

FATHER JUCUNDUS MEETS A DEVIL

HAD anyone roused Father Jucundus and asked him what he was doing, the answer would have been that he was praying. It was after the evening meal, his first community exercise since his return from a tour of spectacular preaching, that too travel-weary to stay more than a few minutes in the oratory, he had sought his cell for final prayer and then repose. His gift of lively imagination, he thought, would help his prayer. So with no curb to his fancifulness, he roamed through the courts of Heaven meeting an occasional saint although the night was well advanced. He took care to comport himself properly in the presence of one, and said all the right things to another. There really was something of the actor in his gate-crashing mode of entry into the celestial realms.

Then quite suddenly he seemed to leave Heaven behind. The atmosphere became oppressive, and he, hot and sickly. He did not like the change at all, and was on the point of taking a good look around, when his attention was held by a curious figure that plumped himself down in front of him, apparently from nowhere.

What he saw was a very old man with all the signs of youthful vitality. The head was remarkably large, the sort of head so often rightly judged to be the envelope for more than normal intelligence.

There was an expression of amused enjoyment on the cunning old face that went with the wise old head.

In somewhat unprofessional language Fr. Jucundus asked 'Who the devil are you?' And the answer came, 'I am your own familiar little devil.'

'The devil you are!' said Father Jucundus.

'Yeh!' said the devil, showing that he had been to the 'talkies.'

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'Oh YEH!' said Father Jucundus, showing thereby that he had been to the talkies too.

'YEH!' the devil replied with movietone insistence.

Father Jucundus was not the man to be browbeaten like this, so he went on in his experienced chatty vein:

'My dear Sir, I almost believe you've been in New York. Now don't deny it. You have, haven't you? Now what brought you over here, old fellow? Oh I say, I'm extremely sorry that I can't offer you a drink.'

'Boy,' said the devil, 'cut that right out. Have I been to the United States of America? Yes Siree, I have. A nice little job of work I had there, too. Some location! I had to keep pace with a Prohibitionist Boss; Atta boy! No cinch about that job, believe me!'

'Yes, my dear old devil,' Father Jucundus could not help interrupting, 'but what are you doing here? This is England, you know, or was a short time ago, before it became Heaven and now whatever it is.'

'Well,' the devil resumed in English, 'this is the way it is. You see I was rather a success in the States, and the head of my department thought I deserved an easier billet, so for the last six months I've been with you—nothing more than keeping an eye upon you up to the present. Of course I've been your reverence's companion when you preached. Seeing that we share an enjoyment of your sermons, you and I, don't you think we really ought to know each other better?' And he gave a devilish dry little laugh. At the conclusion of this friendly explanation, the wicked old face on the grand old head was disfigured by a smile of welcoming invitation.

Fr. Jucundus saw the smile that was as a façade to the massive head. A man versed in every social trick, he could not help smiling himself. But, as sometimes happens to the most accomplished conversation-

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alist, he quite missed the point. He who would wrestle with the evil one must needs be sure-footed. The sensation of wrestling was an illusion and Fr. Jucundus for once was not sure-footed. His reply was sublime :

‘ I am happy, my poor devil, that you liked my little sermons, but I fear they cannot really do you any good.’

At this the devil was very pleased with Father Jucundus. And Father Jucundus grew more and more pleased with the devil. He felt that he could talk with the devil. The devil was such a discerning, such an understanding fellow. So Father Jucundus talked on. At last even the devil could endure it no longer, and with inimitable social grace he gave a comprehensive smile, almost a grin, and said that it seemed a shame to part, but he must be going. Father Jucundus had still many things to say, and afraid of losing his audience, was about to offer his company, when the devil forestalled him :

‘ Look here, Father dear, I have a number of friends who would put you quite at your ease. They would, I know, give much to hear your theories, your experiences, the things that have made you so successful and so popular. You should really come with me without saying a word. No, not a word, Father Jucundus, not a word ! You must reserve your strength for these friends of mine. You will be able to give your exquisite discourses in their hearing. Poor fellows, they are all rather bad cases. Still, old man, it will be an experience for you, and you may find that you have something in common with them. Who knows ! ’

All was going well for the devil, but it fell out that he smiled. He could not help it, but the smile lost itself in shriek after shriek of diabolical laughter. With Father Jucundus a sense of humour was accidental rather than essential, but as sometimes happens he was to be saved by his limitations. The devil’s laugh-