

By RAY KERRISON



It was 2 a.m. when the phone rang. Father Charles Clark, a Jesuit priest of St. Louis, Mo., struggled out of bed, pulled on a robe, and strode to the phone.

"This is Father Clark," he said sleepily.

"Jim here, Father," came a young voice. "Me and a buddy, Randy, have got a supermarket all set up.

We're going to 'hit' it tomorrow. If we score, we're in the chips. Pray for us, Father."

"This is a big job, Jim," replied the priest in alarm. "Who's this guy Randy? Is he any good? Is he jumpy with a gun?"

"No, Father," said Jim, uncertainly. "We've cased the place and got it all figured out."

"Has Randy done any 'jobs' before? Has he pushed over a gas station? Supermarkets are a lot tougher than gas stations. You'd better bring him over to see me."

An hour later, two young pistol-toting kids walked into Father Clark's office.

"I don't know you, son," Father Clark told Randy. "Done any jobs before?"

Randy swung on his pal. "Are we going to stand here all night listenin' to this guy yack?"

Jim smashed a fist into Randy's mouth. "Nobody talks to Father Clark like that," he yelled.

The 58-year-old priest jumped between the youths. "Step outside, Jim," he said. "I want to talk to Randy."

He sized up the lad quickly. Then he spoke.

"You'll never make a gunman. I can tell that by your fingers. They're too small."

Then, abruptly, the priest asked, "Where does your mother live?"

"My father shot her," mumbled Randy in tears.

"I'll get you a job, son. And a good place to live."

Soon, Jim and Randy had abandoned their plans for the stick-up. They went out into the night and have not been in trouble since.

Father Clark went back to bed. It was all part of the day's—and night's—work.

FOR 25 YEARS, the lean, strawberry-haired priest has made the cruel underworld his parish. His flock is made up of murderers, arsonists, hijackers, forgers, and burglars.

From Alcatraz to Sing Sing and all the prisons in between, he is known to thousands inside and outside the law as the hoodlums' priest.

Fired by a consuming compassion for criminals and a matching horror of crime, he has dedicated his life to helping lawbreakers. He has saved 10 men from the gas chamber and has sponsored more than 2,000 convicts for parole. He has found jobs and homes for hundreds of hardened thugs once bankrupt of hope. Scores have been saved from imprisonment by his intercession.

Father Clark, wired in on the underworld grapevine, is one of the best-informed men in the "business." He has long lost count of the number of wrongdoers who have surrendered to him.

Those steered to security and peace by the priest come close to worshipping him.

One convict, released last year after 18 years in the penitentiary for armed robbery, declared earnestly, "I would willingly die for Father Clark. And I know a hundred more who would, too."

His success in rehabilitating ex-convicts is impressive. Of the thousands helped by his unfailing kindness, an astonishing 98 percent have since maintained an unblemished record!

AJUDGE once told the priest: "Sometimes I hate you—and sometimes I love you."

Sitting in his study one night, the priest heard over the radio that two men had been slain in a hotel holdup. The culprits had been caught.

Father Clark rushed to the jail where he found a snarling, blood-smeared hood named Sammy in a cell. He knew him slightly.

The precocious son of a lawyer and an actress, Sammy had been adopted by a woman incapable of managing him. At 17, he had been put away for two years for a \$19 robbery. Now he was arrested for murder.

Policemen could not get near Sammy in the cell. When they approached, he pulled a razor blade as though from thin air and slashed viciously at them.

Father Clark went inside Sammy's cell. "What's wrong, Sammy?" he asked. Within a minute, the young hoodlum began sobbing, then he collapsed.

For the murder trial, Sammy had a battery of six of the best lawyers in St. Louis, recruited by Father Clark. But he was found guilty and sentenced to death. His partner got 10 years.

For Father Clark, the fight had just begun. He and the lawyers, who offered their services free, worked doggedly to save Sammy.

For two-and-a-half years, they shuttled to and from the State Supreme Court, presenting briefs and motions. Finally, the court ruled that Sammy had been tried for the murder of two hotel employees. (You can only face one murder charge at a time.) It granted a new trial.

At this, Sammy pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment. He owes his life to Father Clark.

One of the priest's most sensational cases involved a nurse, whom we will call Jean. Father Clark knew her as a respectable, hard-working woman. He also knew her husband as a brute who drank heavily and often beat her.

After one spree, Jean's husband came home swinging. For self-defense, she grabbed a carving knife and, in the scuffle, plunged the knife into her husband's back.

In court, a friend tipped off Father Clark that Jean, in the judge's chamber with her lawyer, was ready to plead guilty in exchange for having the charge reduced from first-degree to second-degree murder. The priest sprang to his feet and burst into the chamber.

"Jean," he pleaded, "don't plead guilty. When all the evidence comes out, no jury in the land could possibly convict you."

She looked helplessly at her lawyer and the judge. They told her to ignore the priest. Following

their counsel, she would get 10 years. Following the priest's, she would risk her life.

Jean decided to follow Father Clark's advice. After the trial, the jury didn't even bother to take a vote. Its verdict of acquittal was unanimous.

Profoundly grateful, Jean threw her arms around the priest and cried, "I love you." Then she dashed to the nearest beauty parlor where she had her hair dyed red—the color of Father Clark's.

The Jesuit priest confesses to one bad mistake. One night he sat in a drugstore, chatting with the owner, when a youth walked in.

"One glance was enough to see he was going to stick up the store," recalled the priest. "You can always tell when a hood is on a job. He's jumpy and his skin turns greenish-white. This kid also had a hand in his pocket, obviously on a gun."

Father Clark said to him, "Look son, forget about this job. This man has done a lot for guys like you."

Then, jokingly, he added, "If you want to stick up something, try the bar down the road."

Inside a half-hour, the priest heard the wail of police sirens. "That darn kid took me at my word," he said. "Sure enough, he held up the bar!"

Since most consider an alias almost as important as a gun, Father Clark took one himself—Dismas. St. Dismas was one of the thieves who died on Calvary alongside Christ.

"To hoodlums, Dismas is the best con in history," says Father Clark. "He stuck by Christ when He was in trouble."

"So when people sometimes dismiss a certain hood as hopeless, I point out that a thief was the only one ever canonized personally by our Lord. It is a great consolation to hoodlums that they will one day be judged by such a compassionate God."

FATHER CLARK began his mission to criminals before World War II. The youngest of 13 children of an Illinois coal miner, he was, he says, headed for the penitentiary himself.

"I was a wild kid," he said. "The cops in Decatur spent half their time chasing me, and hardly a day passed that I wasn't mixed up in a brawl or rolling dice."

But at 17 he met a Jesuit priest.

"He changed my life. He was devoted to people. He liked me and took an interest in me. We wrote to each other. By his example, I decided to become a Jesuit, too."

Judge David Fitzgibbon, a prominent St. Louis jurist, one day invited Father Clark to visit his court. From there he visited jails and took cigarettes to inmates. He interviewed their families and helped arrange paroles.

After the war, the priest studied criminology and dedicated his life to helping criminals. Operating virtually from a phone booth, he launched the work that was to take him to prisons in every state in the country.

Last October, with Judge Fitzgibbon and Morris A. Shenker, an Orthodox Jew and one of the nation's leading criminal lawyers, Father Clark opened a "halfway house" to help cons make the transition from prison to freedom.

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