

mother could mend and patch my jacket and pants.”

Pietro Enrta was another lifelong dweller at Valdocco. He became an infirmarian and attended Don Bosco in his last illness; he it was who closed the Saint's eyes in death.

Chapter Twenty-Five

AWAY WITH THE MONKS! DEATHS AT COURT

AT THE END of the year of 1854, the two Houses of the Piedmont Parliament were asked to consider a law which would suppress the ‘useless’ religious Houses, under the pretext of helping the poorer parishes. ‘Useless’ would be those Houses, monasteries and convents whose members did not either teach, care for the sick or for the orphans. The Bill was to be debated in the Spring. If both Houses passed it, the king had the deciding vote.

On a freezing day in December, Don Bosco called his helpers to his room to tell them of a vivid dream he had had that night, of a Court herald, proclaiming, “Great funeral at Court!” He told them he had written to the king, Victor Emmanuel II and told him of the dream. Five days later the dream was repeated, but this time the herald was crying, “Great funerals at Court!” this time in the plural. At dawn, he wrote again to the king, who, it was reported, was furious.

Royal Funerals

On January 12th, the Queen Mother Maria Teresa died and was buried on the 15th; she was fifty-four. On January 8th, the Queen, Maria Adelaide, had given birth to a son but did not rally. She was given the Last Sacraments on the 20th, and died later in the day. She was thirty-three. The king's brother, Ferdinand of Savoy, fell ill at the same time and died on February 11th. He was thirty-three.

The Law of Suppression was passed in both the Camera (Commons) and the Senate. The king delayed; but on May 29th he signed. The law was immediately put into execution and according to the official biography, we are told that 334 religious houses were closed and 5,456 members of their communities sent away. The Pope excommunicated all those responsible. Meanwhile, the son born to the dead Queen in January, died on May 17th, the king's only son. When the facts of the two dreams became known, there were many frightened people in high places in Turin.

The First Salesian

Meanwhile life had to go on. Several times in his weekly talks to his growing number of clerics Don Bosco had spoken briefly of the value of the virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience, without elaborating. On the feast of the Annunciation, March 25th, 1855, he put the question to Michael Rua. "Michael, do you feel like making the simple vows of poverty, chastity and obedience for three years?" Michael readily acquiesced; he was quite ready to give three years of his life to help Don Bosco, which was all that this implied. It was the simplest ceremony. Don Bosco stood by his side as Rua kneeling before the crucifix, murmured: "I make a vow to God to be poor, chaste and obedient for three years and to put myself in the hands of Don Bosco" There was no witness; but it could be held that this was the real beginning of the Salesian Congregation, Don Bosco its founder, Michael Rua its first member.

He and all the other clerics had an appalling work load by any standards; they would be teaching religion, taking the refectory, out in the recreations, looking after the workshops; and all the time, using every spare moment to study for the State examinations.

Sunday, far from being a day of rest, was a day of unremitting activity. There were now three oratories in being, each of them looked after by a priest friend of Don Bosco; but when one priest could no longer undertake the work, Don Bosco appointed the seventeen year old Michael Rua to take his place. Michael would be there early in the morning to clean up and prepare the chapel. He would arrange for the confessions when a priest came, see to the Mass, and after the Mass 'do Don Bosco' for the rest of the day, with all that exhausting idea implied. When the last prayers had been said, a few of the boys would accompany him home through the gas-lit streets. A feature of his 'Guardian Angel' Oratory was that the boys were almost all chimneysweepers, tiny fellows most of them who used to descend upon the city in the autumn crying their trade through the streets, expecting the householders to come out and get them to clean their chimneys in preparation for the winter. It was an appalling trade even though many of them made light of it. They would go off cheerfully as they left him at the door, "See you Sunday, Michael!" Michael, completely exhausted, would find something left for him in the oven, probably also finding Cagliari, Anfossi and Francesia in from their own oratories. They would crawl up to their attic beds, sometimes too tired to get into bed, falling asleep on a chair. In the morning, the alarm would go at the inhuman hour of four o'clock; often, in Turin's hard winter, the water in their basins would be frozen (no

heating, no running water!) and they would have to reach out for some snow, and rub their faces till they glowed! Then, with a blanket round their shoulders, to two hours study, before they got the boys up. Don Bosco has been accused of overworking his young men to 'an early grave'. On the face of it, there is no point in killing off your best helpers, defeating your own object. Certainly the work was hard; certainly these first helpers were of a special breed. As for an early grave, Don Rua, who 'did three men's work', died at seventy-three, Cagliari died at eighty-eight, and Francesia at ninety-two!

Tête-à-tête with the Minister, Prison Outing

Urban Rattazzi was the Minister of the Interior and one of the authors of the infamous bill for the suppression of 'useless Orders'. He was a pragmatic man but thought a good deal of Don Bosco. "Here is a man who works for the poor, who does a worthwhile job." (Incidentally saving the Government a heap of troubles with the sons of those same poor, its abandoned youth.) Don Bosco always had ready access to him.

In 1845, a new prison for young offenders was opened in Turin, called the Generala. Most of the boys were there for petty thefts or because their parents could not control them. Don Bosco was a frequent visitor and got to know them well. In the summer of 1855 he gave them a three day retreat, at which almost all went to confession and were in high spirits. So impressed was the priest that he went to the director with a proposal that filled that worthy man with horror. "My dear padre, you must be out of your mind! Take these young rascals for a day in the country? Certainly not! Only the Minister" So off to the Minister, Urban Rattazzi. The Minister listened and thought a while. "All right; you can have them. We'll arrange for a suitable number of men, in plain clothes, along the roads"

"No, Minister, no-one; that's part of it. No guards!"

"Come on, Don Bosco! Why, not one will come back with you!"

"On the contrary, not one will be missing. I give you my word. If one is missing, well, you can put me in prison in his place!"

They both laughed at that. "All right. Have it your way. I'll trust you. Back at the Generala with the news. Shouts to bring the roof down!"

"All right now. We'll have all day. There'll be no guards, either in uniform or in plain clothes. But I've given my word; no-one is to try to clear off. If even one is missing, I'll be disgraced, will never be allowed to come here again. I've given *my* word; now what about *your* word?" There was a pause while some of them got together. "There will be no clearing off, for

anyone; you have our word, Don Bosco," and the bigger boys looked round meaningfully. They had a grand day, with the food packed on a donkey, Mass in the country, games and fun and bits of prizes; and on the way home, Don Bosco himself on the donkey, tired but supremely happy. The suspicious director met them and had them counted, three hundred of them. All present and correct; and the Minister was as happy as any one. He had probably won a good bet!

Chapter Twenty-Six

REASON, RELIGION AND LOVING KINDNESS

"WHY CAN'T WE get the same results that you do, Don Bosco?" asked the Minister Rattazzi after the Generala success.

"You have to get results through threats and punishments; we see our boys as given to us by God to care for, we try to treat them with reason, through the exercise of their religion and through kindness. As priests we would have a moral force that you could not understand."

For years Don Bosco was asked to explain his system, "I have no system," he would repeat, "I just go along and cope with things as they arise". He would try to show these boys, the good and the not so good, that he loved them as Jesus Christ would love them. And to his Salesians he would say, "It is not enough that the boys should be loved, they must know they are loved."

In the Rule book that Don Bosco drew up for the Salesians, he added, in response to requests, an appendix about his system. This was written about 1876. He began by saying there were two systems in use. One he called the 'repressive system' in which laws and rules of discipline are made known to the pupils, as in the army and prisons; they are warned that if they do not observe these rules, they will be punished.

His system he called the 'Preventive system, *sistema preventivo*'. This is not as easily translated as it may seem. A preventive move in war is to get there before the enemy! Prevention is certainly better than cure. Let the boys know what is expected of them but help them to keep these rules for their own good, help them, with reason, to understand. Watch over them like good fathers and brothers who will prevent the little children from falling into the fire, or over cliffs. If you want to be respected, respect your pupils. Never humiliate them in any way; if reproofs have to be made, let them be made in private, not in public; and then forgotten. Harsh punishment should never be used; a favour withdrawn, a privilege forfeited, are often, if not always far more effective than corporal punishment.

In 1876, it was thirty years since the Oratory days of the 1840's when the only rule Don Bosco gave to his boys was to sing, run, jump, shout, make as

much row as you like only as long as you do not offend God. Thirty years later, dealing now with colleges, boarding schools with fee paying students, his Salesian schools had to follow the standard disciplines, many of them laid down by the State. In the schools of today, we are witnessing the gradual disappearance of boarding schools in favour of day-schools where, outside classtimes, there is often little contact between teachers and pupils; brief 'dinner hour' recreations give little opportunity for getting to know one another as human beings. School activities, sports, games, hikes, theatricals, youth clubs, offer some help but do not cover all the school. Apart from his Sunday oratories, Don Bosco's first schools meant that he and his early helpers were with the boys twenty-four hours a day. Circumstances are very different today.

Salesian analysts studying Don Bosco's 'system' consider it more clearly illustrated in a long, dialogue 'dream' recounted in detail by the priest in 1884. Then, approaching his seventieth year, he was taken in a nostalgic visit back to the oratory life of the '40's, to its happy, ideal relationships with the boys. The dream is meant for the Salesians; he waves an admonitory finger at those in the schools of the 1880's. In the early days 'we were boys with the boys, joining them in their games, taking part with them in everything'. Then, "the Salesians played with the boys, now, in 1884, they merely supervise them". Don Bosco and those who took part in the dialogue (mainly our old friend Giuseppe Buzzetti!) were almost exclusively concerned with the recreations. But this, too, was 100 years ago.

Today's Salesians, especially those who have to try to bring a Salesian 'charism' into day-schools, many mixed, with their limited opportunities, have obvious problems. One can only say that they are conscious of these problems and do their best to meet them, that many of our young and enthusiastic Salesians (and some not so young) can compare very favourably with the dedicated young Italians who laid the foundations of the world-wide Salesian Society, in St. John Bosco's day.

None of us can hope to approach Don Bosco himself. It must be remembered that God gave him a special mission; to carry this out, he was also given great spiritual and natural gifts. To the spiritual gifts and graces God gave him, he corresponded to an heroic degree. His life of prayer, of work, of suffering supported his complete commitment; he gave everything: all his time, all his endeavours, all his hopes, all his love; he was indeed a great saint. In a century of great men and women, he was one of the greatest. (For the historically minded, it is interesting to compare the *private* lives of certain other 'great' figures of the century with those of such as Don

Bosco: history's values can be false indeed.) True, he was not God. He was human; *humanum est errare*. He could make mistakes, mistakes he would acknowledge, being the saint he was. He could weep at the end of his life for the opportunities missed, for his failures. We would not call them failures.

consulted a few special friends and asked them about forming a sort of 'secret Society,' (beloved by boys!) not to blow anyone up, but to give unobtrusive help to any who might need it. Don Bosco thought it might work but counselled time to think about it. Eventually a brief 'Rule' was drawn up, chiefly by the 14 year old Savio, by which members of the group, calling themselves the 'Sodality of Mary Immaculate' would act as unknown 'guardian angels' to designated boys in need of help, especially new boys, helping them to get used to school ways, to make friends, to join in games and other activities. In these and in other ways, the group had to be 'little apostles,' doing Don Bosco's work (and God's) among their companions.

One day, the cleric in charge of the refectory noticed that Dominic, as Lent began, was depriving himself of necessary food. He spoke about it to Don Bosco who sent for the boy.

"Look, Dominic, the first rule about becoming holy is to obey. I hear you are doing too much fasting and what's more, even putting stones in your bed and sleeping in this cold weather with only one blanket on your bed. Now I forbid you to do anything of the sort without my express permission. I assure you that your obedience will gain you far more grace than those penances which are damaging your health." Dominic was a little distressed that he had been found out but, of course, at once obeyed.

The Boy who Talked with God

From the first meeting Don Bosco had been astonished how far this boy had progressed in genuine piety and knowledge of the things of God. Evidence of this began to show itself in various ways. One day, missing at meals, Dominic was found in the church of St. Francis de Sales in a state of ecstasy. He had been there three hours: he thought it had been only minutes.

Already that winter there had been another mysterious occurrence. One night, when Don Bosco was working late, a knock at the door brought in Dominic (who ought to have been hours in bed!). "Don Bosco, please come with me. You are needed." After some hesitation, Don Bosco put on his coat and followed the boy, taking with him the essentials for the Last Sacraments. They went through the dim, gas-lit streets and dark alleys until Dominic stopped outside a house. "Here you are needed." Don Bosco knocked at the door. A woman peered out. "Oh, a priest! Who sent you? My husband is at the point of death. He gave up his religion some time ago but is now crying for a priest to hear his confession and put him right with God. Oh, come, please hurry!"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

GOOD-BYE TO A BOY AND TO A MOTHER

ON THE FIRST Sunday of April, 1855, Don Bosco preached a sermon on 'Becoming a Saint,' which probably had little effect on the majority; but one boy took it to heart. On the feast of St. John the Baptist, June 24th, Don Bosco's 'name day,' he suggested to the boys that if they sent him a little note asking for something, he would do his best to get it for them. There were bizarre requests, one bright youth asking for enough nougat to keep him for a year! Dominic Savio, the boy who had listened to the sermon, put five words on a scrap of paper: "Help me become a saint". Don Bosco called him. "For you, a boy, there are three ways to become holy. First, keep cheerful, no matter what happens or goes wrong. Second, carry out with perfect obedience all that you are asked to do, in your studies, your prayers, your daily tasks and duties. Thirdly, do good to others, help your companions even at the cost of some sacrifice. These are your steps to holiness."

Dominic took all this to heart. He was popular with his companions, though some would make snide remarks about his 'piety'. Not that that worried him as one boy found out when he brought into the playground a paper with unsuitable pictures. Dominic walked up to the group round him, snatched the paper and tore it into shreds. "This is not the place for this sort of thing; here we have a priest doing everything for us and you bring in this muck!"

Dominic believed in putting his best into everything he did. Found in recent years, an old companion's recollection of him describes him as a fierce battler in games, in spite of his slight frame. However, as the harsh winter of 1856 set in, Don Bosco noticed him looking rather pale and drawn. "Going out to school in all weathers is not doing you any good, Dominic. You'd better stay in and go to Don Francesca's class. You won't have to get up so early. Good health is a gift of God and we must take care of it."

Sodality of Mary Immaculate

Thinking about 'making yourself holy by helping others' Dominic

As they went back, Don Bosco was left pondering how Dominic could possibly have known about the man and how, indeed, a boy from the country who rarely left the Oratory, could possibly find his way at night through the city streets. Much the same thing happened a little later. This time, Dominic led the priest to a larger house where the owners declared there was no-one sick or in any way in need of a priest. Dominic quietly insisted, "Well," said the man, probably a little amused, "come in and look through the house yourselves. I assure you, you will not find anyone." As they left the last bedroom without finding anyone, Dominic said, "There is still the attic". And there, in the attic, lying on some sacks, was a woman, obviously near to death. The owner exclaimed, "Why, she's one of our cleaners! We thought she'd left hours ago!" When they got back to Valdocco, Don Bosco asked Dominic how he had known these things. The boy looked confused, said nothing and then began to cry. Don Bosco dared not question him further but it was plainly evident that in this Valdocco Oratory there was a boy who talked with God.

In 1850, Pope Pius IX had restored the Hierarchy in England. It was the time of the 'Second Spring' in that country and there were great hopes in Europe that it could return to the Faith it had lost three centuries before. Don Bosco was well aware of developments and used to ask his clerics and the boys to pray and sometimes to offer their Holy Communions for the conversion of England, a country growing in importance and power in the world. Dominic himself would offer his Communion for this intention on Saturdays. One day he told Don Bosco a dream he had had.

"I found myself walking in a country covered with mist, when I saw Pope Pius carrying a torch. A voice said, 'This is England, for which land God is preparing great triumphs'. When you see the Holy Father in Rome, please will you tell him about this dream?" Don Bosco promised that he would.

But now, in this February of 1857, Dominic was plainly ill, weak with incessant coughing. The doctor advised that he should return home, stopping all studies, at least for a couple of months.

Dominic accepted the verdict, though with some reluctance; he would have preferred to stay at the Oratory with Don Bosco and his friends.

"But," said Don Bosco, "you are only going home for a while until you get stronger and then you can come back."

"No, Don Bosco, I shall not be coming back," he said quietly. His father came to fetch him. As they said good-bye, Dominic reminded Don Bosco of his promise to tell the Holy Father about his dream of England. (Don Bosco

kept his promise the following year.)

Dominic died on March 9th, 1857, still more than three weeks short of his fifteenth birthday. The Church pondered long and hard about this remarkable boy, but eventually, almost a hundred years later, declared he was heroic in virtue and on June 12th, 1954, he was canonised, Saint Dominic Savio, the youngest canonised saint in history. (There were martyrs in the first centuries, canonised later by popular acclaim, who might have been as young or even younger. Not that it matters in the least: they are all in Heaven, very dear children of God!)

Nine years later, Don Bosco and Dominic met again in one of the more famous of his 'dreams', one that covers ten pages in the official biography. The priest found himself in a place of 'marvellously beautiful light'. To the sound of music, he saw Dominic, splendidly arrayed, leading a large group of boys and Salesians. He could only stammer, "Dominic! But where are we, you and all these?" "We are in a place of happiness," was the reply and Dominic went on to discuss the work and progress of the Salesians, saying that they would do great good if they were faithful to their vows and their devotion to God and to Our Lady, the Mother of God.

"As for you, dear Don Bosco, you have still much to endure before you, too, come to be with us in this place of such happiness."

Farewell to the Mother

'Mamma Margaret' had spent ten years with her son, coping with an ever increasing household of boys for whom the first port of call in all their needs was her kitchen. She had hoped to spend those ten years on her son Joseph's farm, surrounded by her many grandchildren: but God ruled otherwise. Now, in her quiet moments, she knew that 'the better part' had been allotted to her. The children of Valdocco were not hers, but she was their mother; for most of them, the only mother they had.

In November 1856 she fell ill; pneumonia was diagnosed, in those days almost always fatal, especially for those worn out with work and years. Don Borel gave her the last Sacraments; Joseph and the older children came from the Berchi. Don Bosco was grief stricken, not only because he was losing a wonderful mother but because it was he who had imposed upon her such crushing burdens. Now she was dying. But dying though she was, Margaret remained her practical self. "John, you are making me feel worse, seeing you suffer so. You are exhausted. Please, go to your room and rest. I know you will never forget me. Go now, my son, go and God will bless you."

About three in the morning, Joseph came to tell him that it was all over. Two hours later, he roused his friend Giuseppe Buzzetti and they went to offer the first of many Requiem Masses at his mother's favourite church, the Consolata. She was sixty-eight. She was buried in her only presentable dress, in the pocket of which they found the coin Don Bosco had given her some time before to replace her ancient, quite deplorable hat.

Shortly afterwards Michael Rua went home. "Mother, you know that now Mamma Margaret has gone, we have no-one to make the soup and darn our socks. Won't you come?" Giovanna Maria Rua went to the Oratory with great heart, aged fifty-six, and stayed there twenty heroic years, to Don Bosco's immense relief.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

MONK OR NO MONK, I STAY WITH DON BOSCO!

THE MINISTER URBAN Rattazzi saw Don Bosco again in the summer of 1857. After the cholera and the success of the Generala, he was feeling kindly about the 'oratories'.

"They ought to carry on, Don Bosco; I hope you'll have many more years yet but even you can't live for ever. When you go, who is going to carry on? I think you should train some of your young helpers in your methods and your ideas and let them carry on."

Don Bosco smiled, "You know, what you are asking me to do is to found a new religious order! That coming from you who only two years ago supported the closing of 300 monasteries! The State would shut me, too!"

The Minister smiled back, "I know all about these monasteries but if they make themselves independent of the State, then they should be closed. No, Don Bosco, if you or anyone were to form an association of men who would observe the laws of the State, would pay its taxes, would retain its own rights, that is, its members would retain their property and be subject to the State, then no-one could touch you You would be a group of free citizens; if your association were to have as its object religious ends such as yours, that would make no difference at all."

They parted in friendly fashion and Don Bosco went away pondering over the Minister's views. The State would accept what he already had in mind; would the Church accept?

Meanwhile he would push on slowly with his recruiting of the "sheep who would become shepherds". After Rua, Don Alasonatti and Francesia took the three year temporary vows, again 'only to give Don Bosco a hand' for the time. But he began to make other preparations. Using his experience in the Oratory and later in his schools and workshops, he began to draw up a series of Rules. He sent a draft copy to his Archbishop, who was still in exile. Mgr. Franssoni replied with an encouraging letter and comment but suggested that he go down to Rome and consult the Pope (who had by now returned to the city). So Michael Rua was instructed to draw up in his best

script the draft 'Rules and Constitutions'. "Copy them well, Michael, and you and I will take them down to Rome." They had to get passports to go to the Papal States and the journey was arduous but on March 9th, 1858, Don Bosco had his first audience with Pope Pius IX, who received him with a kindness and understanding that he never retracted. He took the manuscript with him to study it and give his views. On March 21st, they met again. This time, the Pope spoke well of the proposed Rule which he felt would do much good if exercised on behalf of youth, continuing Don Bosco's work. "It is mild in concept and not too demanding. I suggest you call it a Society rather than a Congregation, and ensure that each member is in the face of the Church a religious, and in the face of the State, a free citizen."

Don Bosco reflected to himself that the views of the Pope and the Minister were remarkably alike.

When Pius IX saw Don Bosco for the third time, he told him to experiment with the Rules for a while and meanwhile to give a copy to a Cardinal Gaudi who would study them from every point of view. So Michael Rua had another job; before they left, on this occasion Don Bosco introduced his young assistant to the Pope and also told him of Dominic Savio's dream of the Pope in England, as he had promised. Pius IX, very pleased, saw it as confirmation of his restoring the English hierarchy in 1850.

A Week to Decide a Life

The next step took much more than a year to decide. Don Bosco had many helpers at Valdocco including seminarians to whom he had given the clerical habit; but they were destined not for him but for the diocese, to go to other seminaries eventually while the Turin seminary remained closed. Only his own helpers were his and on December 9th, 1859, he called them to his room. There were nineteen of them. He spoke of his decision to found a new religious Society; vows would be temporary and then perpetual, a commitment for life. They were already 'Salesians' in name; if they joined the Society, they would be Salesians in reality. He asked them to go away, and pray, and think about the step.

The lying propaganda against the older 'useless' Orders had had some effect; 'monks' were not popular; the ebullient Giovanni Cagliero debated long with himself: a life's commitment, here? But then he burst out, "Monk or no monk, I'm going to stick by Don Bosco!" It became a famous saying. The crucial meeting was on December 18th. Seventeen were there, all of

whom signed the document creating themselves the "Society of St. Francis de Sales". By unanimous consent, Don Bosco was elected as the Superior General; other offices were voted for. Don Alasonatti was the only priest and most of the office-holders were teenagers, or nearly so. Boys almost they were, who began this unusual new religious Society; a defect, however, that time would remedy (as Don Bosco dilly pointed out to certain venerable objectors!). Now the Salesians were born, legally!

Crisis for Giuseppe Buzzetti

One famous name was missing from that gathering: Giuseppe Buzzetti had a pistol, which going off when it should not have done, robbed him of a finger. By the rules of those days, that meant he could not be accepted for the priesthood, so he abandoned his studies. He was a large young man, a giant some called him, and a frequent bodyguard to Don Bosco (which probably had more effect on the Saint's safety than we know). He had been in the early days Don Bosco's right hand, taking on every job that was going. Now he saw no prospect before him. Family pressure upset him: "You are wasting your time". He became depressed, decided to pack it all up, went out and got a job and then came to tell Don Bosco.

"You know, Don Bosco, what we have done all these years. Now I'm nothing; these young clerics I taught as boys, taught some of them how to wipe their noses, now are telling me what I have to do. It is too much; I've got a job and I am going. . . ."

Don Bosco, who could have said many things but in his wisdom did not, replied quietly, "You have a job? I hope they're giving you good money? But you'll need something to start you off. Here's the key of the cash box. I don't know what there is in it but there is something. Take what you want and if there isn't enough for your needs just let me know, and I'll get what you want. We have always been good friends, Giuseppe, and I know you will not forget me." Whereupon poor Buzzetti could no longer keep it up; he burst into tears, gave the key back and cried, "No, no, I can't leave you, Don Bosco, and never shall, ever!"

The Brothers

"Religious in shirt sleeves," Don Bosco called them, these Salesian Brothers, or 'Coadjutors'. We shall see some of them later but from the first his idea of them was that they should be as fully Salesian as priests. As the priests, he gave them no distinguishing habit; the priests should dress like the diocesan clergy, the Brothers like every decent layman; and work in

shirt-sleeves! There is a wonderful tradition of Brothers around Don Bosco, some of them simple factotums, some like Giuseppe Buzzetti, craftsmasters, bursars, some professors, in recent years highly professional architects, composers, choirmasters, inventors of new processes in all sorts of arts and trades. Without the Brothers, the Salesian Society would be like a craftsman without an arm. And because they are religious, they have done, and are doing, untold good, mixing as they do easily among the boys and working people the world over. Some of them have died as martyrs, some led such heroic lives that their Cause for Beatification is being studied in Rome.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

STREET ARAB GENERAL

WITHIN A COUPLE of years of the death of Dominic Savio, Don Bosco had found time to write a 'Life' which became a best seller and still sells well today in many languages. But in the same year of Dominic's death, he met another boy of entirely different character whose 'life' he also in due time, felt constrained to write for his boys.

It was a chill, damp foggy evening in the autumn of 1857. Don Bosco was waiting for the Turin train on the platform of Carmagnola station. As he walked down some steps towards the dim lamplight, he saw a group of boys under it, playing cards, with one clear voice dominating all the others. From the bottom steps he jumped to their side, whereupon, the players, seeing through the murk this black figure on top of them, took to their heels and fled. All but one, who stood his ground, demanding, arms akimbo, "Who do you think you are, jumping on us like that?"

"Sorry to frighten you! Call them all back. But I'm Don Bosco. Who are you?"

"I'm Michael Magone. I'm thirteen and the general of my gang." A distant whistle signalled the proximate arrival of the train. There was just time to find out that the boy's father was dead, the mother struggling to bring up the family and he himself, the eldest, having to exist on what he could pick up. The priest nevertheless felt that this boy, desperately poor though he was, a street arab, ripe for good or for evil depending upon who might influence him first, yet had personality and character.

"Look, Michael, take this medal to your Father Arricio and tell him that the priest who gave it to you here wants him to write to him in Turin, telling him all about you." Michael, much mollified, waved to him as the train moved off, obviously another conquest.

The letter from the good Father Arricio confirmed Michael's story as he had sketched it, adding that he proved too lively a character for the school, which threw him out, and although he went to Sunday school, he caused such upset that peace only reigned when he left, to everyone's relief. "Yet all this was due to his high spirits and boundless energy, and not to any malice.

Morally he was not a bad boy and if given a chance, could benefit by it. Perhaps Don Bosco could give him that chance?"

Don Bosco could and did and in due time Michael and his mother arrived at Valdocco. "Well, Michael are you going to turn us upside down, too?"

"Ah, no, Don Bosco, you'll see I'll fit in all right."

"Tell me, now, what do you want to do, to study or to learn a trade?"

"I'd like to study." (Surprising answer!)

"And if you do well at your studies, what then?"

"Well, then, if a rapscallion like me . . . , he laughed.

"If a rapscallion like you . . . ?"

"If a rapscallion like me could ever be good enough, I'd like to become a priest." (Even more surprising!)

He therefore went to the school. But let it be said, when the bell went for class, it was as if it was going for a funeral for Michael, so slowly did this reluctant schoolboy follow the others. But when the bell went for the end of class, out he burst like a rocket, tearing across the playground, leaping and shouting for sheer joy!

He was no plaster saint. The 'Sodality' put a steady boy on him to check him quietly when he used crude expressions and rough ways from his street arab days, which he would accept as quietly, and watch himself.

One day, to give him a little treat, Don Bosco took him out with him on an errand to the city. When they were passing through the market, a boy let out a string of oaths and blasphemies just beside them. Michael, without more ado, smacked him hard in the mouth. Within seconds they were at each other's throats, to the admiration of some of the bystanders. Don Bosco quickly pulled them apart, with Michael hissing at the other, "You can thank this priest for saving you; I'd have beaten you up good and proper. Watch your mouth next time!"

As they moved on, Don Bosco suggested that, while his zeal was praiseworthy, beating up the sinner wasn't perhaps the best way to stop bad language. (But before that 'dream', he would probably have done just that himself!)

Conscience Healed

At school, Michael quickly took the lead and was soon 'captain' of his team (or was he the general?). However, in one recreation, Don Bosco came across him sitting out the game by himself, obviously in low spirits.

"Come, Michael," he said, "I don't like to see you like this. Is there

anything the matter? Aren't you well? Anything I can do?"

The boy hesitated, then said slowly.

"It's a matter of conscience, my conscience. I've a lot on it. When I see the other boys going to Communion, I feel bad."

"Well, you know you have only to go to one of the priests, just to make your confession and you'll feel a lot better."

Of course, it was to Don Bosco that Michael unburdened himself of his faults. Within minutes he was out on the playground, leading his team to victory. "Gosh, I feel grand now!"

It was not long after that when he came across a group in the playground near the gate; a boy was retelling some off-colour jokes to the others, some sniggering, some rather shamefaced but not leaving. Michael kept his fists to himself this time but went close to the storyteller, put his four fingers in his mouth and, inches from the other's ear, let fly a street urchin's whistle that nearly blew the fellow's head off! "Heigh, what do you think you're doing! Have you gone mad?" "No," said Michael, "It's you who've gone mad! Now shut up and be off with you!"

Seven Policemen for One Boy

Gradually his thoughts went more and more to that ultimate goal he had given himself, of the priesthood. He made for himself a list of seven things to notice, he called them 'seven policemen for one boy,' seven pointers to bring him nearer to God. . . frequent confession and communion, devotion to Our Lady, frequent prayer, invoking Jesus and Mary, keeping busy, no pampering of himself, keeping away from bad companions. The hand of Don Bosco is visible here for he had given similar lists to other boys.

On the last day of the year of 1859, Don Bosco gave a 'good night' talk gathering the boys about him under the porticos. He put his hand out and rested it on the head of the nearest boy; it was Michael's. The boys were to thank God for the past year and then ask Him to keep them in His grace through the year to come, "for someone of you may not be here this time next year".

Michael though as he went up to bed, "I wonder if that hand on my head means that I won't be here next year?"

In fact, he fell ill with severe abdominal pains a week later. He said it was nothing, he'd had these pains before and got over them. But they grew worse. By January 19th, his condition was serious; the doctor held little hope. On the 21st, his mother came as he was given the last Sacraments. She then had to return to look after her other children. About midnight, he