

THE REWARD

Alone! This was the foremost thought in the mind of Father Curran as he sat in his study smoking. The pastor, Father Brown, had gone on the noon train to the episcopal city and would be detained there for a few days. The responsibility of a parish had never before rested on the shoulders of Father Curran, for he had not come to St. Peter's until September, and this was his first assignment. Tonight he was alone for the first time since leaving the Seminary and he felt his loneliness intensely. The quaint old house seemed deathly still; and, without the silence was still more oppressive.

Reading had always been a pleasure to Father Curran, but not now. He laid his book aside, went to the window and looked out into the night. Once more he sat down and took up his theology, but for some reason it had no charm for him. Again he laid it aside and returned to the window, asking himself the while: "What is the matter with me tonight?" But the answer would not come. It seemed that prayer would be his consolation. So he wended his way to the chapel and knelt in the dusk before the Blessed Sacrament; but the same queer feeling came over him—something must be wrong! He had great difficulty in saying his beads. Once more he tried to recollect himself and make a short meditation, but all in vain. Kneeling before the throne of his Eucharistic King, he made his good-night visit and returned to the house. By this time he was thoroughly unsettled by the premonition that something must be wrong.

It was nearing midnight when he went to his room to retire, but sleep would not come. He lay awake listening to the rain which had begun some time before to pour down from a black sky. He tried to pray, but to no avail. While lying there, the door-bell rang. He sprang to his feet and dressed rapidly, saying to himself that this was what was bothering him. Making his way to the door, he found there a child who, though in tatters, still had the face of an angel. In a sweet voice the little one told him that an old woman living on the "Old Vineyard Road" was dying and that he had been sent to escort a priest to her dwelling. Taking the boy's hand Father Curran led the way into the room and placed a chair for him before the fire, while he went to the church to get the Blessed Sacrament and holy oils. Returning

bearing his precious Burden, he was soon on his way, accompanied by the child, who when he had fulfilled his mission disappeared into the night.

The home of the sufferer was a poor thatched cottage, clearly bespeaking poverty. The priest on entering found an old woman lying in a corner on a bed. Her countenance brightened when she beheld him, and she cried out in a weak, trembling voice: "Oh, Father, I knew you would come! I knew Mary would bring you to me. Her beads have been my constant companion for many years now, Father, and I knew she would not leave me desolate in my last hour. When I was making my first Holy Communion a holy priest gave me this rosary, and, oh, Father, it has been such a consolation to me! In joy and sorrow, in sickness and health, I have carried Mary's beads. When this holy man of God gave me these beads he said: 'Mary, be ever constant in your devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, and especially to her Rosary. If you are faithful, you can rest assured she will never forget you.' It is now sixty years, Father since I received this rosary, and I have recited it every day. Mary has been true to her promise. She did not forget me in my great need. She sent you to me."

As she was gradually losing strength, when she had finished her confession in her sweet Spanish tongue,—for she hailed from the land of the Cid,—the young priest told her that he would anoint her and give her Holy Viaticum. She heard his words with joy, and when she had received her Eucharistic Lord a brightness truly supernatural lighted up her countenance.

After the saintly woman had made a short thanksgiving, Father Curran, seeing that she wanted to say something more, drew near. She told him that she was a widow, and that her four children had all died in infancy. She had been living in this far-away country five years. Clustered together around the church in a small town were several of her own nationality. Aided by these people she had obtained employment in a factory, working there for three years. While there she fell a victim of the dread white plague and was ordered to the country where she could get plenty of fresh air. The little money she had managed to save was soon exhausted, but she met a kind woman who volunteered to care for her. This apparently good Samaritan, being a Protestant, absolutely refused to grant her charge the supreme favor of a priest's ministrations.

As the sick woman was growing weaker, Father Curran advised her not to exert herself, but only pray. Morning dawned as he was preparing to leave. On his way out he met the woman who was caring for the sufferer. Seeing the priest, she instinctively drew back as though afraid—perhaps through the fear of priests which had been instilled into her when a child, by benighted parents. Recovering her self-possession, she asked him if he were a Catholic priest, and who had brought him there.

Father Curran answered both questions: "I am a Catholic priest, and a child in tatters directed me to Mrs. Avilla's bedside."

"Oh! I am glad you came, Father, though I would not send for you; it surely must have been Mary who sent the child to you, for Mrs. Avilla always said that Mary would never let her die without the ministration of a priest."

They bade each other good morning, the Father promising her that he would return later in the day. All the way home the priest thought of this strange case, thanking God again and again that he had been the instrument chosen to bring heavenly consolation to that yearning soul.

After a little rest he said his Mass, and when his thanksgiving had been made, he prepared to return to the sick woman. On his arrival he was met by the woman who had nursed her. She announced that Mrs. Avilla had died shortly after his departure, and that the last words on her lips were, "Mary, sweet Mother!" As the good priest was about to depart, after remaining a few minutes to breathe a prayer for the soul of the departed, the nurse of this faithful client of Mary said to him:

"Father, it really must be a great consolation to die in your faith. I admired Mrs. Avilla's great devotion to Mary, her patron. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to be advised about that religion which can give such comfort to its dying."

A day was arranged when she might come to see the priest at the rectory. She returned again and again, and finally asked admission to the Church. With unspeakable joy she made her first Holy Communion and received the sacrament of Confirmation; and today she is enjoying all the consolations of Holy Mother Church. Through her prayers to Mary and devotion to the Rosary, which her ward bequeathed her as an inheritance, she has been instrumental in working the conversion of her husband and four grown sons.

—Stanislaus McDermott, O. P.