the stage.



Fred Stone.



Mr. Stone in one of the roles which have won him such wide popularity.



Fred Stone, the famous comedian, has rededicated himself to the cause of Christianity—renewed his faith, after a lapse of many years, in the religion of his fathers and his own boyhood days.

Henceforth he will lead the life of an earnest Christian, reading the Bible daily, saying his prayers night and morning, giving one-tenth of his income to the service of God and doing all he can to win others to the peace he has found.

But won as he is to the church, Fred Stone still is not lost to the stage. To the delight of the millions of theatergoers who think his antics inimitable, he will continue to amuse them just as he has been doing for many years.

How Stone reached his momentous decision that there need be nothing irreconcilable between the life of a God-fearing, God-serving Christian and a professional comedian's career is an interesting story—one as attention-compelling as is to be found anywhere in the history of religious conversion or reawakening.

It was only after long and careful pondering that the comedian decided not to lay aside forever his grease paint and grotesque costumes. His first impulse after being seized with an overwhelming desire to return to the "glory of God" was to quit the stage at once—to turn his back on its glamour and gaiety and occupy himself with more serious things.

Curiously enough, it was a clergyman—the Rev. Dr. Robert A. Cameron, of Billings, Mont.—who finally convinced him that very probably he could serve God better by continuing on the stage than by retiring to private life or taking up some other profession.

And the Billings pastor did it by pointing out the striking parallel between Stone's case and that of the medieval juggler who found out that God was as well pleased with the clownish tricks that were all he could do as He was with the hymns, prayers and works of art of his fellow monks.

Fred Stone was on a train dragging its way across the blizzard-swept plains of North Dakota, when he suddenly awoke to the emptiness of his life and came to the conclusion that it could be remedied only by a return to the religion of his boyhood. He craved the consolation the Bible might have given him, but he had none, nor could he find any fellow passenger who had a copy to loan him.

So when he finally reached Billings he hurried straight to a bookstore and asked for the best version of the Holy Scriptures. Another customer who overheard his request said, "There's a sky pilot who may help you find what you want," and pointed across the aisle to where the Rev. Dr. Cameron stood.

The comedian introduced himself, explained how much he needed advice and accepted the clergyman's invitation to have a talk with him. Seated before a blazing fire in the pastoral study, Fred Stone bared his soul as nakedly as

perhaps any pious Christian ever did to a father confessor.

"But why quit the stage?" asked the clergyman when Stone had finished the account of his spiritual awakening and his half-made plans for the future. "Have you never heard the story of the juggler who found his tricks and comical capers highly acceptable in God's sight?"

Stone replied that he never had, and then the clergyman told him that strange old legend which has come down to us from the Middle Ages and has furnished inspiration to so many poets, novelists and artists. It forms the theme of an opera in which Mary Garden and other famous prima donnas have often appeared and our American poet, Edwin Markham, wrote one of his most beautiful poems around this subject.

The opera is called "The Juggler of Notre Dame" and the juggler hero is named Jean. Markham's poem is entitled "The Juggler of Touraine" and the hero is called Barnabas. But the story in all its main details is quite the same in both.

According to the operatic version Jean is a roaming juggler whose travels bring him to a little French village where a Mayday celebration is in progress. He is amusing a group of the villagers with his tricks, dances and ribald songs, when the prior of a neighboring monastery comes along and starts upbraiding him for his folly. The prior urges him to leave his vagabond life and become a monk.

Jean has no intention of doing anything of the kind until he sees Boniface, the monks' plump, well-fed cook, passing with a donkey heavily laden with provisions. The poor juggler is so famished that the sight of these good things to eat makes him suddenly decide to accept the prior's invitation and enter the monastery.

But his life there proves very unhappy. He cannot speak or read Latin, and therefore is unable to take part in the religious services. He knows nothing of painting, and so is barred from helping the monks who are decorating the chapel with pictures of the Blessed Virgin and the saints. His juggling tricks and dances and songs are his only accomplishments, and for these, his fellow monks tell him there is no place in the worship of God.

One day, when he is feeling more unhappy than ever over his inability to do anything for the glory of God, something impels him to steal into the chapel and perform some of his juggling feats in front of the life-size painting of the Blessed Virgin. Some one tells the prior where Jean has gone and he and the other monks quickly follow.

They are filled with indignation to see Jean in that sacred place juggling three balls in the air while he dances to the rhythm of a ribald song he hums. "Sacrilege!" they cry, but before they can lay hands on the impious one and drag him from the chapel they are paralyzed with awe at the change they see coming over the painted figure of the Blessed Virgin.

Her face lights up with the animation of life and her head is inclined toward the juggler. Her hands are lifted and stretched out in the attitude of benediction. At sight of this Jean stops his pranks and falls to his knees in prayer.

"A miracle!" cry the other monks as they kneel beside him.

A brilliant light envelops the figure of the Virgin, angels are seen hovering about her head and celestial voices are heard singing the sweetest melodies ever heard by mortal ears.

The opera ends with Jean dying in the arms of the now forgiving prior and murmuring with his last breath his satisfaction that "now he understands Latin."

This was the story the Billings clergyman told Fred Stone. As he finished it he took down from one of his bookshelves a volume of Markham's poems and read the closing stanza of "The Juggler of Touraine."

"Ah," cries the prior; beating the breast,

"So the lowly deed is a lofty test! And whatever is done from the heart to Him

Is done from the height of the Seraphim."

Fred Stone, deeply impressed with the parallel which the Rev. Dr. Cameron found between his case and that of the legendary juggler of the Middle Ages, decided then that there to remain on the stage and to seek there the opportunity to serve God and his fellow men as he wants to do.

That night, at Fred Stone's earnest request, the clergyman stood in the wings while the comedian went through his performance and won the enthusiastic approval of the audience that crowded the theater.

"But I saw not what the others saw," says the Rev. Dr. Cameron, "I saw an offering made to God—just such an offering as the legend tells us the juggler made in the monastery chapel so long ago."

The following Sunday found Fred Stone in Butte, Mont. He attended service at the Mountain View Methodist church, and before it was over he had publicly declared himself a penitent follower of Christ and promised to give one-tenth of his income to the church.

"My labors in the theater shall be carried on as before," says Fred Stone. "I will give my best, as always, to my audiences, with an

added inspiration, for I shall do all I do for the glory of God.

"If my experience helps others to gain a happier, healthier view of life and if I can in my humble way be the means of advancing the faith I have so sincerely adopted I shall feel that I have been rewarded far beyond my deserts."

Fred Stone's spiritual reawakening stirs unusual interest because of the dramatic circumstances under which it was made and the odd chance that led him to an adviser who was able to supply him with reasons for continuing his stage career. But it should not be thought from this that men and women of profound religious convictions are a great rarity in the theatrical profession.

Every denomination numbers among its members a large number who earn their living on the stage. There is an Actors' Church alliance, with a lengthy membership list of actors and actresses who are actively interested in spreading the cause of religion.

Almost every reader of this page has probably heard of or seen the Brothers Byrne who won such popularity in "Eight Bells" and other spectacles 25 and more years ago.

The eldest of these brothers was always of a strongly religious turn of mind. When death broke up the family combination back in 1902 he retired to a monastery in the south and lived there until his death a few months ago. The bulk of the property that he left was bequeathed to the monastic order.

Many of the most successful ministers were at one time actors. Per-

haps the most conspicuous example of this kind was the Rev. George Horace Lorimer, whose long and distinguished career as a preacher was divided between Immanuel Baptist church in Chicago, and Tremont temple in Boston. He was considered one of the country's greatest pulpit orators.

The Rev. Mr. Lorimer's conversion was quite as remarkable as Fred Stone's recent spiritual reawakening. It occurred in Louisville and the late Henry Waterson once wrote a dramatic account of it.

While waiting one evening at the stage door of a theater where he was playing in a stock company Lorimer became deeply interested in the exhortations of a band of street evangelists. A few days later he threw up his theatrical engagement without any explanation. He gave himself a year's training in mission work, then took up the study of theology, finally entering the church as an ordained Baptist minister.

Fred Stone is 43 years old. He has been amusing the public ever since, as a mere boy, he joined a circus that visited his home town in Kansas.

For several years he and his brother did an acrobatic act in the sawdust ring. Then he went on the stage—first in a stock company, later in a minstrel troupe and finally in musical comedy. It was in the latter field, in partnership with the late Dave Montgomery, that he won great success in such plays as "The Wizard of Oz," "The Red Mill" and "Chin Chin."