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Foreword

IN 1979, THE Salesians in Italy published 'a new biography' of Saint John Bosco by Father Teresio Bosco, SDB, possibly the best of the many such books published on the Saint in the hundred years since his death in January 1888.

The official MEMORIE BIOGRAFICHE of his life consist of twenty large volumes, of which the twentieth contains only the index to the others in 600 pages! No wonder Father Teresio laments having to squeeze his entire work into some 450 pages!

The present modest little work squeezes the life of this remarkable Saint into little more than a third of Father Teresio's and is meant as an introduction to 'Don Bosco' for those who may not have met him before. But in the hundred years since his death there have obviously been new insights, new angles on his life and times, new stories from those who lived and worked with him, for instance, a mature woman, born blind and cured as a child by Our Lady at the intercession of Don Bosco, comes back to tell us, thirty years after his death, that her sight is still perfect. I am quite confident that even those who already love Don Bosco will find much that is new in this little book.

On the occasion of the centenary of the Saint's death, I decided to produce a short work based very loosely on Father Teresio's book. It is by no means a straight resumé: some chapters come directly from the MEMORIE, others embody articles I had written for the SALESIAN BULLETIN over many years. But nevertheless, I freely acknowledge my debt to Father Teresio perhaps especially with regard to the complicated politics of 19th century Italy. Of Father Teresio's considerable detail, given for Italians, I have used only the minimal background essential to the framework of Don Bosco's life; but thanks largely to Don Teresio, one can vouch for its accuracy. Should there be faults, they must be entirely mine.

After all this, the least I can do is to dedicate this little book to Father Teresio Bosco and with him to a dear friend and colleague of his and mine, Father Martin McPake, until his recent death the Regional Superior of world-wide English speaking Salesians, two great sons of Don Bosco who so truly reflect his spirit, his charisms, his love for mankind and especially for the youth of that mankind in all its needs and problems.

W. R. Ainsworth, SDB

Chapter One

TURKEYS

JOHNNY AND JOE were feeling important. Mother had given them the job of watching the turkeys, seeing that they didn't stray and that no-one picked one up. Johnny was five and Joe all of seven. They looked with suspicion at the tall man who smiled at them across the hedge. He came in as he spoke. "Couple of good lads you two, doing a job for your Mum, eh? You want to look out for thieves. But I'm not a thief. I want to buy one of your turkeys and I'll give you a good price for it, too. Five whole soldi! How's that, eh?"

To little country boys who rarely ever saw any money, let alone five whole soldi, this was riches indeed. The man solemnly counted out the money, popped the heaviest turkey in his bag and made off. The two heroes abandoned the rest of them and rushed off to the farmhouse, "Mamma, Mamma, we've sold a turkey and got a jolly good price for it, too! Five soldi". Poor Mamma. "But look, Mamma, five whole soldi!" "Oh you silly boys! Our turkeys are worth four and a half lire each in the market!" (A lira was worth twenty soldi.) "That man was a thief!"

Young Johnny Bosco took that lesson hard. It was some time later when he was by himself watching the turkeys that he noticed a man strolling through the field somewhat away from him. He counted the birds, once, twice, yes, there was one missing! He rushed out into the lane after the man, shouting,

"Hey, mister! You've taken one of our turkeys!"

"Taken one of your turkeys? Well, well, what a little joker we have here! If I've taken one of your turkeys, where is it? I'm a clever man I know, but even I can't put a big turkey up my sleeve!" and he opened his arms wide.

"I don't care, you've taken one and I want it back! If you don't give it to me, I'll run after you wherever you go, all day if you like, and I'll yell, 'Thief, thief!' and I'll never stop!" Which he proceeded to do until at last the man, to shut him up said it was all a little joke he was playing on him and showed him where he had hidden the bird in a bag under a hedge. He would, of course, have come back after dark to retrieve it.

Johnny told the proud tale to his mother but she was not too happy about it. "That man could have beaten you and hurt you. I'd sooner have let the turkey go." But Johnny felt better now about losing the first one. He was David against the giant Goliath his mother had told him about and he had won and he wasn't going to be afraid ever as long as he was in the right. As long as he felt he was in the right, he would face any odds. All his life, he would. And did.

TRAGEDY, FAMILY AND NATIONAL

Chapter Two

THE ODDS AGAINST John (Giovanni) Bosco started from his infancy. His father, Francesco, widowed with one son, Anthony, married Margaret Occhiena to whom were born two sons, Joseph (Giuseppe) in 1813, John on August 16th, 1815. He was a small farmer, who, when possible, would help a neighbour, to earn a few extra lire for the family budget. Tragically he caught a chill when he was only thirty-three and died of pneumonia. His mother was already living with them so Margaret had to cope alone with five mouths to feed. She was twenty-nine but had no thought of remarriage. She could be said to be illiterate but had the wisdom of grace and experience; she was strong, energetic and eminently practical, the acknowledged mistress at the Becchi, the Bosco farm area.

John was two when his father died but remembered clearly the hard winter that followed, in 1817. No doubt his mother had later filled in the details. The autumn crops had everywhere failed, famine threatened, and even the stocks built up by thrifty small farmers finally disappeared. Margaret, in a crisis, gave what money she had to a neighbour to buy food at any price; he came back empty-handed and wide-eyed with fear for his own family. Margaret showed her mettle. "We have not eaten this day and eat we must. Come and help me kill the last calf." It represented their last available capital. No matter; they killed it and she gave a substantial portion to the neighbour for his own family. The family ate that night. With the utmost care they survived, even scouring the fields and woods for edible wild plants. The depredations of marauding armies had sharpened the knowledge of these things among the peasantry over generations.

National Tragedy

John was born in the year of Napoleon's final defeat: 1815, but his tyrannical shadow had darkened the sunny Italian skies for a long decade of years, at least for the womenfolk. For the men, perhaps, it was different. The French military genius had swept all Italy into his net and such was the glory of his triumphant 'revolutionary' army that tens of thousands of Italians

obeyed willingly his call to arms under the imperial colours. But 20,000 had not returned from Spain and Portugal against Wellington; and 25,000 more perished in the bitter cold of the 1812 retreat from Moscow. Thousands more crept back, crippled and maimed, to their mothers, their wives and children, to their grieving womenfolk who were constrained to sing every Sunday at Mass, "Domine, salvum fac imperatorem nostrum Napoleonem," God save our Emperor Napoleon!

The Emperor had made all Italy one. The subsequent Council of Vienna of 1815 ended that. Italy was again divided into eight slices like a pie; all the kinglets returned, each independent, as did the Papal States, resuming their independence under the Pope. Italy, as a nation, became once again 'a geographical expression'. But the revolutionary virus had taken deep root. All these petty kingdoms, with their separate tariffs and passports, were an affliction upon the people who had recently been one nation, even under a tyrant. For the next fifty years John Bosco lived in an atmosphere of constant political disorder. One by one the kinglets disappeared until at last the Papal States alone stood against the cry of 'one land, one nation, one people'. In 1870, they too succumbed, a tale we shall in due course unfold.

Chapter Three

THE FIRST DREAM

BY THE TIME he was nine, young Johnny was already doing his share of the multiple jobs of the farm, such as hoeing and weeding, watching the stock as, of course, he had been doing as a small child. But John's mother would see that he had his time for play. His strength and inventive mind made him something of a leader even at that age; sometimes, of course, he would be challenged and would come home with a black eye and bleeding nose. "I don't like you playing with those rough boys," Margaret objected as she patched him up. "You should keep away."

"But, Mamma we're not fighting all the time and anyway, when I'm with them, we don't have those bad words you don't let us say, because I won't have them either."

One night, asleep on his straw mattress in the attic, he dreamt he was with a crowd of boys who began to fight and use foul language. John yelled at them to no avail and finally waded in with fists flying. Let him tell the story himself.

"At that moment, I heard someone speaking to me. 'You won't win these boys over with your fists, John. Only with gentleness will they respond. You must learn to help them to see how ugly sin is and how precious is virtue.' At once there was silence and all the boys gathered round the speaker. I saw a man, of noble appearance, whose presence overawed me, but I faced up to him and said, 'Who are you to tell me to do these impossible things?'

"They seem impossible to you now but with obedience and knowledge they won't be."

'And how am I to get this knowledge?'

'I shall give you a Mistress who will teach you.'

'But sir, who are you?'

'I am the son of her whom your mother has taught you to salute three times a day. Ask my Mother for my name.'

'Then I saw at his side a Lady of majestic appearance whose dress shone like the sun. She beckoned me to come nearer and took my hand.'

'Look,' she said. I looked and saw all the boys had turned into animals, goats, dogs, cats, sheep, bears and others.

'Here is your field of work. Make yourself humble, strong, and robust. And what in a moment you will see happen to these animals, you will do for my children' and then I saw all the animals become lambs, playing and frolicking around the Lady and the Man. But it was all too much for me and I began to cry. The Lady put her hand kindly on my head and said, 'At the right time, you will understand'. Then there was a noise and I woke up. In the morning I told my brothers and they burst out laughing. 'Perhaps you'll become a shepherd,' said Joseph. 'More likely a robber chief!' thought Anthony. Mamma said quietly, 'Perhaps it means you might be a priest one day.' But Grandmother said, 'You shouldn't take any notice of dreams at all'. That settled it and I agreed with her but I couldn't get that dream out of my mind."

Margaret, like another mother, kept these things in her heart and there is no doubt that in that heart a seed was sown.

In 1822, the Piedmont government announced a programme of free, compulsory elementary education for all. It took time to implement and in country areas was no more than basic. Shortly after the dream, the nine year old John was able to go to the village school in the November of 1824. The course was to give the three R's, adding a fourth one, religion. It lasted for the farmers' boys through what they called the 'dead season,' when nothing much could be done in the fields. On March 31st it ended and John came away. But he had learned to read and from then on books became a passion for him, especially during the dark nights.

Margaret had never been to school at all but she had a retentive memory and used the long winter nights to give to the three boys the catechism as she had learnt it by heart at Sunday school. She taught them their prayers, the three times a day Angelus, the rosary, she explained the great feasts of the Church and the seasons, the Ten Commandments and those of the Church, as far as they were able to understand. The Sunday Masses and sermons added to their knowledge and she would question them on what they had heard and understood. There was grace before and after every meal and family prayers at night. The boys made their first confessions long before they were admitted to Holy Communion; on Saturdays she would go with them, make her own confession and after they had made theirs, help them with their thanksgiving. The usual age for first Communion was twelve but when Margaret took John to the curate when he was eleven, the priest was satisfied that he knew his catechism and accordingly admitted him to receive the sacrament.

Chapter Four

THE WORST WINTER

THE JOY OF John's first Holy Communion flowed over into an awareness of the abiding presence of God and the budding of an apostolate. John had unusual physical strength and an equally unusual memory; he was also sharp-eyed, patient and tenacious. Work there was aplenty for an eleven year old but there were the Sundays and the holy days of obligation free except for Mass and the feeding of animals. John built up on his gifts of leadership by embarking on a scheme of entertainment, for young and old. Entertainments were few indeed in the rural areas and were usually confined to individual conjurers and jugglers who would attract curious crowds in village squares. John watched them with intense concentration and then went home to experiment. In later years he marvelled himself at his success. "By the time I was eleven I could perform any trick of conjuring or juggling that I had ever seen; at the cost of many a fall and many a bruise, I could even walk the tightrope on my mother's clothesline."

The locals flocked to the Becchi for the free Sunday evening show. Free in money but there was an obligation. Halfway through the performance John would stop the show. "Now, we'll have a break; we'll say a decade of the rosary or the litany of Our Lady" if it was one of her feasts. Sometimes with complete assurance, John would go through the morning's sermon, "in case some of you weren't there or went to sleep". Not all welcomed this interlude and would move off. "All right, you can go; but don't you come back for the second half!"

Margaret would watch him now and then in wonder. One day she turned to a neighbour, "What do you think of my boy? What do you think he will become?" "I don't know but he'll certainly be up to some devilment somewhere!" It was said with a smile but nevertheless there was a shade of fear as these highly superstitious country folk watched the conjuring tricks they could not understand. Occasionally, John could see his brother Anthony standing at the back and heard his remark. "Oh, yes, quite the little entertainer, enjoying himself while the rest of us break our bones with work."

Anthony was becoming a problem. That year, the grandmother, his father's mother, died and he felt increasingly isolated. He incessantly grumbled to Margaret that the heaviest burden of the work fell upon him while John, in particular, got all the attention. She would reply patiently that both John and Joseph did their full share of the work of the farm and only at night did John turn to his books. Books were rare in any farmhouse but he had been able to borrow a couple. Unhappily the very sight of a book served to infuriate Anthony.

"What do we want books for? They don't make you strong for work. I'm as strong as anyone and I've never bothered with books!"

John would answer back. "Oh yes, our old donkey is as strong as you and it can't read either!" Sometimes he managed to get out of range but sometimes he could not and had to cry himself to sleep with swollen eyes and bruised cheeks. In tears, too, was Margaret lying awake in her lonely bed. The winter passed in misery, the 'worst winter of my life' as John later described it. On a bitter February day, matters came to a head.

Anthony came in from the yard and found John reading at the kitchen table. He snatched the book from him and pitched it into the fire. John raced to rescue it before much damage had been done. But this was the end.

Anthony stormed at them. "I'll not have anyone reading when I come in; from now on I am going to throw every book I see into the fire; and that's final!"

Nothing Margaret could say made any difference. She went up to John's room with him.

"We can't carry on like this, son. I'm sorry but there is only one thing to do. Tomorrow you must leave home."

Chapter Five

BREAD, WORK AND PEACE

"BUT MAMMA! OH Mamma! Leave home? Where can I go?"

"I'll pack you up something in the morning and you can follow the road to Moncucco. There are several farms on that road who know me. One of them might give you a job for a while. Then if you go through the village there are cousins of ours, the Moglias. If you haven't got in anywhere, go to them. Ask for Signor Luigi." And in the morning she made up a pack of the few clothes the boy possessed, his precious couple of books, some bread. There was snow on the road and a heavy mist as she gave him a final hug and sent him off, watching him and waving to him until she could no longer see him in the frosty haze. She went back to her kitchen, grieving and praying with all the mothers of the world who have had to send their sons away, to work or to war.

The boy trudged away with death in his heart, a shocked, bewildered lad still six months from his twelfth birthday.

At each of the farms his mother mentioned he was turned away. It was still the 'dead season' and there was no work for anyone. So, in the late afternoon, his bread and his hopes all gone, he asked the way to the Moglia farm. As he turned in at the gate an old man was about to bar it.

"What are you looking for, boy?"

"Work."

"Good. Work away. Goodbye," and he lifted the heavy bar again.

"But I must see Signor Luigi."

The Moglia family were in the portico, working on something for the vineyard.

"I'm looking for Signor Luigi."

"You are speaking to him."

"My mother sent me. She told me to come to you to ask for a job as a stable boy."

"But surely she hasn't sent a little fellow like you away from home? Who is your mother?"

"Margaret Bosco. My brother Anthony beats me so mother told me to

come to you to ask for a job."

"But, my poor boy, it's winter. We don't take anybody until the end of March. Listen, son, the best thing you can do is to have patience and go back home."

All John's courage and vaunted bravado vanished; like any other cold, frightened, exhausted child, he burst into tears.

"Please, please, let me come. I can't go back, I can't! I'll work for nothing, as long as you like, if you'll only let me stay!"

Luigi's wife, Dorothy, herself only twenty-five, tried to comfort him.

"Take him, Luigi, just to try him out for a few days."

Teresa, who was fifteen and Luigi's little sister, also felt sorry for him.

"Look, Luigi, I'm old enough to work with you in the fields now. The boy could easily do my job in the stable."

So it was done. John began work as a stable boy in February 1827 and remained with the Moglias for nearly three years, beyond all his hopes.

They were well-to-do farmers, even though the whole family worked from dawn to dusk. They were also a model family in other ways. Every night there were family prayers and soon John was asked to take his turn in leading the rosary. On Sundays Luigi drove the whole family to the 'grand Mass' in Moncucco, at which in those days the entire village was present.

It was not long before Luigi remarked to his wife, "You know, Dorothy, we did no bad thing in giving that lad a job; he's a grand little worker!"

Shortly after his arrival, John asked, at the Saturday evening supper, for permission to go to Moncucco early the following morning. This happened each Saturday. Dorothy, who felt that she was in his mother's place, was curious to know what he was doing. She got up with the dawn one Sunday and from the house of a friend in Moncucco saw John arrive and go into the church. She followed him in, saw him go to confession and receive Holy Communion at the Mass, the 'low Mass'. In those somewhat Jansenistic days it was rare for anyone to go to weekly communion and it was not distributed at all at the 'high Mass'. Dorothy met John on the way out and they walked back together for breakfast after which John as always went with the family to the principal Mass. Dorothy said to him, "In future, John, you can go to the early Mass whenever you want and there's no need to ask permission".

She gave him a small but pleasant room to himself; in every way, he was far better off than he had been at home. He used to read by candlelight at night and no-one objected. He would go to confession to Don Cottino, the parish priest, to whom he confided his strong desire to become a priest and

all the difficulties that seemed to make that impossible. The priest encouraged him to keep up his courage and his prayers, have patience and trust God to make His will known. Now and again he would give him some help with basic Latin and lend him a few books.

His friendship with the parish priest led him to friendship with the village children. On Sunday afternoons, and on the major feast days, he would gather them together in the school, make them laugh with his tricks, read them Old Testament stories, lead them in simple prayers. When the hard winter weather made it impossible to go to Moncucco, some children from nearby farms would make their way to the Moglias and he would collect them together in the barn, play with them and give them catechism lessons. It was the germ of his future 'festive oratory'.

He was happy at the Moglias, regretting only the passing of years, leaving him no further in essential studies. Yet they were not wasted years. His farm work, often allowing him to work alone, helped him to keep in the presence of God, to deepen his awareness of God and to learn the essentials of contemplation, possibly without being aware of it. There is no doubt that the peaceful years on the Moglia farm were fruitful for his spiritual life and progress.

His absence from his mother was a constant pain for Margaret. In November 1829, she could stand it no longer. Anthony was now twenty-one and thinking of getting married. Somehow John must be allowed to study. She asked her brother, his Uncle Michael, to see John and bring him home. John said an emotional farewell to his friends whom he remembered all his life with gratitude and deep affection. There was tension when he arrived at the Becchi but not war. As long as Anthony was assured that he would not have to contribute to his brother's studies, he was satisfied. The question now was how to start the studies, and where; John was now fourteen and really too big for primary education. A quite unforeseen happening seemed to present a perfect solution.

Chapter Six

IN THE CANONRY

IN THAT YEAR of 1829, a venerable old priest, Don Giovanni Calosso, took over the nearby parish of Murialdo, having in view of his failing health relinquished a much larger parish some distance away. In the November of John's return from the Moglias, there was a mission in another local parish which John attended. On the way back, walking alone, he overtook the old priest making his slow way home.

"Ah, young man, where have you been?"

"I've been to the mission, Father."

"So have I, my son; but surely you wouldn't have understood much of that sermon with all its Latin quotations?"

"Oh," replied John, "I think I managed fairly well to understand it all."

"All? Look, I'll give you four soldi if you can tell me four words of it!"

"Certainly, Father," and John proceeded to go through the entire sermon as they walked along, to the stupefaction of Don Calosso. He wanted to know John's name, heard of his hopes for the priesthood, his frustrations and problems. Before they parted, he asked John to tell his mother that he would like to see her. She went up the next day.

"Look, Signora, your son has a prodigious memory and simply must be helped with his studies. If you'll let him come to me, I'll do all I can to help him."

It was arranged that John would go over to him for Latin lessons every day, returning home to sleep. In times of urgent work on the farm, he would take his share but otherwise his time was spent in the company of Don Calosso in the canonry. It was a wonderful year of progress in every way. They would go through the scriptures and John was encouraged to make a simple meditation each day. In the September of 1830, he moved over entirely to the canonry, repaying the old priest with whatever services he could perform.

"I loved him as a father," wrote John later, "I opened my heart to him and let him guide me in all I did. He returned my affection and gave me as much time as he could spare in correcting my work and instructing me in the spiritual life." It was a time of the greatest consolation to both John and

In the Canonry

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Margaret, for more than once Don Calosso declared that as long as he lived he would see John right through his studies for the priesthood, and if he died, well, he had thought of that, too. It all seemed too good to last.

Just a year after that fortuitous meeting, in November, John happened to be at home when an urgent message sent him flying back to Murialdo. He found Don Calosso collapsed in a chair, unable to speak, suffering from a severe stroke. He managed to indicate to John where the key of his bureau was and by signs to show that whatever was in it, was for him, for his studies. Shortly afterwards, to John's inconsolable grief, he died. The bureau contained some 6,000 lire, not a fortune but quite ample to finance all John's studies right up to the priesthood.

However, when the family arrived for the funeral and enquired about what Don Calosso had left, John simply handed them the key of the bureau. They were well aware of the old priest's intentions and invited John to take whatever he needed of the money. But he felt he could not and returned to the Becchi. With Don Calosso's death had died all his hopes, and now, at fifteen, he had no teacher, no money and no plans for the future.

Musical Tailor

John, however, had still to learn that God has plans. To clear the way, Margaret decided that the little family patrimony be divided according to the law, Anthony taking his share on the occasion of his marriage and be thus independent of the family. Margaret and Joseph ran their part of the farm and took on other work, while she decided that John should attend the local school at Castelnuovo d'Asi, a small town some five kilometres away, where a Latin class had been added to the school course. Uncle Michael fixed up a 'semipension' with a Signor Roberto; John could sleep there and would receive 'soup' for lunch and supper, while Margaret would provide bread and pay the modest pension, usually in kind, from the produce of the farm.

The school soon turned out to be a waste of time as well as an embarrassment for John. At fifteen he had to sit with boys of ten or eleven who laughed at him as 'the big country yokel with clothes stolen from a scarecrow.' A weak teacher, trying to curry favour with the class he could not control, joined in the derision, refused to correct John's work as beneath his dignity and made it impossible for him to make any progress. Poor John. After the bliss of the canonry and Don Calosso, it was a 'via crucis,' indeed. Given a chance he could have exercised all his old mastery with these boys but no chance was ever given. Margaret decided that he should leave and prepare

to go to the secondary school in the provincial town of Chieri, for the school year of 1831. Meanwhile, he had to get through this year. There were compensations.

Signor Roberto was the town's leading tailor and in the long evenings John was eager to help; he soon picked up the essentials and indeed made such good progress that Signor Roberto offered him a permanent job. But the good tailor was also the leading musician and parish organist and again John responded with enthusiasm to his invitation to pick up music. He was soon showing promise on the Signor's spinet and on the church organ; later he acquired a fiddle and could produce a tolerable tune on that.

That was not all. When he left school and during the wait for the move to Chieri, John, with the agreement of his mother, got a job for some hours each day with the local blacksmith. Quite apart from the forge he learnt to use simple engineering tools. With his eye on the priesthood, he probably thought that all these extraneous activities were just a waste of time. In fact, he was laying foundations. Everything he learnt at Castelnuovo d'Asti was to prove of inestimable value to him in later years his music, his tailoring, the use of the tools at the blacksmith's. And just about that time, he had that dream again; the noble Lady, the quarrelling boys who turned into lambs, under his care.

Chapter Seven

GREEN YEARS AT CHERI

CHIERI WAS, AND still is, a pleasant, busy town about eight miles from Turin, the capital city of Piedmont. When John Bosco arrived there, in the St. Martin's summer of November 1831, it held about 9,000 inhabitants, the majority of them getting their living as silk and cotton weavers in one of the thirty establishments of the town; it was also a 'city of convents, monasteries and students'. In addition to the schools, many religious orders, the Dominicans, Redemptorists, Jesuits and Franciscans also had their seminaries there for their own clerical students.

John wrote, "I was boarding in the house of Lucia Matta, a widow with one only son, who had moved there to look after him as he attended school". Margaret arrived just after John, bringing with her on a neighbour's cart two bags of grain, as part payment of the 'pension'. "I'll do all I can to keep up the payments, in cash or in kind, and my son will play his part, you may be sure."

At school, John was again somewhat of a 'pillar' among the younger boys, but he found his priest teachers sympathetic and well satisfied with his obvious intelligence and remarkable memory. He soon moved up the school, leapfrogging some of the earlier classes. It took a little time to find his place among these, generally better off, students, country lad as he was, but soon his scholastic progress won for him their admiration. They began to turn to him for help and he would pass on to any who asked him for his quickly finished work for them to copy. This was ere long discovered by the masters and he was duly reprimanded, though in kindly fashion, as he was becoming a star pupil and usually top of the class at the end of the term. Though rightly forbidden to pass on his finished work, he was always ready to help out with difficult problems.

His mother would come along every now and then bringing what she could to Lucia and happy to hear that good lady's encomiums of her son. John did his best to encourage Lucia's rather lazy son to work harder and was also ready to help in the house in any way he could. During school holidays he found a part-time job with a carpenter and joiner, thus adding to

his 'trades' some knowledge of simple building and getting to know the woodworking tools, all grist to the mill he had not yet dreamed of.

Meanwhile he had to learn to meet life in some of its less pleasing forms. The religious atmosphere at the school was extremely strict by modern standards but some students reacted against it. They took advantage of John's easy approach to try to involve him in some of their questionable activities, in which robbing his mother or his landlady was about the mildest.

"You have to learn to live, man, and you can't live without money. If they won't give you any, you must get some . . ."

He was old enough to look after himself but realised that many of the younger boys, some fresh from the country, would easily give way to pressure of this sort. He got together a few of the better disposed boys and started what he called the 'Societa dell'Allegria'. 'Allegria' means joy, happiness, cheerfulness. He proposed three simple-rules:

1. No act or word that could make any decent Catholic ashamed.
2. To carry out one's duties, scholastic and religious.
3. To be cheerful . . . 'allegro'. (Musically minded folk will recognise the word.)

John was soon in his element gathering around him an enthusiastic group whom on occasion he would entertain in the old Becchi fashion, especially in wet weather, with his tricks, gymnastics, juggling and conjuring. As always, the show ended with a prayer. "We used to end up in the church of St. Anne, where the Jesuit Fathers gave us some great talks, telling us things I still remember."

He became famous at school and indeed in the town, when one Sunday he took on a professional entertainer who was drawing large crowds on the Sunday morning at Mass time and challenging all and sundry to beat him. John's friends urged him to take the man on, and put up the first wager of twenty lire for the first encounter. It was a race, in which the professional soon got ahead but tired over the longer distance. The wager was double or quits each time. The man put up his forty lire for the next try, a jumping contest and lost again; also for the third. Finally, there was a juggling act. The man put up a brilliant performance and seemed certain to win at least this one when his rather long nose got in the way of a difficult manoeuvre and the trick collapsed. John and the group felt rather sorry for him and gave him back their now considerable winnings on condition that he stood them a good lunch and agreed not to perform again on the town square during the time of the principal Mass. The conditions were gratefully

accepted, the lunch was a good one, and 'allegria' all round was the order of the day As it was, in general, throughout John's green years at Chieri.