

BARGAIN IN BRIMSTONE

FULTON OURSLER

THE young assistant pastor had been warned that his new assignment in the abattoir quarter, "back of the yards," was a nightmare parish. In that region of bull pens, slaughterhouses, and slums there was more sordidness than in all the rest of the town.

One muggy afternoon in deep July he stood on the steps of his church where the mercury neared 100 degrees. His body, swathed in a cassock; winced with prickly heat.

A whiff of cheap perfume preceded the girl who now stood defiantly before him. Framed in frizzled hair tied in pink bows, her face was aged in experience, yet hopelessly young and futile; catlike eyes looked up at him in steadfast contempt. She was weaving and twining her fingers together with a faint jingle of bracelets and there flashed through his mind the lines of Elinor Wylie:

"I am, being woman, hard beset;

I live by squeezing from a stone

The little nourishment I get."

Then he heard her husky whisper:

"Relax, big boy. I didn't come here on religious business!"

"Then what are you here for?" the priest asked.

"To kill time," she replied with a bumptious giggle.

"But why?"

"Oh, I just promised my old lady I would come to church, that's all. She's waiting down the street. I only want to stay about five minutes, to let her think I'm going to confession."

The priest mopped his dripping forehead cleared his throat cautiously, and began:

"Listen, child—"

"Call me Aggie. That's my name. Aggie Retzinek."

"I am not asking your name," he said, "but I will tell you it's Russian—Agafia. It came from a Greek word and do you know what it means? It means 'good'."

"That's a joke on you, big boy. Let me tell you something—I'm the worst girl in this town."

"Oh no, you're not! I know the worst girl."

"And who is she?"

"She's the one who thinks she is the best girl in town." There was remote banter in his tone. "You know, I might make your confession for you."

"Listen, big boy—I just got out of the State Reformatory for girls. Reformatory!"

She spewed out the word, disgorging with it a torrent of brothel profanity. The young priest knew that her language was only a projection of her own inner self-contempt, and therefore there was hope for her.

"I fell for your holy stuff at first," she went on. "All I cared about was getting out of there. So I went to chapel and I prayed to God. But He must have been too busy for the likes of me."

"Perhaps He said no."

"Have it any way you want. I didn't go free, that's all. So then—"

"Go on!"

"All right. You asked for it. I prayed to the devil!"

The priest's face blanched. Here was an unfamiliar transgression indeed; faith turned wickedly upside down!

"But the devil," he prodded quietly, "doesn't he always ask a price?"

"Why shouldn't he? Don't you? I promised him, if he would only get me out of that place, I would make nine sacrilegious communions. I did, too. I took communion and I cursed God! Plenty! And you know what? After the eighth time I got paroled. So now, big boy—what do you say to that?"

In three universities, the priest had worked for scholarly degrees. He was a well-educated, even a sophisticated man. Yet at this atrocious disclosure he felt as if in the bodiless presence of Evil itself. Tremulous, quavering, he heard himself answering:

"I say he got a good bargain, that's what I say! This devil you prayed to, he gives you what you call freedom and in exchange he gets an immortal soul. But—"

"Don't get yourself so worked up, big boy."

"You're cheating the devil—and I thank God for it. There's still time."

"Look here, I never broke a bargain with anybody! Never!"

"Your soul is not lost, not yet."

"How dare you say such a thing to me?" she cried in a sudden, tearful rage.

"Why did you come to this church? To please your mother! That means your mother is still dear to you—and don't you see?—no one who loves can be hopelessly lost. Give me five minutes—and all this can be blotted out like a bad dream."

She shuddered pitifully, as if she were contorted by some violent emotion; her breath came in gasps and her cheap bracelets jangled.

"That's enough!" she panted. "I'm leaving. You can't do nothing to me!"

"Stay here and pray," pleaded the priest.

She turned away.

"You'll come back!" he cried. "Tonight!"

The only answer was the click-clack of high heels down the marble steps into the street.

As the priest entered the church to perform his duties as confessor, he told himself that this trollop child must not be lost! The sticky reek of her scent seemed to plague the air, and he could still hear her strumpet laughter. When he entered the confessional, it seemed to him as if the tiny, sweltering box contained all there was of heaven, earth, the bottomless pit, everywhere, and the struggle of good and evil dumped on his lap.

The thing had happened. It was truly believed she had signed up in sulphur and brimstone — and not a fantasy. Aggie Retzinek who was he to underestimate the force of such a belief? He prayed for guidance.

The answer had-been clear from the first. The only way to fight was with the weapons of the soul,

love and prayer. He turned to listen to the confessions, to anxiety, loneliness, and distress. All the penitents were given their penances, and then, to one after another, he said:

"I ask you now to help me to pray for a special need. Will you stay for one hour in the church and pray?"

None refused. One man postponed a journey to join in; others broke off appointments; some volunteered to stay all afternoon.

When afternoon and evening confessions were over, the last shafts of twilight slanted through the open door and the tall colored windows of rainbow saints and tinted miracles. Kneeling before the altar, he laid his hot palms on the firm coolness of the marble balustrade. From the street came the distant calls of late hucksters crying strawberries and watermelons, as he began the first "Our Father."

Hour after hour dragged by. Night came late, with the glimmer of flickering candle flames and the ringing of the tower bells. The street noises dimmed and soon the church was abandoned of all except the enrapt friend of Agatha Retzinek. Once there clanged out the siren and the rumble of hook-and-ladders rolling to a fire, but the kneeling figure did not seem to hear. He was still keeping solitary vigil

when at 11 o'clock the sexton shuffled in to put out the lights and close the doors.

"Never mind!" called the priest. "I'll lock up," and bowed his head again in his bivouac of prayer.

It was long after midnight when he heard the *click-clack* of heels coming down the marble aisle. Hope surged in his soul—and then a whiff of perfume made him gasp with joyous certainty. He did not move or look around as she knelt beside him, but he

heard her begin to weep.

"If I had not waited for her," the priest told me, "she would have turned away, perhaps never to come back. Agatha is a steadfast, happy woman today."

I have told this story to men of many faiths and their feelings were all summed up in what Harry Emerson Fosdick said:

"I salute this priest—he is a real servant of Christ, this Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen!"



HARD WORKER

There was a man so charitable in speech that a friend once said: "I think you would speak well even* of the devil!"

"Well," replied the charitable one, "He's not as good as he might be, but he certainly is industrious."

THE FIRST PROM.

Father Lord says he was typing and meant to write: "So Christ drove the devils into swine." Instead he wrote: "So Christ drove the devils into swing." He thinks this savors of inspiration.