

the purpose.

Accordingly two venerable Fathers called on their dear young friend Don Bosco to invite him for a ride in the country. Their coach was at the door. But Don Bosco had been forewarned: "A ride in the country? By all means, how kind of you! I must get my hat." He accompanied them to the coach, "Seniores priores! After you, Fathers!" As soon as the elderly clerics had climbed in, he slammed the door shut, calling out to the coachman, "Off you go, my friend, as fast as you can, to the mental hospital!" And off they galloped, in fine style, with the painful results at the hospital that can well be imagined. The story swept gleefully round the diocese, not without some embroiling.

Many still thought the young priest was quite mad in his illusions, but perhaps it would be well to treat him with care. However, there could seem to be some foundation for their doubts when rumours spread that he was ill.

The Marchesa de Barolo, older and more experienced, had not been deceived. Don Bosco was certainly ill; his coughing was incessant and he began to spit blood. On the first Sunday of July, 1846, three months after taking over the Pinardi property, after a killing day in the scorching sun, he collapsed. The Marchesa at once sent doctors and nurses. He was exhausted, worn out, and soon there was cause for alarm. He grew worse and the doctors advised that he be given the last Sacraments. The word went through the streets, into the factories and the building sites. Don Bosco was dying.

Salesian biographers speak of what followed as the 'miracle of the little builders, the apprentices'. They came in droves, begging, in vain, to be admitted to the sick room. They came in their rough clothes, after twelve hours' work, without eating, weeping teenagers kneeling on the steps, filling the little Pinardi chapel, begging, beseeching God for the life of their father. Many made, in their generous grief, rash promises; they would pray all night, they would live on bread and water for a week, they would say the rosary every day for a year, anything, to win Don Bosco's life from Heaven. After eight or nine days, the crisis came: and passed. The 'miracle had happened'.

On the last Sunday of that anxious July, Don Bosco, leaning on his stick, was able to walk slowly down to the Oratory. The boys met him and swept him up to carry him into the little chapel. There they offered their prayers of thanksgiving, to God and to Our Lady. He managed to say a few words, few but perhaps the most significant of his life. "My dear boys, I owe my life to you, to your prayers. But be certain of this: from now on I promise to spend

every moment of that life for you!" Says Father Teresio Bosco, this was a solemn vow of consecration, in words only equalled by those uttered on his deathbed forty-two years later. "Tell my boys, that I shall be waiting for them all in heaven!"

The doctors prescribed a long convalescence. But before he left for home, that of his mother and brother Joseph at the Becchi, he called together those boys who had made over-generous promises in their prayers for his recovery. To set their consciences at rest, he used his priestly powers to change all their austerities into simple little offerings, soon given. Then he told them all. "Now I am going home for a while. But don't worry! By the fall of the leaves, I shall be back again with you!"

Chapter Sixteen

BACK WITH THE FALL OF THE LEAVES

BACK FIRST, TO the fields, the vines of the Becchi, with the fresh fruit and vegetables, with Mamma Margaret's homemade bread, and brother Joseph's rich red Barbera to make every meal a feast, all this and the fresh air, soon brought life into Don Bosco's lungs and limbs. Anthony's wife and five children welcomed him with as much love and enthusiasm as did Joseph's wife and four, with Grandma Margaret presiding over all. For the children there never was such an uncle as their Uncle John, with all his stories and a hundred tricks to pass the evenings, now beginning to close in. Boys and girls would vie with one another to accompany him on well-loved walks, to call in on farms where he would be welcomed with delight and the regaling of old tales and memories of his boyhood escapades.

However, once he was returning alone as evening fell, when from the shade of a wayside thicket, a menacing voice stopped him. "Stand still and let's see your money if you want to go on living!" Don Bosco was as alarmed as any of us would be on being confronted by a muffled up figure holding a long knife. But as he was stammering out that he had no money, he recognised the voice.

"Why, you are Cortese, and you are threatening to take my life?"

"Oh, Don Bosco, forgive me! I never thought I would meet you out here! You were so good to me in the prison. But everything has gone wrong: I lost my job, and, there was nothing for it but this. I don't know what I can do!" and the youngster's plants dissolved into tears. Don Bosco took him home, introducing him as one of his young Turin friends. He sent him off in the morning with a letter for Don Cafasso about the possibility of getting a job.

A Mother in the House

Letters from Don Cafasso and Don Borel told him they had taken three rooms in the Pinardi house ready for his return. There was however, a difficulty. The Valdocco district had a bad reputation in the city and for a young priest to live there alone could give rise to unwelcome comment.

Once again, Don Bosco thought of his mother. She was probably never better off in her life than she was then, living in Joseph's house, a good friend and helpful companion to his wife, without any real responsibility or worry. To ask her to leave all this now, at fifty-eight, and take over at Valdocco, was hard indeed. But she knew what her Don Giovanni would be up against. Obviously, the safest solution would be for his mother to keep house for him. So after a struggle, she agreed, packed up her bits and pieces including her wedding dress, her one treasure and, as the last leaves were falling on a November morning, set off, mother and son, to walk the fifteen odd miles to Turin, no mean jaunt. Salesian legend tells us that when they were wearily approaching the suburbs, they met a Don Vola, an old friend, who was both delighted and shocked to see them.

"Why, you've had to walk from the Becchi! Now you have no salary? And what are you going to live on when you get to Valdocco?" Don Bosco smiled. "I don't know, but Providence will look after us. We'll get by somehow!" Don Vola shook his head.

"You're just as crazy as ever you were, John! Well, I'm sorry I just haven't got any money on me, but, well, perhaps this will bring you in a bit to get started," and he handed them, insisting they take it, his valuable gold watch and chain, probably belonging to his father, and much treasured. For which quite heroic act of generosity, we trust the recording angel made mention in letters of gold.

When they opened the door at the Pinardi house and looked into the bare rooms, unfurnished except for a table, two chairs and the two beds in the bedrooms, Don Bosco laughed.

"Well, Mother, you said that if I ever became a rich priest, you would not darken my door. I don't think you could get anything much poorer than this, now could you?" She smiled back, content just to be with him, no matter what the future might hold. Later, a boy passing the house, saw a light, and heard two voices, singing an evening hymn. "He's back!" he whispered, and sped off into the city streets, bringing the good news.

Chapter Seventeen

NEW POPE, FIRST ORPHANS AND POLITICAL EXPLOSIONS

IN THAT SAME year of 1846, a most profound influence in the affairs of Don Bosco entered history. Cardinal Mastai-Ferretti, known as 'a simple priest who loved humanity', was elected Pope, taking the title of Pius IX. In those days the Pope was the prince ruler of the Papal States, covering the centre of Italy; he had a parliament, a prime minister, an army. His was one of the eight independent States that made up what we know as Italy today.

Pope Pius IX had much of the 'good Pope John' approach to his exalted position. He began by freeing all political prisoners. He would often slip out to the mean streets of Rome to see how his people lived, he would visit the hospitals, see how they were run, as well as bless the sick.

For Don Bosco he proved a rock of support; Piedmont priest and Roman Pope built up a remarkable relationship. Today, if you walk down the right aisle in St. Peter's, Rome, as far as the seated statue of St. Peter (kiss his foot!) and then look straight up, you will see that the large plaque is of Pius IX and further up still is the huge statue of St. John Bosco and Dominic Savio. Even today they are very close!

First Orphans

Don Bosco never had any money, of course, chiefly because he spent it before he got it. Debts were a way of life with him and did not for a moment stop him expanding. Over the winter of 1846/7, he took over the whole Pinardi house and started evening classes. Soon every room in the house, every corner including the stairs and the kitchen, was packed with boys with their noses in books. Spare time helpers shared the work of teaching and correction.

We have said that Valdocco was a rough area and many rowdy gangs made the nights hideous; sometimes they would throw stones at the house, try to disrupt the chapel services. More than once Don Bosco had to sally forth to quell the disturbances; in the dark he was smashed in the face and had to fight himself free of attackers. True, that dream had said "Not by blows will you tame these rough boys" But sometimes even dreams

have their exceptions.

He was well aware that these boys could keep his mother awake half the night because they had no homes to go to. He tried to help. There was a little passageway adjacent to the house where he and his mother made up a dozen straw beds and blankets and offered them to one group. They sent them to rest with hot soup; but when Don Bosco went to see how they had fared he found they had all decamped, taking bowls and blankets with them. A second attempt also failed.

The First Orphan Boarder

Came a night when it was raining in torrents. There was a timid knock at the door. A small figure stood there, drenched to the skin, shivering and weeping.

"Who are you, son?" Margaret asked.

"I'm an orphan. I had three lire when I came to the city but it's all gone and I've nowhere to go."

"Well, come in out of the rain and we'll see what we can do."

Don Bosco found some clothes for him to wear while he was getting through soup and bread and his own clothes were drying. He was plainly apprehensive.

"I've nowhere to go. Please don't send me away."

"We might find somewhere for you to stay," said Margaret, "but the last boys we gave a bed to ran off with all the blankets. What about you?"

"Oh, not me! I may be poor but I've never been a thief."

He was the first 'boarder'. Soon another boy was at the door.

"My mother died yesterday and the landlord threw me out; he said he was going to keep our things because Mum hadn't paid any rent."

Another boy, a Carlo Gastini, who had been one of Don Bosco's Oratory boys for some years, came with the same story.

"My mother died yesterday, my brother is in the army far away, and I don't know what to do." Carlo stayed with Don Bosco all his life, was the great organiser of concerts and comedies and always said he'd live to seventy because Don Bosco had told him he would. He died in 1902, aged seventy and one day.

A fourth was the immortal Giuseppe Buzzetti, who just wanted to be with Don Bosco. By the end of the winter there were eight.

The Archbishop's Mitre

On June 21st, feast of St. Aloysius, patron of youth, Archbishop Fransoni

came to the Oratory to say Mass and administer confirmation to those who lacked it. When he climbed into the simple pulpit, the low Pinardi roof almost knocked his miter off. He took it calmly. "One has to show respect to Don Bosco's boys and preach with head uncovered!"

The giggling boys warmed to him. So did Don Bosco when the Archbishop signed the necessary documents for the confirmation, naming the place as 'the parish of abandoned children'. That was valuable support for Don Bosco in a matter in which certain of his colleagues disagreed with him.

Europe Explodes

Not that the Archbishop himself was without troubles. The Spring of 1848 found all Piedmont, indeed all Italy, in ferment. Political demonstrations were drawing thousands, demanding the end of the independent states, including the Papal States. In Turin, eighty seminarians demanded the right to take part. The Archbishop refused permission, seeing the hand of international anti-clerical Liberalism behind the organisation. The eighty seminarians went anyway, and shouted with the rest. Whereupon the Archbishop closed the seminary. But by the end of that year of 1848, all Europe was in flames.

Karl Marx had issued his 'Communist Manifesto' that year; red revolution spread like a forest fire. Monarchs were tumbled off their thrones, barricades went up in city streets. It was a revolt chiefly of the working classes, victims of the industrial revolution; the peasants from country areas took little part and were generally not in favour.

There was a 'copycat' pattern about the uprisings. In February all Paris went up in savage battles; Vienna erupted on March 13th, Berlin and Budapest on the 15th, Venice on the 17th and Milan on the 18th. At the start, there were sweeping victories for the insurgents, but terrible losses when the trained army counterattacked not hesitating to use their cannon on the workers, workers being men, women and children, marking with their blood their first concerted protest at the inhuman conditions of their work, against employers demanding twelve, fourteen and more hours a day for starvation wages, six days a week. Thousands were said to have died, before some sort of order was restored.

Protests in Italy, were, of course, concerned equally with the industrial ills and with the demand for a new Constitution and resistance to Austrian threats of war. Pope Pius IX supported the Piedmontese Charles Albert against Austrian claims and offered 17,000 papal troops in support. He also prayed for 'all Italy'. "Bless, great God, all Italy and preserve in her the

priceless gift of the faith!" The popular press took this up, this blessing for 'all Italy' while ignoring the plea for the preservation of the faith. The Pope was everywhere hailed as a 'liberal Pope'. But when the war ended in defeat for Charles Albert, the Pope was found not to be liberal enough and soon the mobs were baying for his blood.

Chapter Eighteen
**MADNESS IN THE AIR BUT GOD'S IN
HIS HEAVEN**

IN SPITE OF Don Bosco's desperate efforts to keep clear of politics, ("My politics are those of the Our Father,") politics would not keep clear of him; because he would not join in the popular demonstrations, his Pinardi home was attacked by stone-throwing mobs, a terrifying experience he had to suffer more than once. Liberal papers attacked him, as they did the Church in general and the Archbishop in particular, who was eventually forced to flee to Switzerland. The Jesuits and the Sisters, 'the Dames of the Sacred Heart,' were also attacked, pillaged by mobs and forced to abandon their homes. The Convitto, quiet oasis of study and work for the prisons and the poor, was ringed by mobs, shouting, "Death to Don Guata!" though it was beyond the mind of man to understand how *he* could have merited such a fate. Even the Marchesa, benefactress indeed to the whole city of Turin with her hospitals, homes for the old, orphanages for the young, even she had her windows smashed and her life threatened.

There was madness in the air throughout that year of 1848 and after. Even some younger clergy were led away by the 'patriotic frenzy'. When two of Don Bosco's temporary helpers took it upon themselves to preach 'patriotic' sermons to his Oratory boys, he could not help but remonstrate with them. Whereupon they turned back to the boys and led 400 of them away in triumph through the streets, leaving a saddened Don Bosco and his one faithful friend, Don Borel, alone with the remaining 100.

Later many of the younger ones returned to the Oratory. So full were they of ideas of the 'war of independence against Austria' that he thought he would turn it into a game by getting an ex-army friend to drill them with mock guns. It was not one of his better ideas, though well meant. The old sergeant decided they would have a mock battle and divided the 'army' into friend and foe. When he gave the order to attack, chaos ensued; the battle swayed to and fro, eventually over Mamma Margaret's precious kitchen garden. Not only was it trampled to destruction but cabbages, tomatoes, onions were pulled up and used as ammunition. When all was over, the poor woman could only look upon the devastation in tears, tears not far

Madness in the Air but God's in His Heaven

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from Don Bosco's eyes as he looked with her. It was the more tragic because food was becoming scarce and prices rising everywhere.

A touch of real war came shortly after. When Don Bosco was talking to the boys in the chapel, someone crept up to the window and fired at him from short range. The ball, a rough piece of iron fired from a musket, passed between his side and his arm, ripping his cassock. The boys screamed in fear, the priest, trying to calm them, remarking, "This is my only cassock, a pity to tear it! But Our Lady is looking after us, never fear!" Someone fired a pistol at the little Don Borel but fortunately missed him, too.

As that dark year moved into a grey November, news came from Rome that a frenzied mob had murdered the Pope's moderate Prime Minister, Pellegrino Rossi. A fortnight later, Pius IX, dressed as a simple priest, early one morning walked out of the Vatican, on his way to 'exile' to a villa in Gaeta, not far from Naples. It did indeed seem to the embattled Church and its frightened people that the powers of evil were beginning to triumph.

All was certainly not right in the world, but there was a God in Heaven and two reminders came to Don Bosco, two rays of hope.

One of his boys, Ascanio Savio, asked to receive the clerical habit. Since the seminary was now closed, the Archbishop allowed him to stay on with Don Bosco, to study and give what spare time help he could. This was the first of the sheep to become a shepherd. He became eventually a diocesan priest but remained a lifelong friend of Don Bosco.

The second sign of God's approval was entirely different. Don Bosco had long wanted to get away from the Jansenistic idea that, so unworthy are we, once a year was sufficient to receive Holy Communion. He encouraged his boys to communicate often; we need food for our souls as well as our bodies. On an important feast day of the Church he had urged the boys to please God by making a good Holy Communion and when he turned to the tabernacle to bring out the ciborium, large numbers of the boys came forward to the altar rails. Judge of his dismay when he found the ciborium with but a pitiful few hosts remaining. That good young man, Giuseppe Buzzetti, (of course, what didn't he do!) had forgotten to put out a fresh ciborium and now looked with dismay as he saw Don Bosco's face. The distribution began with what hosts there were, Giuseppe holding the communion plate and waiting for the end in great distress. But as the first row ended and then another, it was obvious that something was happening. Don Bosco appears to have given out what would have been a full ciborium and when he finished there were still the few original hosts left. Years afterwards, in 1864, Giuseppe told the story once again to a group of Salesians.

Don Bosco, asked point-blank, admitted the miracle. "Yes," he said, "there were only a few Hosts in the ciborium unfortunately, but I was able to distribute Holy Communion to all who came and there were many. I was moved to see what was happening but not disturbed. I reflected that, after all, the miracle of the consecration is far greater than a simple multiplication. But it was, just then, a comforting sign of God's continuing care for us."

Actually that year there was another moving example of what some called a 'little miracle for the simple poor'. It is attested by two who witnessed it: once more Buzzetti and a boy called Tomatis. It was the custom in those parts to go to the cemetery on All Souls Day, to pray for the souls of the dead. On that Sunday, November 4th, Don Bosco promised a good handful of hot chestnuts for all who came and quite a small army went with him. To keep his promise he had bought three sacks of sweet chestnuts and asked his mother to cook them. But apparently, she did not understand that there would be so many with him and cooked only one large pot. Buzzetti, in charge at home, found out too late.

When Don Bosco arrived with the hordes of cold and expectant boys, he took what he thought to be the first pot of cooked nuts and began to ladle them out with fine abandon. Buzzetti tried to stop him.

"Oh, Don Bosco, not so fast! There'll not be enough to go round!"

"What! Not enough? But I bought three sackfuls!"

"Yes, but only that one pot was cooked!"

"Oh, well, we'll just have to go on as far as they will go," and on he went with the big ladle.

The anxious boys watched him with some alarm when no second or third pot arrived. They grew silent as they continued to file past him, their two hands held out for the warm nuts. The ladle came out each time full, until the last boy was served. A murmur began to go round the yard. "Did you see? Don Bosco must be a saint!" Again it could not be gainsaid and, every year after, hot chestnuts were distributed on All Souls Day in memory of the event. We can see it as gentle proof of Our Father in Heaven's smiling concern for the least and simplest of his children.

"Fear not, little flock! Not a sparrow falls but that your Father in Heaven marks it; but you are worth more than many sparrows!"

Chapter Nineteen

THE POOR MAN MUST BE QUITE CRAZY!

THE YEAR 1849 began badly for Don Bosco. His stepbrother, Anthony, aged only forty-one died, leaving seven children. For years they had been good friends and Anthony was a frequent visitor to the Oratory.

In the city there was a Catholic reaction when 1,000 clergy and 10,000 lay-people sent a petition to the Senate requesting the return of the Archbishop. Mgr. Fransoni soon reappeared but when the Senate passed a law restricting the rights of the Church and seeking to replenish its coffers at the expense of the Church, he vigorously protested. He was arrested, fined, imprisoned, and finally banished again.

Nothing daunted, Don Bosco, who was now boarding and feeding thirty homeless boys, in addition to his Oratory, made a petition to the Senate for a subsidy for his work. It brought in 300 lire from them and 2,000 from the Minister of the Interior, Urban Rattazzi, whom we shall meet again.

It was about this time that the Oratory boys, after hearing Don Bosco speak of the Pope in exile, collected the sum of thirty-three lire, which was sent to Gaeta, with a loyal letter. Pius IX never forgot this simple act, the 'mite' from the youngest and poorest; he sent a parcel of 720 rosaries for them, which took more than a year to arrive!

Meanwhile Don Bosco began to think again of that dream, 'sheep becoming shepherds'. If his work was going to expand he must get help from his own resources. He spoke to four of the more promising boys and asked them if they would like to study Italian (most of them spoke only the Piedmontese dialect) and Latin, with the possibility one day of the priesthood. They agreed and worked for eighteen months; but only one, Buzzetti, of course, stayed with Don Bosco and he became years later, a laybrother. But there were others and with another four there was more success. Don Bosco had kept his eyes on that Michael Rua whom he had mystified with his "We'll go halves". Now grown tall but still somewhat frail, he was thinking of starting work. Don Bosco spoke to the mother about Latin for Michael; she agreed but while the boy stayed with Don Bosco, she brought

him home to feed him, to try to build him up a little, for the next two years. In the meantime, Michael helped with the younger boys for games and classes. Another one of this second four picked out by Don Bosco was the twelve year old Francesia, who became a renowned Salesian Latinist and lived until 1930, when the present writer had already been a year in the Salesian fold! Such is continuity!

Sheep becoming shepherds was part of the preparation for the future; now there must be material progress. The Pinardi house was rented, a somewhat precarious base. Catching Francesco Pinardi one day, Don Bosco said, "I'd like to buy the house off you". "All right," said Pinardi, "65,000." Don Bosco laughed, "I have had it valued and they give me the figure of between 26,000 and 28,000 lire; I'll offer you 30,000 for immediate sale." "In cash and all at once?" "Yes." "And within a fortnight?" "Done." They shook hands. Don Bosco's head began to swim. He hadn't a bean and here he was pledging himself to find 30,000 lire in two weeks! No wonder people said he was crazy! But he had complete trust; and how it was rewarded! To have a rough idea of values, it must be said that the Italian lira was worth much less than the U.S. dollar at the time; but as a rough and ready comparison, if we take a lira to a dollar today, we shall not be far out. Thus 30,000 dollars of today's money would be a fair estimate for the rundown old farmhouse.

That very evening Don Cafasso came in saying that a pious lady, the Countess Riccardi, had given him 10,000 lire to be used 'for the glory of God'. He could think of no better use for it than Don Bosco's need. They looked further. The next day came a Rosminian Father bringing a loan of 20,000 lire from Don Rosmini himself; the interest was to be four percent; Don Bosco later remarked that at no time did the great priest seek either interest or capital. A Count Cotta offered a further 3,000 to cover essential expenses. Providence had stepped in swiftly indeed!

But as for Don Bosco, there was no holding the man! That same month, he remarked casually to his mother, "You know, I'd like to build a fine church in honour of St. Francis of Sales". Margaret dropped the needle and thread on her lap. "A church? And you can't feed the boys without getting into debt! Where's the money going to come from, may I ask?"

"Mother, if you had the money, would you give it to me? Of course you would; well, God is even more generous than you and I am sure He will give it to us."

Margaret sighed; "What can you do with a son like that! Quite crazy!" It was true that the Pinardi chapel was no longer serviceable; it was cold,

damp, in poor state and liable to flooding in bad weather; and it was by now far too small for the hundreds of boys. As usual, Don Bosco lost no time. He had immediate plans drawn up. To the contractor he said he wanted the work to go ahead without delay although he had as yet no money. "If you have no money, we'll have to go slow." "No, I want it built in the year; we need it as soon as possible." "That may be, but you'll have to find the money to keep us going."

"When the foundations had been dug," Don Bosco records, "we had the blessing of the foundation stone on July 20th, 1851. Our great benefactor, Count Cotta, laid it, the complimentary address was read by the young Michael Rua, aged fourteen, and the famous preacher, Padre Barrera, gave the address, in the course of which he said, "This stone is the grain of mustard seed. It will grow into a great tree, in which many boys will find shelter."

Don Bosco and his friends knocked at doors far and wide. He collected 35,000 lire, still 30,000 short. He decided to run a gigantic public lottery. He went on knocking on doors for gifts, sparing neither the Queen Mother nor the Court itself. With eventually 3,300 prizes it must have been a 'gigantic' effort! Don Bosco always thought big! The lottery made 26,000 lire: the rest eventually came in. The church was consecrated on June 20th, 1852 inside a year; it is the 'Salesian Porziuncula' and for 16 years in its walls beat the heart of Don Bosco's work. It is still there, though overshadowed, from 1868, by the great bulk of the Basilica of Maria Ausiliatrice; but that must wait its own story.

For the next four years until her death, Margaret Bosco knelt daily at her 'crazy' son's Mass, growing old and weary but ever marvelling at God's mysterious and wonderful ways.

Chapter Twenty

GOD SENT A DOG!

IN 1848 THE Piedmont Senate voted to give religious freedom to all religions, sects and denominations; there had previously been some restrictions, with the Catholic religion the state religion. Far from accepting the lifting of the restrictions with relief and satisfaction, certain extreme sects began a campaign of attacks on Catholic teaching. Three newspapers appeared, possibly financed from outside the country, and achieved a wide circulation, vilifying the Catholic clergy, falsifying history, calumniating individuals. The Bishops and clergy called for replies to these attacks, to protect the laity from these false prophets. Don Bosco was one of the first to take up the challenge. With a group of collaborators, he began CATHOLIC READINGS of which he wrote and published the first six issues himself. He pulled no punches, answering all the attacks and showing them to be false; there was no compromise, it was hard wall-to-wall attack and counterattack: The READINGS were welcomed everywhere and sales increased with every issue.

The success of this Catholic reply did not, of course, go unnoticed as did not the person of its vigorous leader. His name came in for sarcastic comment and veiled threats. In his brief Memoirs, Don Bosco himself recalled how one day two respectable gentlemen asked to see him and began to talk about the READINGS. They praised his contributions and his evident knowledge of history and scripture. They knew of his books for the schools. Would it not be better to produce more such helpful books, and leave the tiresome squabbles in the READINGS to others? True, there might be some financial difficulty here; they knew he had many commitments in his work for destitute youth; well, there were a couple of thousand lire notes on the table which might help . . . Don Bosco concluded the interview, asking Buzzetti to accompany these two gentlemen to the gate. They went quietly but not without suggesting he would regret his refusal to keep quiet.

So, having survived political attacks, he was now to be the target for sectarian attempts on his life. He was advised not to walk out alone but to take some of the older boys with him. Twice he was called out to bogus sick

calls. At one house he was offered wine and chestnuts and when he declined, the 'sick' person's family tried to force him to drink and that from a 'special' bottle. When he called in his boys and suggested they take the wine and the chestnuts, the farce ended, it was all 'a joke'. In another house at the bedside of a supposedly dying person, that worthy began a violent row with bystanders and in the resultant melee, the priest had to defend himself with a chair until the boys burst in to rescue him.

However, one night he was returning home alone when to his alarm an enormous dog appeared at his side, walking with him, as if he were its owner. "We soon established an amicable relationship and he escorted me home." Don Bosco called him Grigio, the grey one. Once when he was out, again alone, he noticed two men keeping pace with him, quickening if he did, slowing as he did. He made as if to turn back but they jumped on him, trying to envelop him in a heavy cloak, possibly to drag him off. But then there was a tremendous howl and a great body dashed against them, growling fiercely, 'like a mad wolf'. The men screamed in terror and Don Bosco had to call Grigio off to save them from serious injury before they fled.

Michael Rua, who saw the dog twice, recalls how one evening, when Don Bosco was preparing to go out alone in spite of his mother's entreaties, he found Grigio at the door barring his way. No matter how he tried he could not get past, Grigio with low growls pushing against him. Margaret cried out, "If you won't listen to me, for goodness' sake listen to the dog!" Later that night a neighbour came in to say that a man had been seen nearby, carrying a pistol. There is no doubt that Grigio's very appearance with Don Bosco prevented many attacks.

Another time Grigio came in through the playground gate, somewhat to the alarm of some of the boys. Buzzetti cried out, "Leave him alone, he's Don Bosco's dog!" The dog went on and finally into the refectory where Don Bosco was having supper with a few students. Grigio went up to him, put his great head on his knees, as if to say 'Good night before leaving'; it was noticed that, unlike most dogs, he refused all food. It looked as if he wanted to assure himself that Don Bosco was safe at home; he had missed him because the priest had been given a lift home in a friend's carriage.

One of the boys who saw him described Grigio as a huge wolfhound, with erect ears, long pointed nose, grey pelt and a metre high. (A metre = three feet three inches; some dog!) Salesian legend speaks of other appearances of Grigio over some years. When a Baroness Fassati asked Don Bosco point-blank where he came from, the priest smiled, "Well, to say he was some sort of angel is silly; but certainly, he was no ordinary dog!"

Chapter Twenty-One

WORKSHOPS AND APPRENTICE CONTRACTS

THE STAMMERING, LITTLE man Pancrazio Soave wasn't really very far out when he thought the priest was looking for a place for a 'laboratorio'; the 'oratorio' came first and then the laboratorio, which is what the Italians call a workshop. As soon as the church was paid off, the unceasing flow of homeless boys knocking at the Pinardi door urged Don Bosco to add a sizeable extension to the house. When it was nearly finished, one night the whole thing collapsed. Popular estimation was that the devil was trying to prevent the good being done; be that as it may, the immediate cause was shoddy work, the cheapest materials, the poor cement; poor Don Bosco had to learn at the cost of 10,000 hard won lire that the lowest estimate is not always the best investment. But he needed the rooms, so, another estimate and a better eye on the builders.

He had to decide what he was going to do with these boys. Basic education he gave them all; those who gave any hope of a vocation, such as Michael Rua, he sent off to a school run by a Don Bonzanno; schools existed but attendance was not compulsory. He had to do something else for those who could not and did not want to study. Now his own experiences as a teenager trying to pick up what expertise he might, came to the fore. One day he bought two rough work benches, four chairs, a few lasts and showed four boys how to hammer a leather sole as it should be hammered. Soon they were all four hammering away and the first workshop, the shoemakers, was on its way. Then the tailors. He had spent some time with the good Signor Roberto in Castelnovo with so much profit that a partnership was even discussed. So, for another four boys and four more chairs from the kitchen, they began the preliminaries. Patching, mending first, with Margaret's practical expertise with needle and cotton forming the basis. Then Don Bosco remembered his cutting out and by 1853, this workshop was going well, and was popular.

Early in 1854, he one day received the sheets of his latest book, THE GUARDIAN ANGEL. Some boys helped him carry the heavy package into the kitchen. "Right," he said, pointing to one startled youngster, "You are the

bookbinder!" "What, me? I don't even know what a bookbinder is!" "Quite simple! Let's take the first big sheet. Fold it into two; and fold it again, carefully; and again, and still again; and once more. It looks like a little book, now, doesn't it? Now each sheet, we'll say, is a chapter of the book; look for the page number and put all the same sheets together, in order. Now you try the folding; be careful to make it an exact fold!" When all was more or less satisfactory, Margaret brought a big darning needle and good thread and showed them how to stitch the sections together. "Right; now let's get some flour and water from the kitchen and make a good paste to fix the cover," the cover being of paper with the printed title. To trim the edges, Don Bosco sharpened the heavy knife Margaret used for topping and tailing the carrots, etc. and made a fair job. A little primitive, but it served to start. That was workshop number three. When things were well on the way, Don Bosco, of course, engaged experienced craftsmen to supervise the work in all the trades.

By 1856, Don Bosco had built a large shed for workshop number four, the carpenters and joiners. You need a fair amount of room for woodwork and he made this shop as well equipped as he could with simple machinery. This, too, soon flourished.

The most important of his workshops in his 'School of Arts and Trades' was the printing department. In those suspicious days, no-one was allowed to open a printer's shop without a license and it took Don Bosco a long time and much talking before he got his; the date was December 31st, 1861. Such a printing press could be a powerhouse of support for religion, for faith and morals, for defence of justice and peace throughout the land. By the middle of the year 1862, this 'Press of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales' was printing and publishing the CATHOLIC READINGS and continued to do so for years. The modest start in Valdocco was the precursor of a chain of Salesian printers the world over who can now compete with the most modern. Workshop number six also started in that year of 1862, with the mechanics department; in these days of course, they talk of computers, television, silicon chips! But no doubt, 2,000 years ago, St. Joseph had to mend and make sandals, make furniture, use iron and hardwood in the simple ploughs; and Our Lady spent her spare hours at the spinning wheel, weaving the cloth and sewing together her husband's clothes and those of Her Son Jesus. Don Bosco was always conscious of the sanctity of good work and founded the Sodality of St. Joseph for all his working boys. They were free to join or not, but many did. But when the boys had learnt the rudiments at Valdocco, it was time for some of them to go out and get a

job, first as apprentices.

In the Salesian archives are preserved two rare documents, relating to contracts drawn up between the employer, the apprentice and witnessed by Don Bosco, dated 1851 and 1852. He was not the inventor of apprentice contracts but in practice few people bothered about them, the boys' parents being often illiterate and ignorant of the boys' rights; nor did the Liberal state help. ("There must be freedom even in these matters.") But the two documents show Don Bosco's practical concern for his boys; after all, most of them were orphans and he was 'in loco parentis'. He was responsible. We see how a Turin jeweller undertook to take this sixteen year old orphan under his care for three years, to teach him the art without making him do extraneous work, would leave him free on Sundays and holy days of obligation, and would give him fifteen days paid holiday every year. If he had to take the boy to task for some misdemeanor, he must admonish him in words only, and not by beating him; he must treat him, 'da padre e non da padrone,' that is, 'as a father' and not as a master, a hard employer. Furthermore, his pay must increase each year as the boy became more proficient. One rate given was two lire a week for the first year, four for the second and eight for the third year, which would be comparable to a normal wage. No Trade Union could do better for apprentices! Not only that but both Don Bosco and the Salesian Brothers would keep an eye on the boys and see that the terms of the contracts were honoured.

Chapter Twenty-Two

SCHOOLBOYS IN ARMY COATS

BUT NOW LET us meet perhaps the most sparkling star in the whole Salesian firmament! Don Bosco was giving the sermon on the Feast of All Saints, 1851 in his hometown Castelnovo. A small boy sat in the front row with his mother; all through the talk, he fixed his eyes on the priest, staring at him while the Mass went on. The priest met him. "Is there anything you want to say to me, young man?" "Yes; I want to go to Turin with you, go to school and become a priest." "Well, that's clear enough; we'll have to ask your Mum." Mum was a young widow whom Don Bosco had known as a girl. (How many widows do we meet in this Don Bosco story!)

"Teresa," asked Don Bosco, "How much will you sell me your son for?" She laughed, "In these parts we sell our calves and lambs; our sons we give away". "Well, pack up a few clean clothes in a bundle he can carry and we'll get off first thing in the morning." The dawn was hardly in the sky before Giovanni Cagliero was up, had his breakfast, kissed his mother and with his bundle on his back, was knocking at Don Bosco's door. "Well, when do we start?" They set off for the long walk to Turin, about fifteen miles. At least Don Bosco did the fifteen miles; the will-of-the-wisp Giovanni, chasing a butterfly up the road and a dragonfly across a field and back, did twice the distance. As a priest, he told the story himself.

"Don Bosco asked me a thousand questions and I gave him a thousand answers, all about myself. Since then I've never had a secret from him. He laughed at all my pranks and said I'd have to quieten down in the city. At last we got to Valdocco, very tired. We went in. Don Bosco said to his mother, 'Let me present to you a young man from Castelnovo!' His mother sighed. 'All you do is bring me more and more boys and there's just nowhere to put them!' 'Well, this one is so small that we can put him in a canary cage and hoist him up and down from the rafters!' which made them both laugh. There wasn't any room that I could see and I spent the first night lying at the feet of another boy. In the morning I saw the poverty of the place. We ate in a shed; there were some tin bowls and tin spoons; such things as knives and forks and tablecloths did not appear for years. Don Bosco was everywhere;