

turned to Don Bosco at his side and murmured, "This is it, help me, Don Bosco; tell my mother I am sorry for all the trouble I've given her; tell her to have courage; I'll wait for her in heaven . . . and you, and all my friends". He was still only fourteen. (He was suffering from appendicitis; the first operation for that was still forty years away.) A brave little battler, was Michael and his death was a heavy blow to the sensitive Don Bosco, who felt he must tell the world about him. From his brief book, many others have been written, perhaps the best of them in English, "GENERAL MICKEL," by Father Peter Lappin, SDB, a fine present for any boy.

War is a Cruel and Evil Thing

In that year of 1859, the madness of war had again spread to Europe. A Napoleon who had proclaimed himself the Emperor Napoleon III, and in consort with the Piedmontese King, Victor Emmanuel II, rejected an ultimatum from the Austrian Emperor, Franz Joseph. Sixty thousand Piedmontese troops were mobilized while a hundred and twenty thousand French troops assembled to join them. The Austrians, with 160,000 advanced rapidly across the border in an endeavour to defeat the Piedmontese before the French could arrive. They made rapid progress but were held some thirty-five miles from Turin. Meanwhile the French vanguard paraded through the city streets to the wild acclamation of the people. Don Bosco's comment was that there is no glory in war, only cruelty and evil.

By June 24th both sides were drawn up for battle south of Lake Garda, in what we now call the battle of Solferino. The carriage was dreadful and by the end of the long day, fourteen hours of battle, the Austrians were repulsed, leaving, all three armies, more than 30,000 dead and dying on the field. Henri Durant, who was there, described the horror of the aftermath, of the thousands lying maimed and uncared for; he was later to form the International Red Cross.

The upshot of it all was a change of heart by the French Emperor, who made peace with the Austrians, without reference to his Piedmontese allies, and returned with his army to France. Early in the new year of 1860, Garibaldi took his 'Mille,' '1000,' through Italy to capture Sicily and central Italy. In February, the new Parliament proclaimed Victor Emmanuel 'King of Italy,' *all* Italy. He was not master of all the land but the title was enough. The Papal States still retained their precarious independence.

Chapter Thirty

LONG HIKES AND GOOD HARVESTS

SCHOOL HOLIDAYS ARE, or were, long in Italy, well into October, in the early days of which there was the gathering, by all the family, of the "vendemmia," the vintage, the grape harvest, for the wine industry. For many years Don Bosco used to take a group of boys to his home farm at the Becchi where his good-natured brother, Joseph, and his wife, put them all up cheerfully, in return, no doubt, for a spell or two in the vineyards. There would be about twenty to start; later on, this became an important part of the school programme and a veritable expedition of over a hundred boys would set out as soon as the classes ended. In the final stages, which ended in 1864, the party travelled far and wide, in trains, sometimes offered free by the State. But for less ambitious projects, the Becchi would be the headquarters and every day or so the boys would go on foot to villages and shrines all previously worked out by Don Bosco; a couple of donkeys would carry such things as musical instruments, simple stage props, etc., because they would always repay the bounteous hospitality of the villagers with a concert. The band would line up shortly before entering the village and bring everyone to the doors or in the streets, as they marched in to resounding music, cheers and church bells. When long journeys were arranged, the expedition would stay the night, or nights, the village providing beds, sometimes of leaves or straw, in barns, with food and wine in abundance. There would be a special welcome for Don Bosco, some of the good folk kneeling to ask his blessing or kiss his hands; he would give a talk after night prayers and sometimes at Mass.

One of the offshoots of these travels through the villages was the attraction of many splendid vocations. For instance, in the village of Lu Monferrato, the Rinaldi family lined up ten sons, graduated like the pipes of an organ. Number eight was a bright five year old, Philip. On leaving the village, Don Bosco spoke to each boy but to Philip specially, looking at him intently. In due time Philip became a Salesian, and the third successor of Don Bosco as Rector Major. More of this later.

In another village, a boy of twelve heard the drums of the band and

raced into the main square, pushing with much elbow power right into the first row of spectators. Don Bosco noticed his interest and asked if he would like to join these boys at school in Turin, to learn to play himself. His parents agreeing, Luigi Lasagna started school with the rest; but he was country born, country fed, and after a couple of weeks, was homesick enough to run away. Then he asked if he might return. Some of the young Salesians were not in favour, but Don Bosco said, "No, bring him back. There's a good stuff in that boy, you'll see!" There was: there was never a better Salesian than Luigi Lasagna, who became the Salesians' second bishop, after Cagliero, and a truly great missionary in South America.

Drought and the Promise of Rain

The Lasagna village was called Montemagno, where they still tell of a remarkable event two years after this visit by the boys. Don Bosco was invited to give a triduum in preparation for the feast of the Assumption. There had been no measurable rain for three years and the vines were dying. As he began his first talk, he said to the large congregation: "If you make this triduum well, make your confessions, and all of you go to Holy Communion, I promise you in the name of Our Lady that the rains will come". When he got back into the sacristy, he found the parish priest in no happy mood.

"I must say you were a bold man to say such a thing!"

"Such a thing as what?"

"Why, to promise it would rain if they made the triduum well, rain on the feast day."

"Did I say that?"

"You certainly did and everybody heard you; and I must say I don't like this sort of thing. If it is a fiasco . . . ?" Certainly many of the more sophisticated thought it would be a fiasco as the day of the feast, August 15th, turned out to be one of the hottest, with implacable blue-bronze skies all day, and right up to the final evening service. Don Bosco himself could only pray fervently as he went into the pulpit; then, after a few minutes, the people started looking at each other, the crowded church began to darken, soon there was the roll of thunder, and lightning, and then a deluge! 'Our Lady's Promise' made that sermon the best ever preached in Montemagno! But no-one was more grateful to Her than Don Bosco himself, grateful and vastly relieved!

The final trip of all was in 1864, when the itinerary included the village of Mormese, not far from Genoa, involving a train journey. We shall have

more to say about this but for the moment it is enough to say that the good people gave a wonderful welcome to the boys, encouraged by their great parish priest, Don Pestarino. After night prayers, Don Bosco gave a brief talk in the village square; a young woman, Maria Mazzarello, pushed her way to the front, the better to hear and study Don Bosco. Some of the older matrons made disapproving remarks, but Maria said to herself, "They say he is a saint and now I am sure of it". She was to be the co-foundress and first Mother General of the Salesian Sisters, and of such outstanding holiness that she was canonised on June 24th, 1951.

These three, Rinaldi, Lasagna, Maria Mazzarello, were themselves a splendid harvest from the October trips; but there were many others from these and other families, even to our own days.

Don Rua Ordained

We have jumped to 1864; but 1860 had two outstanding events for Don Bosco. The first on June 23rd, was the loss of his greatest friend, his spiritual father and guide, his unfailing supporter, Don Cafasso. News that he was ill came too late for Don Bosco though he raced to the sick room; Don Cafasso had already gone to God. This wonderful priest was yet another Turin saint and was canonised on June 22nd, 1947.

But God made up for the grievous blow to Don Bosco by, a month later, July 1860, giving him the inestimable gift of the priestly ordination of Michael Rua. Don Rua, as he now became, was Don Bosco's 'other half', his 'alter ego,' and his ordination to the priesthood meant so much to Don Bosco that there was a marked change in him. He was now freer, he could pass on much of the responsibility to Don Rua, could feel able to go out to seek alms and help for his work. The Salesian ideal was safe in Michael Rua's hands.

400 Rolls in an Empty Basket

By 1860, the Oratory had grown to an immense school, with nearly 500 students and 300 working in the trade schools; for most of them Don Bosco had to find almost everything.

Francesco Dalmazzo was fifteen when he came to join one of the higher classes; he came from a comfortable home and did not take kindly to the rather spartan conditions at Valdocco. He revered Don Bosco but found conditions too much and so wrote to ask his mother to come to take him home. However, he decided first to make a last confession to Don Bosco and knelt at his confessional during the morning Mass. He was next in turn

when two older boys came to the priest and told him there was no bread for the breakfast. Breakfast consisted of a "pagnotta," a substantial bread roll and water from the tap! Later there was coffee and milk. "Go to the bakers quickly and fetch the bread, then." "We've been and he won't send any more until he is paid and the Bursar says he hasn't any money." "All right, I'll come myself and see to it; gather what rolls there are."

What followed Francesco later recorded in considerable detail. Briefly, he followed Don Bosco to the kitchen, where they gave him a basket containing 'between fifteen and twenty rolls'. The boys lined up outside the door and Don Bosco distributed to them each a roll; many of them kissed his hand and he had a smile and joke for them all. There were about 400 boys and all received their breakfast roll. Francesco says he stood right behind Don Bosco, watching the whole proceeding. When all was over, he looked into the basket as it was taken away and there were still the fifteen to twenty rolls. His mother, standing near, called him rather impatiently to hurry; but he could only go across to her to say he was sorry she had the journey but he could now no longer leave Valdocco after what he had seen. Here was the hand of God, indeed.

Eyes White, Like Two Mushrooms

He became a Salesian priest and was very near Don Bosco, being in later life entrusted with many important posts. He kept a diary and has left us interesting accounts of the many remarkable events he witnessed, including that of the '400 rolls in an empty basket'. He recounts later how he was once in the sacristy with Don Bosco when a woman came in bringing her little niece, begging the priest's blessing. The child was quite blind, indeed, her eyes, attested Don Dalmazzo, had no cornea, 'they were white, like two mushrooms'. Don Bosco asked the aunt and the child if they loved Our Lady; they assured him that they did. After giving them the blessing of Our Lady, he pulled out a medal of the Madonna and showed it to the child, in spite of the aunt's whispered insistence that it was quite useless. The medal slipped from the child's hands and rolled into a dark corner. She ran after it and picked it up, then, realising what had happened, cried out, "I can see, I can see!"

When the question arose of sending the Salesians to England, Don Bosco sent Don Dalmazzo ahead to report on the possibilities. It appears that the fog and the general environment of the proposed foundation appalled him and his advice was hesitant, in spite of which, Don Bosco sent the first three to Battersea, London, in November 1887, his last personal

foundation. Don Dalmazzo himself was the official Salesian representative at the Vatican for some years; it was in Rome in 1895, that he met his death at an assassin's hands.

By now, he must have met in Heaven the little blind girl he first saw in Valdocco that 16th of May, 1869. Her name was Maria Stardero. In 1916, she returned to Valdocco to confirm that her sight was still perfect. She was then in her sixtieth year and had had no trouble at all. And she added something that Don Dalmazzo did not know. The old aunt who brought her to Don Bosco was at that time suffering greatly from acute rheumatism in her back and in her right arm. After Don Bosco's blessing, the pain at once disappeared and never came back. A bonus from Our Lady!

We must make room for one more event with rather a different ending. A woman came to see Don Bosco, bringing her son whose eyes were bandaged.

"He can't stand the light, Father; he screams with pain if I take the bandage off." Don Bosco suggested they say a little prayer together, blessed the boy and then suggested they take the bandage off. The boy smiled as the priest asked, "Can you see all right? Does the light hurt you?"

"Oh, yes, I can see all right but the light doesn't hurt me a bit now!" The mother frowned, "Now don't say that just because you are here. I am quite sure your eyes must hurt you!"

"No, Mum, they don't now." Don Bosco suggested he go over to the window and look out at the sunlit grounds. The boy showed his delight as he looked but the mother would have none of it.

"Oh, you're just putting on an act. You'll start your screaming at any moment now!" She seemed so incensed that Don Bosco thought she was going to box the child's ears!

"Why, don't you want your son to be cured?" he asked. The reply was lost as she angrily pushed the boy out of the room, with no thought of thanks in any shape or form. Well, it take's all sorts . . . !

Bosco: "When did we ever have any money to do anything? If God wants it, He'll send the means".

Easily said but getting those means took years of weary work for Don Bosco and even more so, Don Rua; they cut down their sleep, they toiled night and day on fund-raising schemes, sweating blood and tears. It certainly demanded faith. The foundations were put in hand at once and when they were ready, the priest turned to the contractor, Carlo Buzzetti, (Giuseppe's brother) to say, "I'd better give you something on account". He pulled out his purse and emptied it into the poor man's hands – forty cents!

"It's all right, Carlo, don't worry, you'll have it all in good time!"

Often the work had to stop for lack of funds; but help would come and they would start again. Don Bosco put the whole project squarely into the hands of his Madonna and how she responded! The word got round of hopeless cases being cured, problems solved against all hope. As people flocked to Don Bosco with their sad stories, he would recommend they first put their souls in order by good confessions and Holy Communion, then start a novena, saying simple prayers for nine days, and he would give them the "Blessing of Our Lady Help of Christians". Offerings flowed in, with startling stories of healing, so much so that Don Bosco began to worry. A Mgr. Bertagno testified under oath at the canonical process for the beatification of Don Bosco, that, at a Retreat, the priest came to him, troubled by the flood of cures, and asked him if he should continue to promote them. "I advised him to continue, for it was plainly God's work."

Our Lady intercedes, God grants, we know, but Don Bosco was afraid that the grateful recipients of all these remarkable graces were attributing them to him, to his prayers, insist though he did that it was Our Lady who was doing it all.

Provocative Title

Of course, he had to ask the permission of the municipality before he could start to build. They seem to have been concerned only with the title, "Mary Help of Christians". "Why that, somewhat provocative, title? Could you not call it the church of Mount Carmel, or of the Rosary? . . . the Madonna has many titles."

"If that's all that's worrying you," laughed Don Bosco, "just give me permission to go ahead and we'll think about the title later on." *We* might see nothing to worry about in the title but in those days of friction between Church and State, there was deep suspicion. Of course, the title "Help of Christians" remained, for, as Don Bosco wrote, "This title, is a

Chapter Thirty-One

THE GREAT SANCTUARY

ALL HIS LIFE Don Bosco attributed the success of his work to the guidance and support of Mary, the Mother of God. She showed him in 'dream-visions' the signposts of his progress, what he would achieve; the *how* she left to him to work out, but actively seconding his work in her own wonderful way.

Adjacent to the original Pinardi property was a large field, growing potatoes, cabbages, lettuce, and the rest. In one of his 'dreams', as far back as 1844, Don Bosco saw himself, with the 'Noble Lady', in this field. She pointed out the first beginnings of his work, the first poor chapel. In later 'dreams', the scene changed and he saw a church, much larger, and other buildings; finally, next to the church, she showed him a magnificent cathedral-like building, which covered, with its other buildings, the whole of the old potato field. Over the entrance to the nave was a white facade in which was written in large capital letters: HIC DOMUS MEA: INDE GLORIA MEA. "Here is my House, whence shall go forth my glory." God's supreme glory.

The word "Valdocco" is an abbreviated corruption of the ancient Latin, "Vallis occisorum" "Valley of the Slain," the 'slain' being two soldiers of the Theban Legion, who became Christians, Aventor and Otavius. "On this spot," said the Lady, "the two martyrs died" (and she put out her foot to indicate the exact place, which Don Bosco carefully noted) "and it is on this spot, sanctified by their blood, that I want God to be honoured." (A golden cross on the pavement in the crypt now marks the spot.)

It was after a long evening hearing confessions that Don Bosco confessed to being almost haunted by the need to build the 'third' great church of the dream. "Our present church is too small now we have hundreds of boys; this new church will be the Mother Church of our Society."

As ever, the Father Bursar objected: "We haven't enough money even to pay for the stamps we need to send out all the begging letters as it is; how can you talk of more, and gigantic, building!" That had no meaning for Don

compendium of all Church History. When we invoke Mary as the Mother of the Church, she it is who saves Popes, and Bishops and people in difficult times.”

Fairy Tale Come True

In September 1866, Don Bosco climbed the high ladders to the cupola, following a delighted boy, the son of generous benefactors; together they laid the final stone. There was still much to do but on June 9th, 1868, the Sanctuary was opened and consecrated, as free of debt. Mgr. Riccardi, Archbishop of Turin, said the first Mass, followed by Don Bosco, whose feelings need no recounting. In addition to what the papers called ‘a distinguished congregation,’ room was found for 1,200 boys. To them in particular, he poured out his thanks to his Madonna.

“You see, you boys, and especially you older boys who have come back, you used to laugh at Don Bosco’s fairy tales about the wonderful things you would see. Well, now, you are in one of them, this marvellous church, a lovely fairy tale church, that Our Lady built herself, because every stone, every piece of marble, came through Her, in one way or another! How we ought to thank Her and ever show Her our trust and our love!” After World War II, the church was further enlarged and beautified and was raised to the rank of a Basilica.

A Reminder

Father Teresio Bosco, author of the best life of Don Bosco in recent years, to which this short account owes a great deal, reminds us that biographers must not give the impression that Don Bosco in these years was the ‘only pebble on the beach,’ as if Our Lady and all Heaven were concentrating their interest and benevolence only on that rather murky district of Valdocco. Wonderful indeed as their help to Don Bosco was, he was by no means the only builder of great churches to the glory of God; he was not the only priest caring for social misfits, not the only one working in hospitals and prisons, running oratories, running evening classes. During the very times we have been describing, four great parish churches went up in the city of Turin, all the work of dedicated, hardworking, devout priests and people. One church, with its various parochial buildings, actually cost almost 500,000 lire more than Don Bosco’s ‘Sanctuary’. The Spirit of God is active everywhere, fruitful in creation. Well, we can’t tell everybody’s tale, but while we concentrate on Don Bosco’s, we acknowledge with admiration the work of many other great men and women of God.

Chapter Thirty-Two

NEW PHASES OF THE WORK

THE ‘LITTLE FATHER,’ Don Borel, once told the boys that cabbages thrive better when they are transplanted; and as the number grew in his infant Society, Don Bosco could never stop transplanting the young shoots. By 1865 there were eighty Salesians, of whom eleven were priests in three Salesian Houses, two of them colleges, and more later. There were losses, too, the biggest and saddest being the death of Don Alasonatti, such a rock of dependence and quiet self-sacrificing work, a grievous blow for Don Bosco. Don Rua, who had been sent to open the new college of Mirabello, was brought back to take his place in the Oratory and at once entrusted with a mountain of work and responsibility. Don Bosco himself found his time more and more taken up with interviews; people would queue on the steps leading to his room, seeking a blessing, a prayer, to give a donation, the sick, the people with problems. His entire mornings used to go, and that meant that more and more, business letters, normal correspondence of all kinds, went into Don Rua’s ‘in’ tray; on the top of all that, was the gigantic labour of funding the ‘Sanctuary’. It began to be too much even for his willing spirit.

Don Rua’s Collapse

Don Bosco always said that Michael Rua did three men’s work; for that, he never slept enough, never ate enough, never rested enough, in fact, never rested at all. And on July 29th, of this year of 1868, he collapsed. The doctor diagnosed peritonitis, too advanced, in his exhausted state, to give much hope. Don Bosco was away and found the Oratory in considerable alarm when he got back. Oddly enough, in spite of urgent pleas to go to see Don Rua at once, he went to hear confessions; and then, still more surprisingly, to have some supper; nor did he seem to be in the least worried. Finally he went up to find poor young Michael seemingly at his last gasp. “Is this the end for me, Don Bosco? Please tell me if I am going to die?” “Die? Of course you’re not! I just can’t do without you! Even if we threw you through the window, Michael, you wouldn’t die! There’s far too much to do!”

On the table was the phial for the Holy Oils; in those days of “Extreme

Uncion," they were administered really as the *last* anointing, you had to be at death's door. "You can take these away, Father," Don Bosco said to the anxious priest who had brought them up, "they are not needed just yet". Neither were they. In a few days the patient showed signs of marked improvement. In a couple of weeks, Don Bosco sent him away for a month's rest and recuperation and he came back, much improved, to tackle, uncomplainingly, another mountain of work. Some years later, a young Salesian asked Don Bosco if it were true that some Salesians had died of overwork.

"If they did, it would be no disgrace to our Society; but in fact there was only one who was a victim of overwork and that was Don Rua, and you see him today, still doing three men's work."

New Directives for the Salesians

On the political front, the impulse for a united Italy grew even stronger. The Court still favoured an independent Papal State, the Liberal anti-clericals and their adherents, opposed it. Italy as a whole had 22,000,000 inhabitants, of whom 80% could neither read nor write. There was grave unrest still in industry where employers were still paying meagre wages for a twelve hour day. After Karl Marx's 'Manifesto,' unions proliferated throughout Europe, indeed the world, and workers everywhere protested, demanding fair conditions and fair pay. There were said to have been five thousand strikes in Europe alone, many put down by the military, with hundreds of deaths. In Chicago, strike leaders were hanged. Nevertheless, it was to the West that the eyes of the depressed millions were turned. Successive failures of the potato crop in Ireland sent hundreds of thousands to America, the Italians rather preferring the more congenial South America, especially Argentina; 500,000 were said to have emigrated in one year. It was to these, "our compatriots, suffering in ignorance" that Don Bosco was soon to send his Salesians on rescue missions.

In the meantime, the Liberal State was not having all its own way. There was a Catholic reaction and soon all over Italy 'Catholic' associations began to appear: Catholic unions, Catholic banks, Catholic insurance companies, Catholic schools and colleges. Don Bosco joined in this movement to the limit of his resources. He did not, of course, forsake his work for the abandoned poor; every new Salesian House had its 'Festive Oratory,' there were 'hospices' for the trade school boys. But to compete with the State schools it was essential to open more Catholic secondary schools, colleges which usually had boarders, to provide a solid, Catholic educated body of men, fitted to have a voice in the direction of their country. Don Bosco and

New Phases of the Work

the Salesians were not of course the only religious society to open these schools. Longer established Orders made, at the beginning, far greater contributions to the demand for Catholic education and it was the work of these dedicated religious men and women, working without salaries, that enabled the poor to take their place in these schools. For the Salesians, Don Bosco followed the advice of Pius IX: they were to continue their work for the poor: in their colleges, they were to charge only minimum fees; they were not to accept schools for the well-to-do.

The new Salesian colleges started with bare boards, the young communities (the first Rectors themselves were all in their twenties!) submitting cheerfully to spartan conditions. Fees were indeed minimal but very often poverty-pleading parents were excused even these. In the early years, before they could organise their own fund-raising schemes, Don Bosco had often to come to the rescue of his hard up youngsters.

Fearful stories are sometimes told how he would send them to take charge of a bare House with little more than their fare in their pockets. It was a hard school, hard training, but they survived. In real trouble he was the kindest and most concerned of fathers. In 1864, a Don Bonetti was the bursar at Mirabello, which was struggling. He had many problems, was feeling miserable from a persistent cough and, truth to say, was very, very sorry for himself. He wrote to Don Bosco. Here is the lovingly preserved reply:

Dear John,

As soon as you get this letter, you are to go straight to Don Rua and tell him he has to cheer you up! You are not to think of saying your Breviary until after Easter. I just forbid you to say it. When you say Mass, take your time about it, don't tire yourself. As for fasting this Lent, I forbid it all. Eat what you need with a good conscience. The good Lord is preparing some new work for you but doesn't want you to even think about it until you are perfectly well again, not having even one little cough left. Make up for it all by saying a few more little prayers, accepting your troubles with patience, giving what good example you can. You will please Our Lord with that.

I was forgetting one thing. See that you have a good mattress on your bed, making yourself comfortable just as you would for some delicate old chap who takes his bed soft! In bed and out of bed, just look after yourself and get well again soon. Amen!

*Yours with all affection,
D. John Bosco*

This, from one who was known for his personal merciless austerity! You just couldn't raise another grumble after that, could you?

Chapter Thirty-Three

MAN ON A WHITE HORSE; PRELUDE TO THE SISTERS

THE RIDER WAS the Reverend Don Giovanni Bosco, bringing up the rear, following his Valdocco band and boys, plus half the children of the village into the village of Mornese. It was October 1864 and what was to prove the last major October hike; later hikes were nearer home.

They had set off by train, a free trip from the railway, from Turin to Genoa, thence, after a long walk, to Mornese. News of their approach had gone ahead and the children flocked out to meet them. As they came, after sunset, into the main street, there were lights everywhere, fireworks going off, church bells ringing and everybody shouting a welcome. Outside the church was the smiling Don Pestarino who had transformed this sleepy village into a fervent Catholic community. It was he who had sent the white horse to bring Don Bosco in after the long day on foot.

Proceedings were short that first night. Night prayers in the village square after which a few words from Don Bosco thanking them for their welcome and for the hospitality they were offering to him and his boys. Foremost in the crowd was the young woman Mary Mazzarello; she did not want to miss a word. "I am sure he is a saint." It was a day marked in Heaven for from it came great things for God.

Mary was twenty-seven. She and a friend had set up a dressmaker's shop where she put into practice her membership of the Sodality of Mary Immaculate, that was, helping others. Especially the young. They taught the village girls to sew, but also to pray with their work, to sing, to play games in their little courtyard; it was already a little 'festive oratory' after the heart of Don Bosco, a small corner of happiness.

One day a travelling salesman knocked at their door. Two little girls half hid behind him. "My wife has died," he said, "and I cannot look after these children. Could you help me?" Mary looked at their tear-stained faces and swept them up in her arms. It was not long before others came until there were seven such 'orphans'. Other Sodality members wanted to join Mary to help; Don Pestarino, who was all in favour, turned over his own house to them.

Don Bosco's party stayed five days at Momnese and such was the enthusiasm of the people that it was decided to build a school for boys (in those days the poor girls were given scant thought) if Don Bosco would send his Salesians to run it for them, which he gladly promised. The chronicles record the happy ending of the visit. The entire village lined up outside the church after Mass, many offering gifts of eggs, cheeses, choice grapes, chickens, bottles of wine, even a five gallon barrel of the local produce!

As Don Bosco, embarrassed, simply expressed his thanks and began to move away, the crowd cried, "You must bless us before you go!" "I do indeed bless you," he said, "I bless you and your families and your fields with all my heart that God may keep you from all harm, blessing you in all your undertakings; I beg you in turn to pray for me and my boys."

The White House

One day Mary Mazzarello, walking on the fields, looked across the valley to the village of Momnese on the opposite hill and was astonished to see a large white building, where no such building could possibly be; in the attached playground she saw Sisters and girls playing with enthusiasm. She rubbed her eyes, blinked and stared; and then it was no longer there. She said nothing at the time, but wondered.

Ably supported by Don Pestarino, she continued her work amongst the children and more village girls came to join her, though most still lived at home. Since the Sodality of Mary Immaculate was a country wide organisation and was still active in the parish, Don Pestarino thought it better to give Mary's group the name of "Daughters of Mary Help of Christians". The great 'sanctuary' was being built at the time and it is obvious where this title came from. Don Pestarino asked to be admitted to the Salesian Society and was accepted, but Don Bosco asked him to continue his work in Momnese where he was quite indispensable. Meanwhile the project of building the 'boys school' had begun, with voluntary labour.

About this time, Don Bosco conceived the idea, no doubt fostered by Our Lady of doing for girls what he had done for boys. He called his 'Superior Council' together and discussed the matter with them. He gave them time to ponder over it; in the end their opinion was unanimous that a Society of Sisters should be formed. In August 1871, he went to Rome to discuss the matter with the Pope, Pius IX, whom he found very much in favour; "They must do for girls what your Salesians are doing for boys. Draw up draft Constitutions for them; they should depend on you and on

your successors". In Momnese was the readymade cradle.

In January 1872, Don Pestarino called the "Daughters of Mary Help of Christians" together and suggested that they begin to live in community. Twenty-seven of them voted to elect a Superior. Twenty-one named Mary Mazzarello. She protested her unsuitability. She had never been to a school, although she could read and write. She was thirty-five and would have to start studying standard Italian since she spoke only the local dialect. Don Bosco, however, confirmed her as Superior, understanding that by her gifts of nature and of grace she was well qualified. He sent her a draft of the proposed 'Constitutions' for her comment.

Black Looks and Healing Death

Meanwhile the 'do-it-yourself' building was going ahead, the villagers working hard and generously. Then came a blow. A new Bishop decided that a school in Momnese could conflict with a junior seminary he was sponsoring not far away and reversed his predecessor's decision. Loyalty to the Bishop sealed the lips of the two priests concerned; Don Bosco took the blame, instructing Don Pestarino to tell the villagers that he could not now undertake to run the school for them. This not unnaturally roused the ire of the poor villagers who had given up so many weekends in hard work. Matters did not improve when the local Council of the Commune decided that Mary Mazzarello's group should occupy the building since in their care for the orphans they were doing public service.

Against the open hostility of their friends and relations in the village, it took all of Mary's unfailing optimism and leadership to hold her little group together, made all the more difficult by their stark poverty. Their farmer mothers and fathers were only partially reconciled to losing their daughters; it seems that every Italian mother looks forward to being the "Nonna," the grandmother, to many children. Mary's own mother may well have been one of these but her splendid father was always her best and staunchest supporter and many a basket of food went quietly to that house, now the 'white house' of Mary's daytime vision.

Nevertheless, there was great joy among all the Sisters when the crucial day dawned, August 5th, 1872, their official birthday. Fifteen Sisters received the habit, eleven made the first, triennial, vows. Don Bosco mentioned their troubles but assured them that they would pass if they had courage and trust in God and Our Lady, their patron, the Help of Christians, whose 'Daughters' they now were, officially.

On January 29th, 1874, the first death came. One of the happiest and

youngest, Sister Maria Poggio, fell ill and without fuss, quietly slipped away. Her funeral, attended by her sorrowing young companions, saying the rosary through their tears as they walked, suddenly moved the assembled people and from then on, all hostility ceased, and the true Christian kindness of these simple country folk came through. Don Pestarino had done his work well; and on the very day, shortly after, when he was telling the Sisters that "death could come upon us at any hour, any minute," he fell and died, aged only fifty-seven. Without him there would never have been so firm a foundation for what has become one of the great 'Orders' of the Church.

Every Stitch an Act of Love for God

We have seen something of the mystery of grace in Dominic Savio. Mary, born five years before him, showed from her earliest childhood something of the same extraordinary intuitive cooperation with grace. She knew the value of the Mass and the sacraments. She was conscious of the abiding presence of God, not as an accusing monitor but as a loving Master whom it was a joy and privilege to serve, to do something for. She had heard at Mass the preacher quoting St. Paul, "Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do it for the love of God." So she would tell her little girl apprentices, "Every stitch we make, let's do it for the love of God," just to show Him we love Him, "not only when we say our prayers but when we have our dinner, when we sing our hymns or comic songs, when we play games, when we have to stay in to finish some work". This simple creed for the children was also valid for her young Sisters. In her talks to them, in her advice to them, in her practical letters, there was always this theme of joy, of happiness because whatever we did, we did for the love of Our Lord.

Superiors in religious communities have to be careful to observe to perfection both the letter and the spirit of their Rule. Mary, of course, was exemplary in this but she did not forget her humanity. Sister Margaret Renshaw tells us a delightful story of this. It seems that when the first Sisters received their habit, they wore only a head scarf. It was decided that they should have a veil, like all the other Orders. There was considerable excitement when the veils arrived and giggles when the Sisters began to try them on. But, alas, there were no mirrors. By order. But one bright daughter of Eve produced a solution. She filled a bucket to the brim from the well in the courtyard. (It is still there, the well, not the bucket.) She looked into it and put her veil straight. Whereupon the others did the same, and so, laughing like the rest, did Mother Mary Mazzarello. They loved her for it.

The First Swarming of the Bees

After only four years, in 1876, the first 'bees' began to swarm. The first three went off on a freezing February morning to open a school and oratory thirty-five miles away. As more prospective novices came in, twenty-six professed Sisters left Mornese that year, for work, some of it in concert with the Salesians. Seven of them went off to a seaside home for scrupulous children, among the seven being Sister Enrichetta Sorbona, working with cheerful loving care, remembering the day when she herself had knocked at the door of Mornese, holding on to four sisters, each tinier than herself.

In 1875, Don Bosco had sent off his first missionaries to Argentina. For the third expedition, in 1877, he asked Mother Mazzarello for some Sisters. She at once chose six, of many volunteers. They were asked to go to Rome where Pius IX must have been astonished to meet the 'Superior' of the group, aged twenty-two. The second in command was just seventeen. She was the only one with any Spanish. These inexperienced, innocent girls faced a life no-one could tell them anything about. They set off with all Mother Mazzarello's cheerful confidence that they would do great things for God. Which they most certainly did. There are heroisms beyond pulling people out of burning houses, heroisms that last years.

Only the Superior Could Obey

Mother Mazzarello had never, after contracting typhus as a girl, been really strong and it was noticeable in 1880 that she was frequently ill. It was when saying farewell to another missionary group of her Sisters in January 1881 that she went down with pleurisy and became desperately ill. She made some recovery but only as a passing phase. In the spring, Don Bosco went to see her. The doctors had been shaking their collective heads and doing her little good with their often painful remedies when she asked Don Bosco what he thought of her condition. He said nothing but began to tell her a story.

"One day, Death came to a convent. He knocked at the door and when it was opened, asked the Sister doorkeeper to come with him. She refused, who would look after the door? He went to the kitchen and asked the Sister cook; she refused, too, for who would cook the meals? He asked each one, in vain, and finally came to the Superior. There was no-one else; so she had to go." Mary understood and accepted it.

As May came in, bringing with it all the glory of the flowers, so beloved by Mary, she began to fail; and on the 14th, she went to God. She was only forty-four and had been for just nine years the Mother General, nine

wonderful years of constant growth. She had opened twenty-five Houses, convents, schools, oratories, there were 139 Sisters, with fifty novices waiting in the wings. When Don Bosco died, seven years later, there were 390 Sisters with a hundred novices. Today there are, through God's providence, more than 1,500 foundations throughout the world, with some 17,000 Sisters. Mother Mary Mazzarello wrote no books, in her life there were no miracles that we know of, although there were certain unexplained events. She was the most unassuming of God's servants, but He showed, after her death, by granting miraculous cures through her intercession, that she had indeed served Him with heroic sanctity. She was canonised on June 24th, 1951.

Her immediate successor was Mother Catherine Daghero, then aged twenty-five. She had already been Superior for some years in Turin! Just before taking the habit, she was assailed with a fit of the deepest depression and doubts and wanted to withdraw. Mary Mazzarello told her firmly that the moment she was clothed with the habit, all doubts would disappear, which indeed they did. Mother Catherine ruled the Sisters for the next forty-two years, taking them well into the twentieth century and leaving them a worldwide influence for great good.

Chapter Thirty-Four

PARIS FALLS, ROME FALLS AND A TREMOR SHAKES VALDOCCO

THE STORY OF 'Salesian Sisters' might have seemed to us quite the most important event in these years. Alas, there were other things going on which we cannot ignore. The year 1870 saw two historical events which, each in its own way, shook the world. Pope Pius IX called the bishops of the Catholic world to a new Council (the first in the Church since that of Trent, 300 years before), the chief theme of which was to be the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff. Seven hundred bishops, with heads of religious Orders and others, gathered in Rome for the beginning of this Vatican Council on December 8th, 1869. While they were there, the city of Rome fell to Italian troops.

Don Bosco was in Rome at the start of the Council and twice saw Pius IX, who urged him to add another chapter to his "HISTORY OF THE CHURCH," explaining papal infallibility and also to include this in the current printing of the "CATHOLIC READINGS". Before leaving, Don Bosco handed the Pope a statement written in prophetic language concerning events in the immediate future. By April the Council had approved unanimously of a document, "Dei Filiis," giving a clear exposition of Catholic teaching concerning God, Divine revelation and Faith. It also affirmed that, when perfectly understood, there could be no conflict between science and faith since they both came from God. The Council then, on May 15th, began the debate on papal infallibility. After a month a Bishop could write, "We are embarked on a perilous journey in a ship beset by rough waves, on which we are all seasick". The majority were in favour of a definition, with the Pope, but a strong minority argued that such a definition, as a dogma of faith, could only increase the separation between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities.

However, on July 18th, 1870, the Council accepted the text of the declaration, which was read by the secretary, accompanied by one of the most violent thunderstorms ever experienced in Rome. It declared that it was of faith that the Pope was infallible when defining a doctrine concerning faith or morals as being part of the deposit of divine revelation, this in virtue of the Divine promise to Peter. The Council was adjourned for a month; but