

A CLERGYMAN TURNS ACTOR



FREDERICK A. WILMOT

"THE humdrum of parish life bored me stiff."

That is the real why, the real wherefore of the transformation of Frederick A. Wilmot from parson to actor, from "Reverend" to Astrologer Royal to the Empress of China. That is the real reason for his strange change of activity from the Church of the Divine Paternity at Seventy-sixth street and Central Park West to the Century Theatre, New York City.

"Why should I devote my life to becoming a fair preacher when all my inclinations point to my becoming a good actor?"

That is the question he put to himself after a year in the pulpit, and his answer is found in his appearance eight times each week in three roles—gardener, mandarin, interpreter of dreams—in Pierre Loti's great Chinese spectacle.

For two months before he handed his resignation to his pastor, the Rev. Dr. Frank Oliver Hall, last summer, he had the step in mind. He had been in touch with Belasco and Liebler, and when the time came he was simply fortunate in finding a part at once.

Let whosoever will criticize, he is convinced he has made no mistake, sure his field is the drama, not the ministry. He professes no

belief that from behind the footlights he is going to preach to larger congregations; he puts full responsibility upon his own inclinations.

"Making ministerial calls is far more a hardship to me than putting on grease paint and fantastic costumes," he says.

Born in Boston, twenty-five years old, a graduate of Harvard and of Tufts Divinity School, he entered the ministry in response to a "call" that had no deeper foundation than the suggestion of the Rev. S. H. Roblin, in whose church, the Second Universalist of Boston, he had been active in young people's work. He gave it up when sober thought convinced him his real "call" was to the theatre.

"I simply found that acting held more appeal to me, that my leaning was toward the stage rather than the pulpit."

Of his aims, his hopes, he is mum. But perhaps his ambitions may be read between the lines of his establishment at Harvard of an annual prize of \$100 for the best thirty-minute playlet written by a student.

"We have no serious little plays," he explains. "And I myself may find something among the prize offerings that will give me the sort of thing I want."

In his dressing room at the Century, while he made up as a slant-eyed Oriental, he talked of his unusual change of professions.

"Some people like to preach, to give other people advice. I don't. I believe I can do more effective work by delivering my sermons through the emotions. In our Puritanical church the emotions have been too long repressed. If the church would develop the emotional side of its young people by acting its accomplishments would be increasingly greater. For morality comes from the development of the emotions. If the emotions are never developed there can never be proper conception of right and wrong.

"Preaching is work for a man of mature years. It is ridiculous for a young man to be preaching about life when he knows nothing of life. Not that I would disparage the church or the ministry. I attend Dr. Hall's church regularly; I am interested in the work; there is no reason why I could not go back actively to it. Dr. Hall understands and agrees with me that I should have left as I did. He's a brick—one of the finest and squarest men alive. The people at the church have been very kind. And I don't feel a bit the culprit, in spite of what seems a growing conviction, even in the liberal Universalist Church, that all who aren't in the church are damned.

I have been interested in the stage and the drama for years. My mother was on the stage. My college work was all aimed toward the stage. I was in the D. U. theatricals when I was in Harvard. I put on 'Ingomar,' 'The Rivals' and twenty-five or thirty other plays for the church in Boston. Last year in New York I managed a production of 'Burglar's All' for a cafe chantant at the Plaza. I directed two plays for Dr. Hall's church.

"My whole leaning is more toward the stage than the ministry. And if a man is turning out wooden spoons when his bent is toward making shoes the world has lost a good shoemaker, and the sooner the man finds it out the better for him and for the world.

"I was never ordained in the ministry because I always felt there might be some slip-up. But I spent a year in the church, and certainly a man should know what's what in a year.

"The other day I had luncheon with Dr. Steffanson, the Arctic explorer. He studied for the ministry at Harvard. To him I said: 'You and I both entered the ministry. You are a great explorer. I am an actor. If divinity schools can produce good Arctic explorers and good actors they have not lived in vain.'"



Frederick Wilmot as he appears in the character of the Chinese astrologer in Pierre Loti's play, "The Daughter of Heaven."

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