

## *Chapter Eight*

### THE SEASON OF FRIENDSHIPS

IN THE AUTUMN of 1832 John Bosco began his final two years at Chieri. He was eighteen, the age of friendship. Apart from his little army of followers, there was a close circle of intimate friends some of whom remained so until the end of their lives. One of the early ones was a Jew, Giacomo Levi. In the Piedmont of the time, Jews were second class citizens, with many disadvantages. They had to live in a ghetto while coping with a Gentile world. As an Orthodox Jew, Giacomo was forbidden to do any work on the Sabbath, the Saturday, not even his homework. John settled that problem by doing it for him; but there was much else. Naturally, the friends discussed their respective beliefs. Giacomo became interested in Christianity and eventually, to John's delight, and despite threats and warnings from his family, was baptised; he remained true to his newly adopted faith and his friendship with John Bosco until his death.

Another close friend was Luigi Comollo, a classmate, gentle, reserved, the very opposite of John. Once in the delayed absence of the class master, a free-for-all developed to which Comollo played the slightest attention, getting on with his work. This annoyed some of the wilder sort and they tried to drag him into the fray, finally resorting to blows. John saw red, and forgetting that dream 'not by blows but by gentleness,' waded in to protect his friend. In fact, lacking any weapon, he picked up one of the attackers and used him as a battering ram to scatter the others. Comollo's comment was, "You frighten me, John. Your great strength was not given you to massacre your companions. As Christians we have to turn the other cheek." John, suitably chastened, went to confession and started again to try to keep that resolution. It was never easy for him. Of Luigi Comollo, we shall have much more to say.

But as the school years ended he began to think hard about his future. A priest, yes, but just how long could he expect his poor mother to find the means? The seminary fees would be beyond her. He thought hard about joining an Order. They would advance him to the priesthood without burdening his mother; in fact, he approached the Franciscans who told him

they were prepared even to forego the fees they usually asked from students before profession.

On the other hand, as his parish priest pointed out, as a parish priest he would be able to support his mother in her old age, which he would not be able to do in a monastery. Margaret, however, would have none of this argument. In fact, she told John, that if he ever had the misfortune to become a wealthy priest she would not darken his doors; she wanted nothing from his priesthood. Then John had a dream of an old friar who said to him, "You will not find with us the peace you are looking for". But who bothers about dreams? Someone suggested, "Why not talk to Don Cafasso?" Why not, indeed. Don Giuseppe (Joseph) Cafasso was himself a native of Castelnuovo d'Asti, a young priest still, but talked about for his austere life and his extraordinary discernment.

He listened carefully while John told him of the financial problem and the dilemma. His reply was clear. "Forget about the monastery. Go to the seminary which is your true vocation. As for the means, do not worry. God will provide." John accepted this counsel without hesitation, as he went on doing for many years, as Don Cafasso became his confessor, his spiritual director, his mentor and benefactor, one of the major influences of his life and work.

of fresh air. His Chieri boys would clamour at the gate to see him and he could spend a happy couple of hours with them; it was the highlight of the week. Not that he was unhappy; he was doing what he had worked and prayed for and it was good indeed. In writing later about his seminary days, he had two adverse remarks. One was that the superiors kept aloof from the students. The sight of one in the courtyard would cause the students to scatter. John resolved that when he was a priest he would change all that; he would be the first to approach the young. The other sadness concerned the indifference of a minority of the students; some did considerable harm to the weaker ones. He was also rather saddened that the rule laid down, in those rather Jansenistic days, Holy Communion only at the low Mass on Sundays. When the students filed in silence into breakfast during the week, it was possible to slip aside and go to the nearby church of St. Philips: one paid for it by foregoing breakfast. John, and some of the more devout students, did this as often as possible.

In John's second year, Luigi Comollo entered and the two at once resumed their close friendship. Though two years younger, Luigi rather led the way in spiritual things. He would pull John away from recreation for a further half-hour in the chapel; at table he would fast, not only rigorously in Lent, but find many a pretext to do so during the year. Often he would merely dip his bread into water at a main meal. There was no-one to moderate his austerities. Truth to say, he ruined his health by them; in later years when Don Bosco was guiding the young Dominic Savio to sanctity, he would not allow him to go too far. But who are we to judge? God must have loved Luigi in his foolishness, born of love and of sorrow for the sins of the world.

## Chapter Nine

### THE SEMINARY

DON CAFASSO WAS, of course, right about God providing. John's new parish priest's support moved two parishioners to settle John's bill for the final school year, and Don Cafasso himself persuaded the Rector of the seminary to grant him a gratuitous first year.

First had to come the clothing, the vesting of the clerical cassock. This took place in the parish church of Castelnuovo d'Asti, before a large and admiring congregation. There were many tears, from those who knew John's, and Margaret's, story; happy tears too, from Margaret herself. It would be six years before she could call her son 'Don Bosco' but the black cassock was the sure sign that he was on the way, the proof of God's approval. For John, of course, it was a happy day but a solemn one. He drew up, in a personal notebook, a list of stern resolutions, such as he deemed essential for a clerical student on the way to the priesthood. His best biographer comments that he did not keep them all since, like the rest of us, he was flesh and blood; but at least they pointed the way.

On October 30th, 1835, John being now twenty, he entered the great gates of the seminary. He joined the long line of clerics who filed into the chapel to the solemn strains of the organ in the 'Veni Creator'; they settled in for the opening retreat.

The course was for six years, two of philosophy and four of theology, as indeed it is today. The Chieri seminary had only been opened since 1829 but it conformed in every way to the iron discipline and inflexible timetable laid down centuries before in the Counter Reformation. The first thing the students had to learn was that the bell was the voice of God and woe betide anyone who did not instantly obey it. The rising would be at 5 a.m., the day long, and truth to say, monotonous in its unvarying pattern. Meals were taken in silence, a reader supposedly keeping the students interested as he read the history of the Church or the lives of the Fathers. Food was simple, rough and at times, sparse; a stern notice reminded all that "We eat to live, not live to eat". Recreation time after lunch helped to ease the tension but only on Thursday afternoons, free of all studies, could John get a real breath

and it is no wonder that year after year John Bosco carried off the major prizes for study. To these, oddly enough in a seminary, were attached substantial financial rewards, which helped to cover his fees in the final years.

The full course of theology at Chieri lasted not four but five years but by special permission of the Archbishop, John was allowed to cover the fourth year course during the final holiday period which he did successfully.

But first there occurred a strange, disturbing event. One day Luigi Comollo remarked to John how little we know for certain as to who was saved, who went to heaven, or not; even for the apparently pious, there was always a doubt. He proposed to John that, the one who might die the first, would find some means of letting the other know whether he was in heaven or not. Foolishly and dangerously, John agreed and they made a pact.

Shortly afterwards, Luigi collapsed and on April 2nd, 1839, with John holding his hand in grief, he died. He was twenty-two. On the night of April 3rd/4th, as all the students were asleep in the dormitory, they were awakened by a terrible noise approaching the room; some described it as like a 'huge wagon, drawn by galloping horses'. As it approached the door, with an ever increasing roar, the students, including John, leapt from their beds in terror. The door burst open with a blinding flash and there was heard the voice of Luigi Comollo crying, "Bosco, Bosco, I am saved!" The noise then died away and the door closed. John was overwhelmed by the experience and took months to recover. "I fell ill," he said, "and was in bed for months, nearly dying myself." It was a grim warning to him and to all of us that we should not attempt to find out what God does not as a rule choose to reveal to us.

However, he recovered, completed his studies and was admitted to the subdiaconate and diaconate. Finally, on June 5th, 1841, he was ordained by Archbishop Fransoni in his private chapel in Turin.

The next day, he said his first Mass in the church of St. Francis of Assisi, assisted by his friend and benefactor, Don Calasso. It was the greatest day of his life, he said, as it is for every priest. He prayed for and remembered all who had helped him to that day, his wonderful mother, his dear ones, the family dead, his benefactors with a special memento of his dear Don Calosso, who had indeed done so much to put him on the way.

The next day was the feast of Corpus Christi and this Mass he said in his parish church, in the presence of his mother and family, and of all who had followed his progress through the years, remembering him as the boy who could do so many tricks, how he would entertain them, the boy whom they

## *Chapter Ten*

### THEOLOGY: THE RUN UP TO THE PRIESTHOOD

PHILOSOPHY SCHOOLS ENDED on June 24th, John's 'feast day,' that of St. John the Baptist. He walked the twelve kilometres to his brother Joseph's farm, where he was warmly welcomed by the little family, by Mary the wife and Filomena, the baby daughter. Margaret lived there too but often went to help out at other farms.

John tells us in his 'Memorie' that once when he was working in his brother's vineyard, he started a hare. Without thinking he rushed into the house, grabbed his brother's shotgun and set off across fields and vineyards in chase followed by an enthusiastic group. When after five wild kilometres he finally caught up with the poor animal and shot it, he suddenly remembered the second of his fine 'clothing day' resolutions: "I shall refrain in future from all such things as conjuring, acrobatics and hunting". Ah, well . . .

Theology classes began on November 3rd, 1837. Theology is the science that studies God. Its chief elements are Dogmatic theology, the study of Christian truth, Moral, the laws governing Christian morality, Scripture, the word of God, Canon Law, the laws of the Church, Church History, the story of Christianity and its development to modern times. There are several subsidiary subjects deemed to develop the priest's maturity and understanding of the world he lives in. Anyone who works through these sometimes difficult courses conscientiously must be considered as a 'professional' in all the modern connotation of the word.

John Bosco was always a ready student inclined to overwork rather than to slack. Apart from the compulsory subjects he filled his remarkable memory with all the riches he could gather from an extensive library. He was reputed to know the entire four Gospels in Greek and Latin by heart, as likewise he did such classics as Dante's 'Divina Commedia'. He was highly intelligent but not, perhaps, brilliant in the sense of being creative or intuitive. His memory made him an accurate and orderly recorder of known facts, as is evident in the popular books he was later to write. Seminary examiners are apt to demand a great deal of memorial accuracy

would meet on the hills, with bare feet, and carrying a book.

Now he was 'Don Bosco'. When Margaret that evening was able to get him to herself for a minute, she said, "Now John, you are a priest and near to Our Lord. I haven't read all your books but believe me when I tell you that when you start to say Mass you will start to suffer. You won't know at once but gradually it will dawn on you. All you must do now has to be for the salvation of souls; you must not bother about me at all."

Among the written resolutions he made that day was this one: "The charity and gentleness of St. Francis de Sales shall be my guide in all I do".

## *Chapter Eleven*

### THE REAL WORLD

IT SEEMS THAT, at that time, diocesan priests were not, after ordination, automatically appointed to curacies. Don Bosco was offered various posts, as chaplain or tutor and was free to choose. He turned to Don Cafasso who told him not to take any of them. "Come to us at the Convitto, where you'll do some extra study, some pastoral work and find out where your real work lies."

The Convitto, the St. Francis Priests' House, had been set up by the Seminary Rector, D. Guala, as a two-year perfectionist course for forty-five priests; he had recruited Don Cafasso, who again helped Don Bosco about fees. Don Bosco actually stayed three years there taking his share in lecturing but mainly increasing his priestly experience and meeting the real world of his future work.

On December 8th, 1841, when he was about to offer the Mass of the Immaculate Conception in the church of St. Francis of Assisi, there was a commotion in the sacristy. A boy had crept in; seeing him the sacristan told him to serve Don Bosco's Mass. "I can't, I don't know how." "Then what are you doing here, you rascal! Get out, clear off!" and the irate old man began to belabour the boy with the broom. The priest intervened, "What are you doing, Giuseppe?" as the boy fled. "Call him back, he's a friend of mine." With difficulty, the boy was persuaded to return.

"As soon as I've said Mass, we'll have a talk" and after Mass Don Bosco took him off to a quiet corner. He was an orphan, came from the country, was sixteen, had made a first confession but no more, had forgotten even how to make the sign of the cross. His name was Bartholomew Garelli. "Can you read and write, son?"

"No."

"Can you sing?"

"Sing? No!"

"Can you whistle . . . like this?"

"Oh, yes!" They laughed and were friends.

"Come along on Sunday and bring a few friends; but first let's say a Hail

Mary” and together they went through the little prayer to Our Lady which, forty-five years later, Don Bosco said was the real start of his work. On the Sunday Garelli came, with eight other building apprentices like himself, to meet the “priest who can whistle, too”.

Each Sunday, the numbers grew; soon there was some difficulty in finding suitable venues for what was the beginning of Don Bosco’s ‘Festive Oratories’; Festive, because they took place on Sundays and days when there was no work, holy days of obligation, feast days; and Oratory, because they were a mixture of pray and play. Don Bosco was free to devote the entire Sunday to them. They would gather at an appointed spot and he would lead them off into the country or to some outlying shrine where he would have arranged to say Mass for them, to give them a short talk, a little catechism, hear confessions, even; and then have a full afternoon of noise and bustle and games of all sorts. He would find little prizes, again helped by Don Cafasso, and even bread and fruit for those without. They would finish up in the evening with Benediction, given a final thought, told where to meet the following week and so home, often some of them escorting a weary priest back to his lodgings.

Meanwhile he was meeting a new world, utterly different than that of his simple country existence, where poverty existed but not destitution, where families still lived Christian lives as he and his brothers had lived at the Becchi.

Rural life could no longer support the teeming thousands who flocked into the city for work and lodging. The industrial revolution, begun largely in England, was sweeping through Europe, and Italy was no exception. Ill-paid, if they had any work at all, ill-lodged, many of the innocents from the country soon fell into gangs, driven to crime and degradation. As the Lady had said to him as a small boy, “These are to be your field of work”. He was appalled when he realised it fully. For all his strength of mind and body, Don Bosco was deeply sensitive, soon sickened by what he saw.

Made of sterner stuff, surprisingly, was the frail, almost hunchbacked Don Cafasso who, theologian and ascetic though he was, made it his business to go into the prisons and work untingly with the inmates. He was, of course, met at the start with the usual derision, blasphemies and obscenities, but he persisted, would never give anyone up, ever trying to bring a little Christian love and understanding into a dreadful environment. Eventually he was accepted, and because he would accompany even the worst criminals to the scaffold, became known as ‘the apostle of the gallows’.

He would urge Don Bosco to accompany him or take his place, which he would gladly do, but at times it would be more than he could stand.

his need. Don Cafasso, however, constrained him to make the effort.

The actual hanging was to be in the large town of Alexandria. Trains in 1846 were primitive and open. The sentence stipulated that the prisoners would be visible to all as the train stopped at every station, where passengers could join it. The two priests were on this 'death' train, which arrived in the evening before the execution. They were at once taken to the prison. In his 'Life' of Don Cafasso, Don Bosco described what happened in some detail.

"Each of the prisoners was in a cell by himself. When I entered, the poor boy flung himself on me, weeping bitterly. There was one guttering candle for light and we sat in front of it. I tried to find words to comfort him. I helped him to make his last confession, to express his sorrow for what he had done." Don Bosco used all his experience, all his love and pity, to console the weeping frightened boy, his own tears not very far away. "See the crucifix; Our Lord was sinless, yet He suffered, suffered for you too. He had to die, so He has been through all this before us. Now you have made your confession, you are sorry for all the sins of your life, so you have nothing to fear. Remember what Our Lord said to that thief on the cross beside Him, 'This day, you will be with Me in Paradise.'? Think of Him saying that to you, too." It was never easy to find words to answer the ultimate question "Why must I die?"

About two in the morning, the guards came to take them to the prison chapel. There were just the two of them. Don Bosco said the Mass at which the boy received Holy Communion. There they sat together until daybreak. Shortly afterwards, the governor came in, accompanied by the hangman, who, as was the custom, knelt down to receive the prisoner's pardon. He then put a noose round his neck and bound his hands. As they were lining up at the main doors, there came the boom of the great bell of the Cathedral; it was the signal to all the city, the 'passing bell,' that someone was near death. This was common in Italy, but all his life, Don Bosco could never hear it without recalling that slow, solemn beat on that awful day.

Outside there were three carts, each with two horses. In the first was a local priest with one of the prisoners, in the second Don Bosco and the boy, and Don Cafasso in the third with the boy's father. Leading the slow procession was a group of blackhooded 'Fratelli della Misericordia,' Brothers of Mercy, headed by one of them bearing a tall crucifix. The Brothers began to chant the Psalm 'Miserere,' in Latin, as they walked, repeating it as the solemn beat of the great bell kept time. The crowds were largely silent, at least at the start; many of the women would make the sign of the cross, staring in awe or fear as the sombre procession passed by.

## Chapter Twelve

### TWO SAINTS AT A HANGING

*Three men hung from three crosses, condemned to a public death in the sight of all who cared to look, to mock or to mourn. Over the head of the centre one was a crudely written sign in three languages, naming the prisoner as, 'King of the Jews'. One of the hanging criminals joined in the mockery. "Look at him! Some king! Some throne! Why can't your majesty get us down from here?" But the other would not have it. "Shut up, you! We're getting what we've been asking for a long time but this poor fellow hasn't done anything!" Poor deluded king, pity him. "Sir," he said, "remember me when you come into your kingdom." He heard from the suffering man by his side: "I tell you, this day you will be with me in Paradise." Paradise? Paradise? But through the pain and the misery and the despair, there came to that pitying prisoner a sudden lifting of the heart.*

BY THE END of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century capital punishment could still cover crimes which today would scarcely earn more than a couple of months in prison or even, perhaps, a fine. We may joke, "Might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb!" but then, a man could hang for stealing a lamb. Italy was no exception, though the actual laws might differ in one or other of the petty kingdoms. In Piedmont, of which Turin was the capital, hangings were public, a spectacle that drew fascinated crowds. The Church, however she might deplore the crime, had care for the criminal and did what she could to bring Christ's forgiving mercy to all who would accept it.

In 1846 three men were sentenced to death in the Turin courts. Two were father and son. The son, aged about twenty, had been one of Don Bosco's early boys and now asked him to be with him in the days before the hanging. Don Bosco spent many hours with him in the prison, trying to comfort him. On the final day before the sentence was due to be carried out, the boy then begged him to stand by him on the scaffold. Don Bosco, for all his care, was reluctant to make a firm promise for fear he would not be able to stand the strain and thus fail his poor young friend in the very moment of

Once the carts stopped, the police and soldiers halting them outside a church. A group of altar boys came out, carrying candles, followed by a priest in cotta and stole, carrying the Blessed Sacrament, with which he blessed each cart from the steps; he then returned.

The crowds thickened and grew noisier, some shouting ribald remarks, others trying to comfort the prisoners. As they turned a corner, Don Bosco saw the gallows, as did the trembling boy by his side. He felt himself growing faint. Don Cafasso, close behind, must have noticed his white-faced distress: he got down and went across to him. "Come, Don Bosco, I'll go in with the boy and you go with the man; it will be easier for you."

The third cart became separated from the others as the crowd surged around the gallows. Nothing the police or the driver could do could clear the way. The prisoner in the cart, seemingly indifferent to his fate, was amused at their futile efforts. "Hey, you people! What's the hurry? I'm the number one attraction on this show and if you won't let us through, you won't get your money's worth!" Eventually they moved in as the other carts pulled away. There was a roll of drums. Don Bosco, feeling faint and holding on to the side of the cart, looked up and saw his young friend already hanging. As the man with him got down from the cart and began to climb the steps of the scaffold, he remembered no more. When he came to, he was being comforted by Don Cafasso. When he had somewhat recovered, they followed the three coffins to the church of the Brothers and assisted at the Requiem Mass offered at once by the prison chaplain. Thus does the Church show her compassionate concern for all her children even for those who may be no credit to her.

Don Bosco never again attended a public hanging nor did Don Cafasso press him to do so although, until public hangings were abolished, the Turin gallows were only a few hundred yards from the Valdocco house.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### IF I HAD ONLY ONE PIECE OF BREAD, I'D SHARE IT WITH YOU!

IN RELATING THE execution experience, we have rather jumped a little from the early days of Don Bosco's more general work for 'poor and abandoned youth'. His contacts with Garelli and his friends grew rapidly as more and more of them found somewhere good to go to on Sundays and holidays.

One Sunday he was going through the parish church at the time of High Mass during which a young priest was giving a long and erudite sermon, when he noticed a group of boys fast asleep in one of the side altars. He thought he might wake them up which he did with a gentle shake and a smile.

"We couldn't understand that priest's words, Father," they explained a little shamefacedly.

"Come along with me, then, and meet a few more friends," and so saying he took them through the sacristy where Garelli and half a dozen others were already waiting for him. In due time, he said Mass for them and used it to give them some simple basic principles, and a story or two, to help them cope with the difficulties of their lives.

Most of these boys were builders' apprentices, many of them far from their homes. Some of them kept close to Don Bosco all their lives. Amongst the sleepy-heads was one Carlo Buzzetti. In the spring of 1842, he brought his younger brother Giuseppe (Joseph), all of ten years of age (and already a builder's apprentice!) to see Don Bosco and join the group. For the rest of his life Giuseppe stuck to Don Bosco like a limpet. He was never far away from him at any time, shared all the vicissitudes of the early years, became a Brother and was at Don Bosco's bedside when he died, forty-six years later. When there might be some doubts as to this or that happening, Brother Giuseppe's memory could always be relied upon to provide confirmation.

Italian children in those days were always very pleased to receive medals and pictures from the priests, but Don Bosco soon realised that his ever growing troops of weekenders had more material needs. He began to gather old clothes (a lifelong chore). He made friends with bakers who on

Saturday night might have surplus bread or cake. No matter if it was stale on the Sunday. Hungry boys aren't fussy. In any case, on his Saturday visits to the prisons, he never went empty-handed, using his meagre resources to take fruit, chocolate or tobacco. It broke down barriers and made it easier for him to ask the youngsters to come to see him when they got out.

Gradually the word went round that this rather unusual young priest was genuinely concerned. As he was not working in a parish, he had a certain amount of spare time (in those days!) and this he devoted entirely to his young friends. Some were completely illiterate. He found time to help them. If a boy had a bad employer, he found time to go round his friends, or those of Don Cafasso, in the city, to try to find a better job and a better employer. He was always approachable, always ready to listen. If he made a promise he would see that he kept it. The young rarely forgave a broken promise especially if, as would often be true of these boys, it concerned something of which they were in real need and were relying on. From the start his commitment was complete. He could not help expressing it: "If I had only one piece of bread, I'd share it with you!"

It must be asked what compels even a good man to commit his entire life to such as these boys, boys who, particularly in the early years, were often quite unattractive, unwashed, unkempt, many of them rough in speech and in manners, some crafty with the desperate experience of Fagin's school of rogues, depending entirely on their own resources for survival. The answer must be that Don Bosco, and those like him, saw these boys as Our Lord saw them; "He had compassion on the multitude, for they were lost and bewildered, like sheep without a shepherd". If, as we are taught, God made us to know him, love and serve him in this life and to be happy with him for ever in the next, then these boys, humanly speaking, had little chance, lost, bewildered, exploited in their innocence and ignorance as they were. Without a shepherd they could not survive. God gave Don Bosco a shepherd's mission. He gave him, too, great gifts of nature and of grace, which with the heroicity of a saint, he used to the full. It had to be total commitment.

Someone noted down what he said to the boys one evening after night prayers, some years later.

"I have something important to say to you. I want you to help me in a matter I have very much at heart – your eternal salvation. This is not just the main reason – it is the only reason I am here."

If in later years, he could build houses for them, could feed and clothe them, it was because, having them with him, he could speak to them of God as a loving Father, their loving Father who cared for them. When they got to

know God, they could learn to love Him, and loving Him could live as 'good Christian citizens' and die in His grace. So, their eternal salvation, the only object and purpose of his life and work. Let us hope that he won it for them all, for those who responded, those who drifted away, those who fell by the wayside.



## *Chapter Fourteen*

### THE WANDERING ORATORY

AS LONG AS Don Bosco could stay with his friends at the Convitto, he could count on it as a centre for his ever growing Oratory. However, his three years came to an end in 1844. Don Cafasso used his influence to get him a post as chaplain to one of the orphanages built and supported by a remarkable lady, the Marchesa de Barolo. Left a widow with an immense fortune, she devoted herself entirely to the provision of homes for the old, the young and those in moral danger. She accepted Don Bosco and allowed him to use the grounds round the latest orphanage while it was being built. But when it was completed she expected him to devote his full time to the general welfare of the girls and leave the noisy boys to someone else. Obviously, quite unthinkable for Don Bosco and they had to part. She, nevertheless, thought a great deal of him and often sent him help through Don Cafasso. Later she offered Don Bosco a substantial sum to take a rest, when she felt his health was suffering. But he declined.

The story for the following year is of every Sunday and Church holiday Don Bosco taking his growing army to some place he had arranged during the week, in and around the city or as far into the country as they could conveniently walk. Turin winters can be harsh and to find a place to pray and play for two hundred lively youngsters in bad weather taxed even Don Bosco's persuasive powers.

The boyhood dream was repeated, perhaps to give him confidence. There was the Lady, the sheep who became boys and now some of the sheep became shepherds. She now showed him of a church, more buildings, and boys in playgrounds.

But the months went by and there was still no sign of any permanent home. However, he gave the Oratory a name, that of the 'Oratory of St. Francis de Sales'. It was important, said Don Cafasso, that the work should have a patron saint and who better than the gentle St. Francis de Sales, a Savoy Saint greatly loved in the Savoy kingdom of Piedmont, a saint too, upon whom Don Bosco tried to model himself. So this naming of the Oratory became the germ, the seed, of the great Salesian Society.

It was in 1845 that he was to meet one who had a fundamental influence on his life and on that of the Society to come. He was one day giving a handful of medals to a small group of boys on the fringes of which was a frail eight-year old. The medals ran out by the time the boy got to Don Bosco but the priest smilingly put out his left hand and made as if to cut it in two with his right hand. "We'll go halves," he said. The mystified little lad was Michael Rua, wearing a large mourning ribbon on his arm, as was the custom, for the recent death of his father, and who was then at school with the De La Salle Brothers. Don Bosco did not explain but left the boy puzzling.

Problems mounted up as the year went on.irate residents complained to the municipality of their Sunday slumbers being violated by these rowdy young ruffians encouraged by that priest, who, said some, ought to be locked up. Friendly parish priests had to withdraw permissions in the face of angry complaints from their parishioners. Farmers who had given permission for some games in unused fields also soon withdrew the permission, saying these hundreds of flying feet killed all the grass. Some parish priests also complained to the church authorities that the Oratory was taking away boys who ought to attend Sunday Mass in their own parishes. Don Bosco pointed out that most of the boys came from outside the city and had no parishes. He would, of course, certainly encourage local boys to go to their own parishes but unless these parishes could provide what the Oratory provided, it was unlikely that many would go. Nor did they.

Matters came to a head on Palm Sunday, 1846. For once Don Bosco sat down during the final games which were being supervised by one or two friends. When the time was up, he would lead a final prayer and then tell the boys where to meet on the following Sunday morning. But today there was nowhere. No-one would have them. This very field was not available for them, nor could he find anywhere in the city or out. It was the end, the end of his dreams ("Ah, those dreams!"). Unless some angel came along to show him what to do, the Oratory was finished. He said afterwards that this was the lowest day of his life.

Then there appeared, not exactly an archangel, but one Pancrazio Soave, stammering and spluttering, from which it appeared that a certain Signor Pinardi had heard the priest was looking for a laboratory ("Not a laboratory, but an Oratory, a little chapel," murmured Don Bosco). They went together to meet the gentleman who was pleased to hear that it was not a laboratory but a chapel because he could sing in the choir himself. There

was a long, low shed against the wall of the house. "Far too low," said Don Bosco. "No matter; I'll dig it out half a metre, do repairs, make a floor, have it ready for next week, Easter Sunday" (which he did). "You can have it for 300 lire a year." "Add the ground round it for games and I'll give you 320." "Done; it will be ready." For this sum then, a contract was drawn up between Signor Francesco Pinardi and the Reverend Giovanni Borel, in the district of Valdocco, Turin, for three years. Don Borel signed as guarantor for Don Bosco. That holy man could not get back quickly enough to the boys in the field. "At last, at last, we have a home, a place of our own, no more wanderings!" When all the ecstatic acclamations had died down and Don Bosco had explained exactly where the Pinardi 'shed' was for next Sunday, then and there, and not far from tears, he led them in a thanksgiving prayer to that gracious Lady who was making his dreams at last come true.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### MIRACLE OF THE LITTLE BUILDERS

QUITE EARLY in his life, Don Bosco felt the need to share his hard won knowledge with all who might need it. Italy was, like the rest of Europe, emerging into literacy and the demand for suitable books was rising. But many were expensive and difficult, with school textbooks sponsored by the State biased on historical and religious grounds. There was need for simple, solid, inexpensive 'books for the masses'. During his time at the Convitto, Don Bosco robbed his sleep of many hours (too many, as he afterwards realised and forbade his Salesians to copy) to provide these books. His first was published in 1845 a *CHURCH HISTORY FOR SCHOOLS*: it became the accepted textbook throughout the country; it was simple, clear, interesting, perhaps not brilliant but factual depending on its author's industry and prodigious memory. Other 'best sellers' followed. In 1847, a *BIBLE HISTORY*, in 1849, a *HISTORY OF ITALY* correcting many distortions regarding the Church. Oddly enough, in 1855, there was the *METRIC SYSTEM*. One would have thought it was not a priest's job to instruct the people as a whole but the guides provided by the Government were not, it seems, clear. It was brief, clearly illustrated with examples and was country-wide popular. In spite of the enormous demands on his time, night after night Don Bosco scratched away by the light of candle or small oil lamp, producing a whole shelf of books. No wonder, in view of his constant battle against time, the handwriting was generally atrocious; later, younger eyes would decipher it with love, transcribing it for the press.

To go back to the Pinardi 'shed'. As the first sign of stability, it was the first small reply to a host of critics and doubting friends. Possibly a little indiscreetly, for some years Don Bosco had been encouraging his young followers with his dreams of a glorious future. "Oh, one day there would be fine schools, workshops, splendid churches, and not only in Turin!" Many of his fellow priests affected to be seriously disturbed by these 'castles in the air' fancies. Surely the poor man must be suffering from delusions! A solemn, private gathering of grave ecclesiastics decided he needed what we call psychiatric treatment, and planned to get him into a mental hospital for