

MR. BROWN'S CONVERSION

And other True Tales about Our Lady's Intercession

BY A PARISH PRIEST

IT WAS PRETTY and devotional, that little church, the house of God in my first parish. When I stood at the desk (which served as a pulpit), before reading the notices on Sunday, I had only to glance round the small congregation for a few seconds, to know who was present and who was absent. When my eye caught a stranger, I would make a mental note that I must find out whether he or she was a new-comer to the parish, or only a passing visitor. Easy enough to do after evening service, when I could get to the door of the church before most of the congregation had gone out, but an impossibility after Mass, when the prie-dieu was waiting for me to make my thanksgiving.

I noticed the two ladies at Mass four or five Sundays, but as they did not come in the evenings I could not introduce myself to them. It was Chris, my thurifer (who was also a delivery boy for a local grocer), who told me that two Catholic ladies had come to live at one of the new houses at the top of Oak Road. He described which house it was; so early that week I made my way to Oak Road to pay my respects to my new parishioners.

Mrs. Brown (whom I may call Olivia) gave me a very kind welcome. After showing me round her pretty house, she took me into a charming garden, where she spoke of roses, and showed me more varieties than I ever dreamt existed. Returning to the house, she began to tell me all about herself; for although she was about thirty-five years of age, she had a sweet simplicity about her, and a child-like confidence in talking to a priest. The other lady who came with her to Mass, she said, was her step-sister Freda, still in her twenties, for whom she had a deep affection. She kept the sad note till the end. Her husband, she told me, was one of the best men in the world, kind and thoughtful towards her and towards her step-sister, a successful man of business, and fond of the world. But there was one subject which irritated him beyond measure—religion. He had never been baptized, had never attended any place of worship, and had a strong dislike for all ministers of religion. He had been in a Catholic church once—to marry her; he would drive her and her step-sister to Mass on Sundays; but nothing would induce him to come inside the church; he would go for a run in the car, and return to the church gate in time to pick them up after the service.

It was the fact that he had never been baptized at all that particularly distressed Olivia. "Do you think there is any hope for a man like that?", she asked me. I told her to pray, and to have great confidence that her prayer would one day be answered. "Think of St Monica," I said, "who prayed and prayed year after year for her son Augustine, until he became, not merely a Christian, but a great saint." Olivia smiled sweetly but incredulously, and said, "yes, Father, but, you see, I am not a saint; far from it." She was, however, a most devout Catholic, as I learnt during the few years of our acquaintanceship.

About three months later, when visiting that part of the parish, I made my second call at the house in Oak Road. It was evening, and Mr. Brown had returned from his business in town. Olivia took me into the drawing-room, and introduced me to her step-sister, Freda, and to Mr. Brown. He received me with cold civility. They were playing cards. "I suppose you do not hold with this kind of amusement," he said to me. "Far from it," I replied; "It is some time since I played cards, and I am not a good player; so I don't want to spoil your game; but if you like to tell me how to play, I will join in." He seemed rather surprised; and was still more so when, after about an hour, I had quite a little sum to my credit! Mr. Brown then said that he was feeling dry, and could do with a little refreshment. "You don't object to seeing me have a drink, do you?" he asked me; and when I said, "Not in the least; and if you have a glass of beer for me, I will be grateful," he opened his eyes in astonishment, but went out to get me a glass. Then we chatted for a short time, until I said good night.

A few days later I met Olivia. With eyes beaming with delight, she told me that her husband had now quite a different opinion about priests—"never knew they were so human and cheerful."

Some months elapsed, and although I saw Olivia and Freda regularly at Mass, I had little chance of speaking to them. Then one morning, after breakfast, Ella, my capable housekeeper, told me that Mrs. Brown was waiting to see me in the reception-room. I found Olivia out of breath and excited. She told me that her husband had been in bed for some time, suffering from ulcers on the feet, near the toes. Gangrene had set in on two toes of one foot, and specialists

had advised that that foot (and probably the other) should be amputated. She added that her husband, a heavily built man, found the pain so intolerable that he spent day and night moaning, and, sometimes shouting. She said that she was worn out attending to him; he wanted only herself, and would not consent to engaging a nurse. "Last night," she said, "I felt I could bear it no longer. As if in desperation of natural remedies, I said that we had tried everything, and nothing seemed to do any good. So I flung myself down by the side of the bed, saying, 'Only God can help us; we can only rely on Him.' After praying on my knees for a few minutes, I got up. My husband was much calmer. 'Funny,' he said, 'but while you were praying, the pain seemed to ease off.' I did not dare to reply, for I knew that if I said anything about religion he might go off into a temper. But, this morning, when I was tidying his bed, I ventured to remark: 'So there is something in prayer, after all. You remember what you said last night?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'I have been thinking over things during the night and I want you to do something for me.' 'What is that?' I asked. 'I want you,' he said, 'to go to the presbytery and ask Father to come and see me.' I dared not question him, Father; but I have simply come to tell you what has happened. That's all, Father."

Naturally, I was at the house that morning. I found Mr. Brown in bed, looking very miserable and glum. "Well, old man," I said, "what's wrong with you?" "Ulcers near the toes, and gangrene," he replied, adding, "They're talking about taking my feet off." "Never mind," I said; "we will have to try some Lourdes water." "Some what?" he asked, evidently under the impression that I was referring to some special lotion. "Lourdes water," I repeated. "Never heard of it?" "No," he replied. "Well," said I, "you're doing nothing in bed. I will go down to the presbytery and send you up one or two books about Lourdes. Read them. Tomorrow I will call and see you again, and bring some Lourdes water with me."

When I went, the next day, I found Mr. Brown most interested in Lourdes. It was the first time he had heard about the famous shrine; and, although he was somewhat sceptical about the cures, he thought it was all very wonderful. Then I produced a little bottle of Lourdes water, telling him that I was going to ask his wife to put a few drops on his feet and on the bandages when the ulcers were being dressed.

When I called the next day, Olivia met me with a smile of delight. The Lourdes water had been used the previous evening, and that morning when the bandages were removed, it was found that the ulcers had disappeared. The doctor had called in, and he was absolutely astonished and mystified. I went upstairs. "Well, old man?" I said to Mr. Brown. He replied: "Father, I want to become a Catholic." Olivia's prayers had been answered.

I gave him a course of instructions. As he had never been baptized, I told him that he was under no obligation to go to confession, at his reception into the Church. He made his profession of faith, and I baptized him; then I strongly urged him to go to confession and Holy Communion at least once a month.

Olivia was somewhat anxious. "Father," she said, "somehow or other I can never see my husband going into the confessional." "Once you thought he would never become a Catholic;" I rejoined. "Keep up your prayers, and trust in the grace of God." Actually Mr. Brown never missed his monthly confession and Communion; and when I saw him regularly at Mass on Sundays, reading his prayer-book with rapt attention and devotion, I was much edified. This man of big physique, a prosperous man of business, had become childlike. His first care was to order a specially made statue of Our Lady of Lourdes to be brought to his home, to keep him in mind of the great debt of gratitude he owed to the Virgin Mother of Christ. He gave me a generous donation towards the building of a new church, which the parish needed; his wife and her step-sister gave a similar sum as a thank-offering. He made a will, leaving his shares in his business to his wife, then, in the event of her death, to Freda, after whose death the money was to be devoted to the building of a church in honour of Our Lady of Lourdes. (They had no children, to their great grief.)

He did not live many years after his conversion. He was fond of fishing; and one November day, when the air was damp and foggy, and he had already contracted a cold, he went off to enjoy his favourite sport, in spite of his wife's advice that he ought to stay indoors. He contracted pneumonia. I administered the last sacraments, and he died on the day before Christmas Eve. May he rest in peace.

I called on Christmas night to comfort Olivia and Freda. They told me that when he was being laid out, they noticed how perfect were his feet and toes; there was not the slightest trace even of a scar where once there had been ugly ulcers and gangrene threatening to deprive him of his feet. Olivia's grief was softened by the thought that during his last years her husband, once a pagan, had led the life of an exemplary Catholic, and had died a holy death.

The year following we went to Lourdes, to thank Our Lady for her kindness in performing the miracle. In the autumn of the same year I had to leave my beloved parish for work elsewhere.

Less than two years later, one beautiful day in July, I received an urgent letter from Olivia, begging me to come and see her that very day, if possible. She received me at the door with her kind smile. I thought she was looking well, but rather thinner. She took me into the garden. The roses were in full bloom, and filled the air with a fragrance that was exhilarating. Then she turned to me and said: "Father, I know you will think that I am stupid, when I tell you why I sent for you. Please do not laugh at me; but for days I have thought that my husband was calling for me. I have tried and tried to banish the idea as a delusion, but it keeps coming back. I felt I must tell somebody, and that is why I sent for you." I asked her whether she was feeling ill. "No," she answered, but with some hesitation. (Later I heard from Freda, that she was not well at the time.) "Perhaps you need a holiday," I suggested. "Well, as a matter of fact," she replied, "I am going off to the South Coast tomorrow with a friend of Freda's, and Freda is joining us after a week. That is why I asked you to come today. But this is only our usual summer holiday."

I told her not to be a little silly person; to rid herself of senseless ideas; to have a good fortnight's holiday, and come back with a clear mind.

The holiday had only lasted two days when Freda received a telegram telling her that Olivia was ill. She was taken to a nursing home, and an operation was advised. This took place at four o'clock in the afternoon on the Saturday, but it was unsuccessful. She knew that she was dying. "My husband is calling me, and I am going," she said. She was quite happy and contented. A priest was called in to administer the last sacraments. At ten o'clock Olivia was dead.

It was only after we had laid her to rest that we discovered that the prosperous business that her husband had built up was going to ruin. Had she lived much longer she would have found herself a penniless woman. God had called her at the right time. May she rest in peace.

THREE HAIL MARYS

SHE WAS INDEED a most devoted sister to him; although, I am sorry to say, her devotion to the Church could have been more fervent. She was often tempted by difficulties against the Faith, and, instead of dispelling them by prayer, she would try to work them out in a mind ill-equipped with theological learning. This, however, has little to do with the story.

Her brother (about thirty years of age) was stricken with tuberculosis. For months he had been at a sanatorium; but he had begged and pleaded so earnestly to her to take him out (he was a man who had had his own way in most things) that she had eventually consented. But there was the great problem of her earning enough salary to keep both of them, and to provide the little luxuries that he so often fancied. She rented an old-fashioned four-roomed cottage. She worked hard from morning till evening, but was able to pop into the cottage at dinner time to prepare a little nourishment for the invalid. But he was very lonely.

It was then that she came to see me. "Father," she said, "you know that my brother is not a Catholic; indeed, he does not believe in God at all. But he does find the days so long. I wonder whether you would be so good as to call in now and again, and have a little chat with him; although I think you would be wasting your time if you talked to him about religion."

"Very well," I replied. "I think I could fit in a visit once a week or a fortnight."

So I took to calling at the cottage. We spoke about a number of ordinary subjects—the weather, what was in the newspaper, his state of health, and so on. After some weeks he surprised me one day by asking me whether I had any books to lend him on religion. As we had never once discussed the question, I was delighted, and I promised that I would bring a few books with me next week.

This I did; but beyond describing the books to him, I did not talk about religion.

About a month later, he handed me back the books at the end of one of our chats. They had taught him, he said, to believe in God; and he could now see that suffering was not useless, but could have great value. He added, however, that that was as far as he was prepared to go; he had learnt to admire the Catholic Church through reading the books, but he could never become a Catholic. He objected especially to confession.

We left the matter at that, except that I got him to promise me that he would begin to pray to God.

Weeks passed by. Each time I visited him I said a few prayers with him at the end of our conversation. I could see that he was rapidly getting worse in health; his cough, especially, was distressing. Then one day, as I was leaving the presbytery to go to the cottage, my conscience became uneasy. Here was I, I thought, a Catholic priest, visiting a man whose life was quickly drawing to its close, a man who had never been baptized. Was I doing my duty of saving souls? Ought I not to try to get him to make an act of faith? Should I speak to him about Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church, and to make him desire baptism? Or would he think that I wanted to force him to become a Catholic; which might make him obstinate, and turn him even against saying the few prayers with me? I was perplexed and could not make up my mind. Then I decided to say three Hail Marys, and leave the matter entirely to Our Lady, trusting that she would guide me to do the right thing.

The cottage was some distance from the presbytery. On the way I was met by various persons, and my mind was taken up by one thought after another, with the result that when I got to the man's bedside, I had completely forgotten the three Hail Marys. We discussed the usual topics, and I remember that we chatted longer than usual. I looked at my watch, which told me that if I didn't hurry up I should be very late for lunch. (I was usually late!) So I knelt down to say the prayers and then hastened to depart. I had my hand on the handle of the bedroom door when he called me back. "Father," he said, "I want to become a Catholic." I expressed my delight; but said that, as I was already late, I would come again tomorrow to talk over the matter. "Tomorrow may be too late," he replied. "I want to become a Catholic now." "But," I said, "that is impossible. I will have to give you a course of instructions, and then ask the bishop's permission to receive you. It is a long business." "But I know all I need to know, from those books you gave me to read," he insisted. "Well, anyhow," I replied, "I cannot discuss it now; I have an important engagement after lunch, and so I must be off." "All right, Father," he said; "but remember that if I have a hemorrhage tonight, and die, I asked you to baptize me, and you refused. I hope the thought won't worry you for the rest of your life! Goodbye, Father."

I looked at the thin and pinched face on the pillow, and the appealing eyes. I simply could not make up my mind. Then, as if impelled by sudden decision, I took the water bottle from the table beside the bed, got a towel, made him say the Our Father and Apostles' Creed with me, and then baptized him. I told him that as baptism took away all sins, he was under no obligation to make a confession; but he insisted, declaring that he wanted to make a general confession of his whole life.

It was only when I was nearly at the presbytery, on my way home, that I remembered the three Hail Marys that I had said on setting out from my house that morning. Our Lady had saved another soul.

I gave the sick man a few instructions, during the next week, on the Blessed Sacrament. Then he received Viaticum with great devotion. He died about ten days later; and the last word I heard him utter was the holy name of Jesus. May he rest in peace.

THE NEW PRESBYTERY

LOOKING BACK, I hardly know how Father Charles ever lived in that presbytery, if, indeed, one can dignify the hovel by giving it that name. It was a four-roomed building. The front apartment served as a sacristy, confessional, priest's study, dining-room and reception-room. On either side of the fireplace, in recesses, were old-fashioned cupboards; these contained the vestments and all the "treasures" and plate of the church; and, on the top of one of them, the vestments were laid out for Mass. In the fireplace itself, a wheezy little gas-fire chortled a spluttering tune, proud as Punch, both of its long years of service and of the honour of warming a priest's room. Not much light came through the little panes of the worn-out old window; dusty and dirty ivy leaves poked their fingers towards the room, as if in derision at its meanness. The old iron knocker on the door had, I think, stood the strain of long years better than anything else inside or outside the dwelling.

The other room downstairs was the housekeeper's sanctum. Here Nellie kept all her pots and pans, crockery and linen; here she cooked all the meals, here she washed the clothes. Here, when all was done at close of day, she would draw her rickety chair close to the fire, putting her feet on the tattered hearth-rug to protect them from the cold that danced up from the well-worn and red flagstones of the kitchen floor, while she set about darning Father's socks, sewing buttons on garments, until yawning sent her to bed.

One crouched as one went up the squeaky stairs, for fear of knocking one's head against the ceiling. When Father Charles first moved in, and was showing me round his abode, I peeped into the housekeeper's bedroom at the top of the stairs, and noticed how the roof slanted down, until the ceiling threatened to find its support on the pillow. A tiny window jutted out into the slates, as if straining its neck to get a breath of fresh air outside the stuffy house. Inside the priest's bedroom, a chest of drawers, a washing-table, a chair, and the bed itself, jostled one another in order to allow enough space for his reverence to get in and out of his bed. The boards of the floor creaked in their rheumatically joints. Long, long ago they had passed their age of threescore and ten, so their painful groans were easily excused.

Yet happy were the years that Father Charles spent in that house. Like many another priest, he got so used to his surroundings that, in time, he scarcely noticed them. Besides, it was his first parish; indeed, he was the first resident priest there; and he had plenty of parochial work to do to take his mind off domestic inconveniences. Awkward situations would, however, arise, as, for example, when a parishioner called for an urgent and confidential piece of advice while Father was having a meal with a fellow-priest in the one room downstairs. Either the guest had to leave the table, and go out into the yard, there to kick his heels until the talk was over, or Father had to leave his guest at table and take the caller into the yard! Also the place was frightfully damp; and, try as one would not to see them, ugly patches on the distempered walls spelt out bronchitis, arthritis, sciatica, lumbago, and pneumonia, warning the resident, with an ugly grin, that he stayed in that house at his peril.

It was after a cup of tea, one day, that Father Charles told me the good news that the house standing by itself, round the corner, was going to be sold. It would make an ideal presbytery; it even boasted of a bathroom! The owner was quite willing to allow Father to buy the property. Everything seemed rosy. But then came the "snag." For reasons into which I need not enter, the house was useless as a presbytery unless a strip of land which lay between it and the old presbytery could also be purchased. His Lordship the bishop, after duly considering the matter, wisely decided that the purchase of the house was out of the question until this strip was secured. But the owner of this piece of land was adamant, bigoted, and obstinate. Every reasonable offer that Father made to him was rejected with scorn; he simply did not want to sell, and would not. After repeated failures Father Charles was downcast, coming to the conclusion that all hope must be abandoned of acquiring a new home.

We were walking by the side of the hedge that separated the road from the defiant strip of land. Father Charles was usually of such a bright and cheerful disposition that it hurt me to see him downcast. Then I thought of a tiny statue of Our Lady that I had carried about in my coat pocket for many a day. I did not like the thought of parting with it, for I was much attached to it; but, on sudden impulse, I brought it out of my pocket, said a little prayer, and tossed it over the hedge into the field. "Cheer up," I said. "You will get the land all right, Charles."

I do not really know how it happened (I think the owner's wife had something to do with it), but some days later the strip of land was Father's. "Our Lady has got him to sign on the dotted line," said Father to me in triumph.

About a month later, Father Charles was removing his bits of furniture from his old house to the new presbytery. His eyes were beaming with delight; so, methinks were the eyes of the Mother of priests, in heaven.

THE SOILED PICTURE .

PATCHES OF GREASY MUD, huddled together on the bluish- black bricks that formed the street pavement, looked like masses of thin jellyfish washed up upon a derelict jetty when the light of the few street lamps cast a glare upon them. Dismal houses of be-sooted brick reared themselves up from the inner edge of the pavement. Some of them put their feet out—one or two stone steps—to trip up the incautious wayfarer, as if to brighten the gloomy surroundings by a silly joke. But the houses in some of the streets boasted "front gardens," four feet width of soil, whose flowers were bits of dirty paper, a few brick-ends, and broken pieces of roof slating, amongst which stunted growths of evergreens struggled manfully to get enough light and air to keep leaf and stem together.

Such was a district—by the canal—in my second parish. I wondered how I would ever get used to it! It was November when I set out on my first round of visiting. The weather was wet and foggy; it was a year of trade depression; men and youths slouched about the streets or sat listlessly at home, ninety-five per cent of them only too eager to get off the dole, and ready to do any kind of work; but, alas! it was not forthcoming: Rotting humanity. And when we look back on those years, and realize at what little cost those men might have been given employment,

thereby perhaps preventing a war that is now costing more per day than all of them would have required in a whole month, during which they would have done most useful work and kept their homes in decency and comfort, we cannot but deplore the short-sightedness of the rulers of our country in those stupid days.

I really thought that I would never get used to the squalid and sordid surroundings. Sunday alone brought me any cheer; for the church was a fine building, the congregation was large and devout; and a former priest had taught the choir and servers to assist at the sacred functions with exact decorum. Little did I think then that when the ecclesiastical authorities would remove me to another parish, six years later, I should leave those people with sobbing in my throat. For they had really golden hearts. I grew to love them with an affection that I can only compare with that expressed by St Paul in some of his epistles. Good, kindly, homely, generous, loyal and active people. God bless them! They gave me their hearts, and I gave them mine!

But let us get back to the early days. I soon found that most front doors, in that particular district, were merely ornamental—unless the house was a back-to-back construction. Entrance was by the rear. The uninitiated who knocked at the front door was usually regarded as a nobody, not worth bothering about. If, like the man in the Gospel, he wearied the inmates by his persistent knocking, a voice from within might call out shrilly: "Who's there?" A caller of little account would be bidden: "Go round the back." On my first tour of that district I was a greenhorn in making my entrée into family circles, and would keep knocking at the front doors. When, however, I replied from without, "It is the priest," there would follow a movement of household furniture, a pushing back of bolts (even a loosing of chains at times), and a turning of keys, as if I was about to be admitted to an inspection of the crown jewels. But I soon learnt the etiquette of "going round the back," of keeping my head low to avoid the asperges of garments on the clothes-line, and of dodging mangles, pails, and other utensils for which accommodation could not be found within the walls of the dwellings.

Brick Lane was across the canal bridge, in the least respectable part of the district. Tales were told of earlier days when no policeman would venture down the Lane except in company with another member of the Force. Things were better in my days, probably because, as one old cheerful parishioner said to me: "They don't know how to make beer, these days, Father. I remember the old days when beer was beer!" Yet I did not feel particularly happy as I walked down the Lane to find the addresses of three Catholic families that lived there. Surly looks came my way from women at doorways; while men and youths, leaning up against window-sills, scowled at me with a questioning, what-are-you-doing-down-here attitude.

Needless to say, all three Catholic families had lapsed from the practice of religion. At one house was a man living with a woman who was not his wife; at another no one had been to church for years; and at the third was a hard-faced widow, who kept me at the door and was loath to tell me a single thing about herself. A sardonic grin was the only answer I could get to my enquiry as to whether she ever came to church. I left Brick Lane feeling that only a miracle could make these people return to the sacraments.

Late one night, two days before the first Christmas I spent in that parish, a Protestant woman called at the presbytery and left a message that the widow in Brick Lane was "very bad" and "wanted Father to call." There was a thick fog outside, and it was bitterly cold besides. I was feeling particularly tired; and the last place in the world I would have chosen to go to that night was the district over the canal bridge. However, there was nothing for it. I got out the holy oils and my sick-call case, buttoned my coat tightly under my chin, and set out alone—the Protestant woman had disappeared.

When I got to 33 Brick Lane the door was ajar. I knocked; and after a "Who's there?" the widow herself came shuffling through the room to the door. "Come in, Father," she muttered. I followed her in, saying to myself that there was nothing wrong with the old hag at all. (I was glad I had not brought the Blessed Sacrament with me.) "But I thought I should find you in bed—ill—dying," I stammered out. "What do you mean by bringing me out, all this way, on a night like this?" I asked, as the blood began to boil in my veins "I've had nothing from Albert [her ne'er-do-well son] for the last fortnight," she said, adding: "I've only got my pension. What sort of a Christmas do you think we'm goin' to have on that, Father?" "But why did you send that woman with a message that you were very ill?" I asked, my temper getting the better of me. "Well, you might not have come all this way, otherwise," she naively replied.

Indignantly I brought some silver out of my pocket and flung it down on the table. "You'm a fine gentleman, Father," she said with a grin.

I could make no further comment; words simply would not come. I picked up my hat from the table, and was going to leave, without saying "Good night," when my eyes fell on a dirty soiled picture of Our Lady, half hidden behind a motley collection of odds and ends on a shelf, in a corner of the room. The picture seemed to wink at me! Of course, it didn't do so; it was pure imagination on my part. But somehow or other, Our Lady seemed to be enjoying the joke! Certainly I had a kind of assurance that Our Lady would look after the old hag, and that all would be well with her soul at the end.

I went out into the fog and the cold, and trudged back to the presbytery with heavy feet, a lighter purse, but a much lighter heart. "All would be well at the end."

A few years later, my duties included an occasional visit to the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor, those angels on earth who look after those old people whom nobody else in the world wants to look after. There, to my surprise, I found the old widow from Brick Lane. How she had got there, goodness only knows. I spoke to the good Mother about her, and learnt that she had been to Holy Communion (possibly her first), and was very happy in the Home, saying her prayers and eagerly learning her forgotten religion.

She was not there for long. She fell ill; received the Last Sacraments with devotion, and died in St Joseph's Home.

The dirty picture had told me right; all was well with her soul at the end! May she rest in peace.

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