

Magic, Mystery, And Vent

The Story of Magic and Ventriloquism
BY WILBORNE HARRELL

Acknowledgment

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Above is pictured a corner of Vent Haven, Covington, Ky., the home of William S. Berger, president of the International Brotherhood of Ventriloquists; showing a few of the many ventriloquial dummies that have found haven there, some of them the actual dummies once used by famous performers, and on the walls a portion of the many signed photographs of great ventriloquists and magicians. (Photo courtesy of William S. Berger).

"Magic is an art that sometimes instructs, often amuses and always entertains" — WILSON.

Many years ago in the old Bell's Opera House here in Edenton, a small boy sat goggle-eyed and slack-jawed intently watching the magical act of the famous (self-styled) Professor Durno, magician and ventriloquist extraordinary. It was in the early days of Chautauqua and Professor Durno's act was one of the many offerings of music, plays, lectures and variety acts of the week's program.

Professor Durno, with the assistance of a spectator from the audience, had placed a large red cloth over a bird-cage, with the bird inside, then proceeding to grasp the cloth by two of its hanging corners, he jerked the cloth and the bird-cage from the hands of the astonished spectator.

But the bird-cage had vanished. Professor Durno freely displayed both sides of the red cloth, showing that the cloth was empty and the bird-cage had indeed vanished, and smilingly took his bow as the mystified but appreciative audience applauded.

I was that small boy who sat so avidly enthralled by the Professor's magic. It was my initial experience with magic and I was deeply impressed by what I had seen, and I came away from the performance determined that some day I, too, would duplicate the feats of the famous Professor Durno. I never became a magician, but my interest in magic never waned, and many years later after much study and research I acquired a working knowledge of magic and magicians, and learned the secret of Professor Durno's vanishing bird-cage.

Not long after this introduction to the artistry of Professor Durno, I came into the possession of a cheap, paper-bound volume, titled "The Wizard's Manual," which purported to tell all the secrets of magic and initiate one into the mysteries of ventriloquism. Some years and several paper-backed books later I ran across the famous books on magic by Professor Hoffman, the standard works on the subject and required reading for anyone interested in magic. Later I began reading more modern writers, Jean Hugard, Burlington Hull, T. Nelson Downs, Howard Thurston and many others. The magazines and periodicals of magic and magicians were also available to me.

After a bit I accumulated a few magical props and tried my hand as an amateur performer. I seriously contemplated entering the field professionally, but circumstances and conditions, coupled with a stronger urge and a greater interest, sublimated this ambition in other activities.

Yet, after all these years, I am still thrilled by a magical act or a ventriloquial performance. I still keep my hand in with the few remaining

props I still possess, if only for my own amusement, and still read with great interest books and periodicals on magic and its allied subject ventriloquism. And with a nostalgic sense of having missed something deeply satisfying by not venturing along the magic path, I shall become for a moment a magician, and create a vicarious illusion, with words, of magic and ventriloquism.

This, then, is the magic story. Magic has a mythological, a Biblical and an historical background. Mythology tells us that Hecate was a mighty goddess who presided over the magical arts, and that she had power over heaven and earth and sea. She was, therefore, the chief goddess of the practitioner of magic and the black arts. Secular and religious literature is replete with references to wizards and astrologers, soothsayers and magicians. Historians have recorded from the earliest dawn of civilization stories of folk-lore and legend, and the ancients attributed to their oracles and priests and graven gods the dark powers of the supernatural.

But as history and civilization marched on, superstition and credulity gave way to knowledge and enlightenment; religion clarified and explained the supernatural, and the astrologers and fakers and magicians gave way to the now familiar conjurers, prestidigitators, magicians, illusionists, sleight-of-hand artists and performers of feats of legerdemain. Where the deep and dark mysteries of magic were once used to frighten and mystify the minds of men, they are now used to entertain and amuse. The modern magician, however, still attempts to mystify but he claims no supernatural powers. He gives you credit for knowing he is out to trick you, and with his tongue in his cheek he sets about cleverly and adroitly to fool you, and at the same time dares you to catch him at it.

There is a challenge and a thrill in a magical performance; anticipation of the unexpected and the promise of a battle of wits excites us. As D. D. Douglas has written, "Magic is the very oldest form of entertainment known to man... there is a fascination about magic that seems to lure all alike. Its appeal is universal... always man has delved into the Unknown, seeking to penetrate the veil that hides Knowledge from his eyes."

From the witches and sorcerers and magicians of folklore and history, on down to modern times, there has been an imposing array of outstanding performers and personalities. But this piece is concerned principally with those famous figures of the entertainment world who have brought us magic as we know it, with their marvelous feats of mystery, escapes and illusion.

Although the decline of vaudeville and variety almost killed off magic and ventriloquism as a form of entertainment, the talkies, radio and television are reviving them. Night clubs and dinner spots have helped also in this revival, particularly the rejuvenation of ventriloquism, to the point where it rates top billing, above magic, in show business. Therefore the magicians and ventriloquists, with a few outstanding exceptions, mentioned in this story are listed among the greats when the variety act was in its heyday.

To list all the great names of magic would require more space than I command, so I will limit myself to the few performers I consider the greatest: Alexander Hermann, Harry Kellar, Ching Ling Foo, Howard Thurston, Harry Houdini, Dunninger, and the Great Blackstone. The three who are probably best known are Thurston, Houdini and Blackstone.

Howard Thurston, the magician's magician, was considered one of the world's greatest stage illusionists, and the only man who ever mystified the unexcelled Professor Hermann. He was born the son of a minister and ostensibly intended to enter that profession, but the field of magic finally claimed him and he eventually rose to the topmost ranks as an illusionist and magician extraordinary. Professor Hermann's interest in Thurston was an inspiration to him, and gave the rising magician much encouragement

in his career.

A distinguished magician, Harry Kellar's greatest claim to fame lay in his invention and development of "The Levitation of Princess Karnac," a stage illusion in which a woman slowly rises from a prone position and floats in the air, apparently without support. A large hoop is passed completely over her body, indicating the entire absence of wires or props of any kind. After a few minutes of suspension the young lady floats gently down to the couch and the trick is concluded. Few among the devotees of magic who have not seen and puzzled over this illusion, for illusion it is, accomplished by trickery and hocus-pocus.

The Chinese have always been prolific inventors of magic tricks, and Ching Ling Foo was one of the greatest exponents of Chinese magic. He made famous the Chinese Linking Rings, solid metal rings that link and unlink at the will of the performer, the rice bowl trick in which rice changes to water and hundreds of other tricks and effects with flowers, birds and firecrackers, things that are dear to the heart of the Chinese.

The word "houdini" has come to be synonymous with "escape." Harry Houdini gained his greatest fame as an escape artist, extricating himself from supposedly escape-proof prison cells, handcuffs, mail bags, milk cans, trunks, strait jackets and what have you. But what is little known is the fact that Houdini was also an all-round accomplished magician, and gained his first success as such. Harry Houdini's seemingly impossible feats of extrication were accomplished by natural means and they were super—but they were not supernatural. The chief ingredients in his escape acts were tremendous strength, an iron nerve and a great knowledge of all kinds of locks, plus, at times, a little bit of legitimate hocus-pocus and trickery.

Dunninger, equally famous as a magician and illusionist, has in later years achieved his greatest fame as a "mental"ist, a mind reader or telepathist. This particular branch of the magician's art requires a prodigious memory, a mentality peculiarly fitted for the work and the inevitable modicum of hocus-pocus, without which no magical performance would be successful. Nevertheless, among the practitioners of telepathy, some claim a real ability to "read" or anticipate another's thoughts can be achieved. This skill in telepathy is a flair for the work that few possess, but which Dunninger has developed to a high degree of perfection.

The Great Blackstone may be truly characterized as one of the greatest magicians of all times. He appeared for many years in vaudeville under the name of Harry Bouton, and like Thurston quickly became a headline performer. Blackstone's specialty was the presentation of big stage illusions.

Incidentally, Blackstone is the only magician who ever duplicated the famous rope climbing trick of the Hindoo Fakirs; wherein a rope snakes unsupported into the air, and holds there while a small boy climbs to the top disappears in a cloud of smoke, the rope falling limply back to the ground. Blackstone is reported to have performed this trick on a brightly lighted stage and under conditions that were favorably comparable to the original Hindoo performance.

Ventriloquism, like magic, also has its origin rooted in antiquity. The priesthood of ancient lands were masters of the art, and the mysterious "voices" that issued from the many famous oracles were undoubtedly of ventriloquial origin. The gods of ancient Egypt and Greece were notably known for their oracular utterances and these no doubt can be attributed to ventriloquism. Biblical reference is made many times to "voices" that may be traced to the art. However, the wide gap between ancient ventriloquism and modern ventriloquism is so shrouded in obscurity, the transition to today's "voice throwing" cannot be sharply defined, but a few points of interest are outstanding and noteworthy.

Ventriloquism, in the manner we know it today, was first practiced by

Louis Brabant, a valet-de-chambre in the court of Francis I. A Baron de Mengen of Vienna, in the eighteenth century, was believed to be the first to construct and successfully operate a dummy with movable lips, a great stride in the development of ventriloquism in the modern entertainment manner. Valentine Vox, a great English ventriloquist who flourished around the latter part of the nineteenth century is believed to be one of the forerunners of today's vents.

Edgar Bergen and his two famous dummies, Charlie McCarthy and "not so dumb" Mortimer Snerd, is unquestionably the dean of today's ventriloquists, with Paul Winchell and Jerry Mahoney and Knucklehead Smiff following a close second. Following close on their heels (to name a few) are many other famous figures in ventriloquism, the Great Lester, Monsieur Brunard, Richard Haldane, Senor Wences, the Spanish vent, and Max Terhune, of movie fame, with laughable, lovable "Elmer".

There is an interesting parallel that may be noted between Bergen and Winchell. Bergen's young daughter, Candice, or "Candy", and Winchell's daughter, Stephanie, are both accomplished ventriloquists, Candy having already made her debut in radio. But only time will tell if these two talented young vents are to follow in the footsteps of their famous fathers.

The mecca of all ventriloquists is Vent Haven, located in Covington, Kentucky, the capital of the ventriloquial world and the headquarters of the president of the International Brotherhood of Ventriloquists, William Shakespeare Berger.

William S. Berger, son of an old-time Shakespearean actor, author and playwright, with this theatrical background was destined to become tops in some form of entertainment. Today he is at the pinnacle of ventriloquism, one of the world's recognized authorities on the subject, and the custodian of the world's greatest collection of ventiana. Vent Haven, as Berger's beautiful home of gardens and pools and walkways is named, houses his huge ventriloquial collection and it is still growing. Its great guest book is signed by all the world's prominent vents, some names appearing many times.

Vent Haven also contains one of the largest libraries on ventriloquism, each volume indexed and including books in Spanish, Italian, French and German. This exhaustive collection contains many rare volumes, and the library is still growing, as Berger continues to seek out the rare and unusual and out-of-print pamphlets, books and tracts on ventriloquism. Affectionately called the "Rogues' Gallery" is Berger's collection of hundreds of signed photographs of all present day greats in ventriloquism. Outstanding are two huge oil paintings of the Great Lester and Frankie Byron, Jr., and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

Last but not least is Berger's immense collection of ventriloquial figures, or dummies, many of them the actual dummy once used by some of the great masters. Every conceivable type of figure is represented, and it is difficult to walk about Vent Haven without stepping on a dummy.

By the way, a ventriloquist never, never speaks of his stooge as a dummy. He endows the little figure of wood and wires and paint with a definite personality, and thinks of the little fellow as an actual person, as indeed, in the hands of an expert he really becomes. Edgar Bergen once had a complete room, built to scale, outfitted for Charlie McCarthy.

Surprisingly, ventriloquism today has been placed in many instances, upon a higher plane than as a medium of entertainment. Writing in The Saturday Evening Post in a recent article, "The Secrets of the Talking Dummies", Rufus Jarman, speaking of Paul Winchell has this to say: "Himself a victim of infantile paralysis, Winchell has started experiments in a New York hospital teaching ventriloquism to victims of polio who cannot speak because of the weakened

throat muscles. Knowing that ventriloquism, which emphasizes use of the diaphragm, has benefitted certain speech difficulties in the past, a staff of polio specialists is supervising Winchell's experiment in the hope that speech can be restored to some victims."

"Ventriloquism has lately been adapted to other noble purposes. Lt. Lee Estes, of the Kentucky Highway Patrol, an amateur ventriloquist, uses a dummy to teach safety to Kentucky school children. One prominent New York ventriloquist, between professional engagements, gives lessons in citizenship and Americanism, through four dummies, to public-school children. Several Sunday-school teachers use dummies to expound their lessons. Ventriloquism has even invaded the sedate pulpits of England; the Rev. E. P. Schofield, of London, preaches through a dummy.

"Ventriloquist Stanley Burns, a well known entertainer in cabaret circles, took up ventriloquism when he was twelve, as a cure for stammering, and Jimmy Nelson, now twenty-four, had it prescribed ten years ago as a cure for his shyness..."

So, indeed, there is more to vent-

triloquism than meets the eye.

As entertainment and as a hobby ventriloquism is growing in popularity in leaps and bounds, probably topping magic. Kids and grown-ups alike have adopted it as a hobby and the ranks of the professionals are being augmented day by day.

I have experimented with magic and ventriloquism for many years but I still remain an amateur, and although a member of the International Brotherhood of Ventriloquists, I do not presume on that fact as indication of any great ability. I prefer to remain an amateur, and in the mysteries of magic and the wonders of ventriloquism turn back the hands of time in its flight—and live for awhile the wonders and mysteries of boyhood.

CHRISTIAN CHURCH SERVICES
Services at the First Christian Church have been announced as follows by the pastor, the Rev. E. C. Alexander:

Bible School, Sunday morning at 10 o'clock; morning service at 11 o'clock; young people's meeting at 6:30 P. M., evening service at 7:30 o'clock. Wednesday Evening Bible Class meets at 7:30 o'clock. Everybody is welcome to all services.

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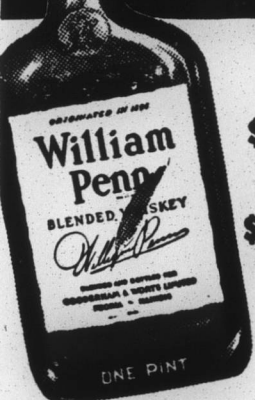
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