

# **DON BOSCO - A MAN WITH A DREAM**

by Teresio Bosco

## **THE LITTLE SHEPHERD**

A boy. Nine years of age and 15 sheep. Every day, after dinner, he would take up his stick and drive the animals towards the valley. In a little bundle he had a lovely slice of white bread: his afternoon tea. Another shepherd boy awaited him in the valley, the same age and with an equal number of sheep. There was only one difference: he had only a piece of horrible black bread for his afternoon tea.

One day, the first boy handed his bread to the other. "Take it", he said, "it is yours". "And what will you eat?" "I'd like your black bread".

That boy was called John Bosco. He had lost his father when he was only two years old. His mother, who had cooked the lovely white bread and who had taught him to be generous, was called Margaret.

## **A DREAM AT NINE YEARS OF AGE:**

One night, perhaps the night after he had exchanged his bread, John had a dream. He would recount it himself many years later.

"When I was about nine years old I had a dream that left a profound impression on me for the rest of my life. I dreamed that I was near my home, in a very large playing field where a crowd of children were having fun. Some were laughing, others were playing and not a few were cursing. I was so shocked at their language that I jumped into their midst, swinging wildly and shouting at them to stop. At that moment a Man appeared, nobly attired, with a manly and imposing bearing. He was clad with a white flowing mantle and his face radiated such light that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name and told me to place myself as leader over those boys, adding the words:

"You will have to win these friends of yours not with blows, but with gentleness and kindness. So begin right now to show them that sin is ugly and virtue beautiful."

"Confused and afraid, I replied that I was only a boy and unable to talk to these youngsters about religion. At that moment the fighting, shouting and cursing stopped and the crowd of boys gathered about the Man who was now talking. Almost unconsciously I asked:

"But how can you order me to do something that looks so impossible?"

"What seems to impossible you must achieve by being obedient and by acquiring knowledge."

"But where? How?"

"I will give you a Teacher under whose guidance you will learn and without whose help all knowledge becomes foolishness."

"But who are you?"

"I am the Son of Her whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day".

"My mother told me not to talk to people I don't know, unless she gives me permission. So, please tell me your name."

"Ask your mother."

"At that moment I saw beside him a Lady of majestic appearance, wearing a beautiful mantle glowing as if bedecked with stars. She saw my confusion mount; so she beckoned me to her. Taking my hand with great kindness she said:

"Look!"

"I did so. All the children had vanished. In their place I saw many animals: goats, dogs, cats, bears and a variety of others."

"'This is your field, this is where you must work.', the Lady told me. 'Make yourself humble, steadfast and strong. And what you will see happen to these animals you will have to do for my children.'

"I looked again; the wild animals had turned into as many lambs, gentle, gamboling lambs, bleating a welcome for that Man and Lady."

"At this point of my dream I started to cry and begged the Lady to explain what it had meant because I was so utterly confused. She then placed her hand on my head and said:

"'In due time everything will be clear to you.'

"After she had spoken these words, some noise awoke me; everything had vanished. I was completely bewildered. Somehow my hands still seemed to ache and my cheeks still stung because of all the fighting. Moreover, my conversation with that Man and Lady so disturbed my mind that I was unable to sleep any longer that night."

"In the morning, I could barely wait to tell about my dream. When my brothers heard it, they burst out laughing. I then told my mother and grandmother. Each one who heard it gave a different interpretation. My brother Joseph said:

"'You're going to become a shepherd and take care of goats, sheep and livestock.'

"My mother's comment was: 'Who knows? Maybe you will become a priest.'

"Dryly, Anthony muttered: 'You might become the leader of a gang of robbers.'

"But my very religious, illiterate grandmother, had the last word: 'You mustn't pay any attention to dreams.'

## **THE LITTLE ACROBAT**

Despite his grandmother's dry comment, John often thought back to this dream: to the boys he heard blaspheming, to the bears turned into lambs, to the words of his mother :Who knows? Maybe you will become a priest." He knew quite a few of these boys already; they lived in the houses nearby or in the neighbouring farmhouses scattered throughout the countryside. Some of them were very good lads, but there were some who did not behave themselves very well at all, who were ignorant, who were blasphemers. Why not start away to make these larrikans his friends?

One day he came home with blood streaming down his face. He had been playing 'tip-cat' and the piece of wood had hit him on the mouth. His mother is worried and whilst she treats his lip she said: "One day or other you will have your eye knocked out. Why do you play with those boys? You know that some of them are not up to much".

"If I played with them just to have a good time, I would stop straightaway. But I find that when I am with them they are much better behaved."

His mother sighed and said no more.

The trumpets or the acrobats could be heard from the neighbouring hill. It was the patronal feast of the town. John is already there. He had decided to study the tricks of the magicians and the secrets of the tight-rope walkers. He pays ten cents to have a good place at the front.

He returned home and practiced what he had seen. He walked the tight-rope (with a couple of tumbles in the early stages), he pulled live pullet from a pot of boiling water ...

It was on one summer's evening that John announced that he was ready to give his first exhibition. He spread some bags on the grassy slope near his house and performed miracles of balancing with jam jars and pots from his mother's kitchen - all these on the point of his nose. His young spectators watched with open mouths as he pulled dozens of coloured balls from a box. Then he went on to use his magic wand. ...

His stepbrother Anthony arrived from the fields halfway through his performance. He threw his hoe to the ground in anger and shouted out: "Look at the clown! The lazy loafer! While I break my back working on the farm he act the goat".

John stopped the show but recommenced it a few yards further down the slope, under the trees and Anthony left him in peace. John is a special 'clown'. Before his final item, he took out his rosary beads, knelt down and invited all to pray with him. Or he repeated the sermon he had heard in the parish that afternoon. It was the price he asked of his little public, the ticket that all were asked to pay whether they be big or little.

Then he stretched a rope from a pear tree to a cherry tree, climbed up on it and amid the initial silence and then loud applause he walked from one tree to the other. It seemed that his guardian angel was holding on to him to prevent him from falling. But that was not true; there is more than one angel and the Lord it is who sends them. This young acrobat was to grow up strong and robust and one day was to preach from quite a different pulpit than that which stretched from tree to tree.

## **A DECISIVE MEETING**

There was a special sermon in the neighbouring parish and John was among the crowd who was returning along the country road. Among the crowd there was also a venerable old priest, Fr. Calosso who, on seeing this lively young lad among so many men and women, shook his head and smilingly asked: "And where are you from, young man?"

"From Beechi".

"And what are you doing here?"

"I came to hear the sermon".

"And who know how much you understood, poor boy".

Then John, to clear away any doubts, gave the whole gist of the sermon, reciting it as if he were reading from a book.

A little while afterwards John was sitting in Fr. Calosso's study.

"You have a prodigious memory, my boy. You should settle down to study. I am already old but anything I can do to help I will do willingly. Here is a Latin grammar and a Latin author, Donatus. We'll get down to study both of them at Christmas time. Now you want to give your Italian a brush up. Here is a book to read and meditate upon. Read a page of it a day and reflect on what you have read. If you do not understand it, ask me for an explanation. Intelligence is given you by almighty God and you must make use of it above all to know Him. If we learn all the Latin in the world and do not learn to love Him we have wasted our time, you and I.

And from that day onwards John learnt to make a short meditation every day.

## **AN ENEMY WITH HIS HOE OVER HIS SHOULDER**

But at home John found an enemy. Anthony with his hoe over his shoulder, was waiting for John as he returned with his books under his arm. And the war commenced:

"Here's the little Lord! The little professor! We have to work under the hot sun and he lies about the house with clean hands! We have to eat polenta while he sips coffee!"

It was the same everyday. The words changed, but the music remained the same.

It became an impossible situation. John realized this and so did his mother. And so one morning, he left home with his few books and pieces of clothing under his arm in search of a nest that could be much poorer but where he could live in peace. His mother remained standing outside the house, waving her handkerchief as she watched the small immigrant disappearing in the green sea of the paddocks, beginning his voyage towards the unknown.

He approached the farm house that belonged to the Moglia's. The Moglia family were all in the barn preparing willow cuttings to tie up the vines.

"What are you looking for, boy?", a man who had the air of being the owner, asked him.

"I am looking for Luigi Moglia".

"That's me".

"My mother sent me here to get a job as a farmhand".

"But why did she send a small boy like you away from home? Who is your mother?"

"Margaret Bosco. My stepbrother Anthony gives me a rough time and so my mother asked me to come here and get a job".

"Poor boy ... We will not be taking on any farmhands until the end of March. You had better return home".

"For goodness sake, take me on even just for my keep", pleaded John and he broke down crying.

Mrs. Moglia intervened: "Take him in trial for a few days, Luigi".

John worked hard so as not to be dismissed; he worked from daylight till dark. Then, when he went to bed, he read by the light of a candle, the books Fr. Calosso had given him. He also read as he led the oxen in the plough. His boss did not complain but shook his head and asked: "Why do you read so much?"

"Because I want to become a priest".

But it was not easy to read as you tramped over the clods. Two years later Fr. Calosso took him into his own house. These were wonderful days for John. He was living with a wonderful old priest.

He soon covered all the Latin grammar.

However, one foggy morning in November 1830 Fr. Calosso became very sick and had to take to his bed. John ran to help him but the priest was already close to death's door and, with trembling hands, gave John a key and expired. He could do nothing but kneel by his bedside and cry as if at the loss of a second father.

The key was to a desk that contained money and John frightened at the thought that questions might be asked about the corpse in the corner, gave the key to the priest's relations and left the house. His world had crumpled.

Now John was once more on his own, without a teacher, without any money, without any plans for the future. He was truly in a desperate plight.

## **10 KILOMETRES A DAY**

Yet, in some way or other, he had to continue his studies. His mother had to submit to the humiliation of dividing up the house and farm with Anthony to put an end to his opposition. And

John, with incredible grit started to walk twice a day the five kilometres of road that separated Becchi from Castelnuovo.

Rain and wind, sun and dust, were the companions of each day, shoes worn to the uppers, feet that could not take another step.

One night, as he slept, there stretched before him the dream of the first valley. He saw once again the sheep and the beautiful Lady that had confided them to him. "See that you are humble, strong and robust", she repeated, "and in time you will understand everything".

1835. John Bosco was already a young man. He had studied and worked hard. He had made hundreds of friends. Now at twenty years of age he took the most important resolution of his life; he had decided to enter the Seminary.

Six years of intense study.

5<sup>th</sup> June 1841. The Archbishop of Turin placed his hands on John Bosco's head, invoked the Holy Spirit and consecrated him a priest forever. Some minutes later, John Bosco commenced his first Mass. He had become Don (Father) Bosco.

That evening his mother said to him: "Now that you are priest, you are nearer to Christ. I have not read your books but remember that to start to say Mass means you start to suffer. From now on think only of the salvation of souls and do not worry about me".

## **UNDERGROUNDS AND BLACK WALLS**

What would Don Bosco do now? He had firm offers of chaplaincies and curacies but he had other ideas: he wanted to work with young people. He remained at Turin to finish off his studies and to look around.

His professor was a small priest who was to be his friend and adviser for all his life. Fr. Joseph Cafasso. He was called "the priest of the gallows" because he used his spare time to visit the prisons to comfort the inmates and when any poor 'devil' was condemned to death, he mounted the scaffold with him to give him consolation for those last dreadful minutes.

Don Bosco started to go with him to the prisons. In those dark underground cells, midst dripping walls he met so many sad and pitiful cases. But what caused the greatest heartaches was the sight of young delinquents with their wild eyes and cynical grins.

One day he saw a group of very young prisoners; they were only boys. And Don Bosco was so sad he wept.

"What are you crying like that for?" one of them asked.

"Perhaps he is crying for us".

"Perhaps he wants to help us". a third added, "and is sad to see us locked up here ..."

That day, coming out of the prisons, Don Bosco took a firm decision: "Many of those are there because no one is interested in them. A remedy must be found, somehow or other a means must be found to prevent all those boys ending up as they have. I want to do something for them."

8<sup>th</sup> December 1841. Don Bosco was preparing to say Mass in the church of St. Francis of Assisi. A lad entered the sacristy. The sacristan, thinking he was a larrokan about to create a disturbance, chased him out with a broom. But Don Bosco intervened.

"What are you doing? Put down that broom!"

"And why Father?"

"Because he is a friend of mine".

"If that's so ..." the sacristan mumbles. The boy was asked to come back ...

He was embarrassed. Don Bosco spoke to him and asked him to wait for him until he had finished his Mass because he had something very important to say to him. Mass over, he led him aside and, with a smile on his face, started to question him.

"My good friend, what's your name?"

"Bartolomew Garelli, from Asti"

"Is your father still alive?"

"No, he's dead".

"And your mother?"

"She's also dead".

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen".

"Do you know how to read and write?"

"No".

"Can you sing?"

"No".

"Can you whistle?"

"Oh yes", and the boy smiled. Don Bosco continued:

"Have you made your First Communion?"

"Not yet".

"Have you made your first Confession?"

"Yes, when I was little".

"And you go to Religious Instruction?"

"I'm not game to. The smaller boys would rubbish me".

"If you would come to instructions on your own, would you be interested?"

"Yes".

"Here in this Church?"

"So long as someone does not chase me with a broom".

"Don't worry about that, for you are now my friend and no one will be game enough to hit you. When will we start?"

"Whenever you think best".

"Straightaway?"

"Willingly"

Don Bosco knelt down and recited a Hail Mary. In that moment the Oratory was born, as was the great apostolate that John Bosco carried on among young people.

### **A COUNTESS THAT DID NOT LIKE NOISE**

In the Church of St. Francis of Assisi where Don Bosco had first met Bartholomew Garelli, he also came across another lad with some of his mates.

"What's your name?" Don Bosco asked him.

"Charles Buzzetti. I am a bricklayer's labourer. I have come down from my village of Caronno Ghiringhello".

"Good-o. Did you listen to the sermon?"

"Yes, but since I understood nothing, I went to sleep".

Don Bosco smiled, gave them a bit of Religious Instruction and invited them to return.

"Next Sunday more turned up, and then more: a whole stream of lads with torn clothes but lively eyes. They sought out Don Bsoco for his words and his interest in them was something they needed.

The army of boys kept on growing but winter was approaching. He would have to find a place to shelter them from the rain and the snow. The first sheepyard for his flock was the institute where



Don Bosco was studying. In this tiny courtyard they had their recreation and in the nearby Church the functions, the singing, the Religious Instruction. Fr. Cafasso approved and helped but others began to protest: all that noise is a disaster, something that could not be suffered any longer.

When Don Bosco had finished his studies he was appointed as chaplain to the Refuge, a Home for poor girls situated in the outer suburbs of Turin by Marquess Barolo.

And the crowd of boys followed Don Bosco. Two hundred, three hundred larrikans flooded the surrounding fields and tried to go up the stairs and into the room of Don Bosco to listen to his word.

Now that he had a room, Don Bosco thought of giving a little bit of instruction to the more intelligent of these boys.

In the evenings, they came to him in groups, some with faces blackened by soot or faces whitened by lime, with their coats over their shoulders happy to be able to get a bit of schooling., They found it hard to do calculations so Don Bosco wrote for them a simple text book on the Metric System.

The Marquess did not put up with that hullabaloo for long. Seeing that crowd of dirty urchins in her house, she tried to convince Don Bosco to tell them to stay away. Failing this, she gave him the choice of stopping his work with the boys or leaving his post at the Institute. He left the Institute.

It was autumn of 1845. Don Bosco transferred his work to the city mills on the bank of the River Dora. He was only there for a short time before people complained about the noise. Don Bosco had to give his little army another bit of news:

"My dear boys, we have to quit".

But in that short space of time that he was at the Mill Don Bosco met a pale-faced lad who often watched him in silence. He was 8 years old and his name was Michael Rua. Don Bosco handed out medals to his larrikans but also passed by this pale-faced lad. Then one day Don Bosco went up to him. He held out his left hand and went as if to cut it in two with his right, saying with a smile:

"Take it, Michael, take it".

The boy looked at him but did not understand what he meant. Then Don Bosco said: "We two will always go fifty-fifty."

That boy became the first successor of Don Bosco as head of the Salesian Congregation.

## **A DRUM AND A LOT OF POLICEMEN**

From the Mill near the Dora Don Bosco shifted to St. Peter in Chains near the cemetery. There was a chapel there, but unluckily there was also the chaplain's crabby old housekeeper who had no love for boys. She complained that the boys damaged everything, they threw stones.

It came to the point of forcing the poor chaplain to send an official complaint to the Town Council Office. Then, satisfied, she yelled at the larrikans:

"Finally we will see the end of you, you ragamuffins".

That wish came true. The dear old lady died that very week.

For several months Don Bosco was not able to find a roof for his boys. But he was not discouraged. He spoke to them in the open air, gathering them together in open fields or in vacant squares. People began to take notice. There were those who laughed at him and those who pitied him.

"But where is that priest going?"

"It is Don Bosco with his boys".

"Poor thing, they say he has a fixation. He will finish up in the Lunatic Asylum with all that silly going on".

By spring Don Bosco had succeeded in renting a field on the outskirts of the city.

There is a kind of shed in the middle and it is here that the gear for the games was kept. Around it mill about 400 boys. In a corner seated on a bench, is Don Bosco, hearing confessions. About ten o'clock a drum sounds and the boys get into line. Then a trumpet sounds and they leave either for the Consolata or the Mount of the Capuchins. There Don Bosco says Mass and distributes Holy Communion.

But these are troublesome times and 400 boys obeying the sound of drum and trumpet begin to cause concern to the authorities.

Marquis Cavour summons Don Bosco to his office. It sets limits on the number of boys who may gather together, absolutely forbids them to march into the city in columns and orders that the bigger lads be excluded altogether. Don Bosco refuses. The interview with the Minister gets a bit hot. Cavour shouts:

"But what are these ruffians to you? Leave them where they are! Don't take on this responsibility or you'll be sorry."

Don Bosco left the interview without giving an inch but, from that day onwards, policemen were posted all around the field where the boys played.

One day the owners of the field came along. They looked over the ground pounded by hundreds of boots. They called Don Bosco over:

"But here you're turning the field into a desert".

"At this rate our field will soon become as bare as the road."

"Be patient with us, dear Father, but this sort of thing cannot continue. You'll have to leave."

For Don Bosco this was a bold from the blue. And where could he go? Already he had been thrown out of so many places. Leaning against a tree in a corner of the field Don Bosco watched his boys running about and enjoying themselves for the last time, and he broke down crying.

But just that very evening of that sad day, when he was about to disband these boys whom no one wanted, a gentleman turned up.

"Is it true that you're looking for a place to put up a laboratory?"

"Not a laboratory but an Oratory."

"I am not sure what it is you want but I know of a place. Come and see it."

Don Bosco went, his heart full of hope. It was about a big shed owned by a certain Francis Pinardi. Alongside was a small strip of land. Don Bosco hurried back to his boys and shouted out:

"Cheer up, lads! We have found our Oratory! We'll have a church, a school, a courtyard to play in. We'll go there on Sunday."

It was the 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1846. Next Sunday would be the day of the Resurrection."

## **TWO PRIESTS IN THE MENTAL HOME**

The Oratory that Don Bosco bought from Francis Pinardi was only an old shed, no more than a metre high. The floor was the bare earth. The leaning walls were full of holes. Rain came in generously through the gaps in the roof. Don Bosco when he entered, had to bow down so not to hit his head on the ceiling. He saw big mice running all over the place, for they had made this shed their refuge. Not even the grotto at Bethlehem could have been as poor as this.

"Here we will build the church", said Don Bosco, "we'll have to get some workmen straight away."

The masons came, reinforced the foundations and the walls; they put on a roof. Then the carpenters put down a wooden floor. Don Bosco's boys many of them apprentice masons, gave a hand in their free time all that week.

Don Bosco himself rolled up his sleeves and worked with plane and trowel.

By Saturday night, as if by magic, the building was good as new. The new chapel was provided with vestments, lamps and candlesticks. And Don Bosco began to feel the weight of debts.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> April was a day to be remembered. On Easter morning, all the bells of the city rang out in festive note. To that imposing concert there was joined the voice of a little bell up there on top of the Pinardi shed calling all the boys to Valdocco.

Now that the Madonna had opened up the way, Don Bosco was certain that his work would go a long way. He spoke to the priests who were helping him on projects as if they were a reality.

"I'll put up schools, workshops, offices. I see everything as if it was really here."

At first they listened out of curiosity. Then some began to shake their heads:

"Don Bosco has a fixation. He'll go mad ..."

"We'll have to do something before it goes too far ..."

Even his dearest friend, his right hand in the work of the Oratory, Fr. Borel, began to have doubts. One day when Don Bosco had spoken to him energetically of all the things he planned to do, he exclaimed in a voice stricken with grief:

"Poor Don Bosco. Poor dear friend of mine!"

In deep secret, a place was got ready for Don Bosco at the mental Home. As he was giving a catechism class one evening, a closed carriage arrived. Two priests got out and invited Don Bosco to go with them for a drive."

"You're tired, Don Bosco. A bit of fresh air will do you good/"

"Willingly, I'll come straight away."

One of his friends opened the carriage door and said:

"Get in, Don Bosco."

"Oh no, Poor Don Bosco should not be the first to get in before you!"

His two friends, after some insistence, winked at each other and got in first. But as soon as they were in, Don Bosco quickly closed the door and shouted to the coachman:

"To the Mental Home, quickly! They are expecting these two!"

A crack of the whip and the carriage left like an arrow for the Mental Home which was not too far away. Some nurses awaited the carriage and immediately jumped on the two passengers. They had a lot of explaining to do before they could gain their freedom.

From that day on they left Don Bosco in peace.

### **THE MIRACE OF THE LITTLE STONEMASONS**

During the day, the masons of Turin began to witness an unusual sight: a priest, with his cassock tucked up, climbing over the scaffolding amid buckets of cement and piles of bricks and stones. It was Don Bosco who, to save time, had climbed up there to see his boys. For them it was a wonderful occasion. They were a long way from their native villages, they had come to Turin in search of work and had become apprentice stonemasons and bricklayers. Very often they were in the employ of unscrupulous and greedy men. Don Bosco was the only person who was interested in them and was willing to help them.

But Don Bosco was not satisfied with meeting them wherever they were working. He stopped to have a chart with their employers. He wanted to know how much they were being paid, the hours they were working, whether they could get to Mass on Holydays of obligation. He was the first man in Italy to demand work contracts for his young apprentice and he made sure that these contracts were not a dead letter.

However Don Bosco was only a man and every man has his limits.

One evening in June, after a killing Sunday of confessions, preaching, leading his youngsters in play, he fainted. He was a few metres from the Refuge and some passersby carried him in there. During the night his temperatures rose to alarming heights.

On the scaffolding of the masons in the workshops of the young mechanics the news spread throughout the city: "Don Bosco is dying."

That evening, in a room at the Refuge where Don Bosco hovered between life and death laid low by pneumonia, groups of bewildered lads began to arrive. They were still in their working clothes. They had not eaten their tea in their hurry to get there. They were crying, they were praying:

"Good Lord, don't let him die."

For eight days Don Bosco was at death's door. There were many boys who, for those whole eight days, had not touched a drop of water to extort a special grace from Heaven. At the church of the Consolata, young workmen took it in turns to pray, night and day, in front of the statue of the Madonna. At times their eyes closed in sleep but these lads stuck to it because DON BOSCO MUST NOT DIE!

The grace was obtained, extorted from the Madonna by her little ones who could not bear the thought of being deprived of their father.

One Sunday, after midday, leaning on a stick, Don Bosco slowly walked back to the Oratory. The boys flew to meet him. The bigger lads made him sit on a chair, they lifted him on their shoulders, carried him in triumph to the courtyard. They sang and they cried, these little ones of Don Bosco, and he cried with them.

They went into the chapel and thanked the good Lord. Don Bosco managed to say a few words:

"I owe my life to you. Be certain of this, from this day forward I will spend it entirely for you."

In those days when the heat in Turin was unbearable, Don Bosco went to Becchi to convalesce. He promised his larrikans:

"When the leaves begin to fall, I will be back with you."

### **A MOTHER FOR 500 LARRIKANS**

It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1846. The autumn winds made the leaves fall and Don Bosco set out for Turin. He was no longer on his own. His mother was with him. She had agreed to come with him to be a mother to all his boys.

The two pilgrims did the trip on foot. His mother carried on her arm the a basket containing all her riches: some linen and some food.

Just as they were approaching the Oratory a priest, a friend of Don Bosco's saw them and came up to greet them:

"Welcome back, Don Bosco. How do you feel?"

"On top of the world, thanks."

"And where are you going to live?"

"Here, in the Pinardi shed. My mother's coming to live with me."

"But how are you going to live without any income?"

"I don't know yet. But Providence will provide, I'm sure."

That good priest was moved. He took out his pocket watch and gave it to Don Bosco:

"I only wish I was rich at this moment, just to be able to help you."

Mrs. Bosco entered the small house for the first time. There were two small rooms, with two beds and a cupboard or two. She smiled and said to her son:

"At Beech, I was always having to keep the house tidy, dusting furniture and washing pots. Here I'll have nothing to do."

And smiling she set to work. Don Becchi hung a crucifix and a picture of the Madonna on the wall. His mother prepared the beds for the night. And together, mother and son, they began to sing:

Woe to the world if we felt we were strangers,

deprived of everything.

Someone heard them and the news went from mouth to mouth to all the Valdocco boys:

"Don Bosco is back."

Now that he had his mother with him Don Bosco planned to do more for his boys. Many of them were abandoned, not knowing where to go or where to sleep. Don Bosco felt he could give the most abandoned ones shelter.

The first experiment failed. He got together some of them and put them to sleep in the loft. His mother had obtained for them, with a lot of trouble, blankets and everything. In the morning there was nobody and nothing in the loft: the birds had flown with the blankets. His mother was very upset. Don Bosco, instead, was not discouraged. He would have to try again.

It was the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1847. It was raining 'cats and dogs'. Don Bosco had just finished his tea when there was a knock at the door. It was a rain-drenched and frozen young lad.

"I am an orphan. I come from Valessia. I am a bricklayer but I can't find work. I'm cold and I don't know where to go ..."

"Come in, come in", invited Don Bosco. "Sit down by the fire - you're so cold you'll catch pneumonia."

His mother prepared some tea for him. Then Don Bosco asked him:

"And now, where are you going?"

"I don't know. I only had 3 dollars in my pocket when I landed in Turin. I've spent that. Please let me stay here."

Mrs. Bosco was thinking of the missing blankets:

"We could let you stay here but what's to tell us you're not a thief?"

"Oh no. I am poor but I have never stolen."

Don Bosco had already gone out into the rain. He returned with a few bricks he had collected. Out of them he made four heaps and then laid some planks on them. Then Don Bosco took the mattresses off his own bed and put that on top:

"Sleep here and stay as long as you like. Don Bosco will never send you away."

"He was the first orphan to enter Don Bosco's house. At the end of the year there were seven of them. They grew into thousands.

One day Don Bosco entered a barber's shop. A young lad came forward to lather his face.

"And what's your name?" How old are you?"

Charlie. I'm eleven."

"Good, Charlie, give me a good lather. And how's your father?"

"He's dead. I have only my mother."

"I'm sorry to hear that." The boy had finished lathering.

"And now, come on, get hold of the razor and give me a shave."

The boss came in and nearly fell over:

"For goodness sake, Father, the boy does not know how to shave. He only puts on the soap."

"But sooner or later he'll have to begin, won't he? Then let him start with me. Come on Charlie."

Charlie shaved him but he was trembling like a leaf. And when he had to shave round the chin, he broke out into a cold sweat. A nick here and there, a bit of blood, but he completed the job.

"Good job, Charlie", Don Bosco said with a smile. "And now that we are friends, how about coming to see me sometime?"

A few days later, Don Bosco found Charlie in tears close to the barber's shop.

"What's wrong?"

"My mother is dead and my boss has given me the sack. And now where can I go?"

"come with me."

His mother prepared a bed for him. Charlie Gastini remained with Don Bosco for fifty years. Happy and quick-witted he became the minstrel of the Oratory. When he talked about Don Bosco, however, he cried like a little child.

## **BOOTMAKERS IN THE CORRIDORS AND TAILORS IN THE KITCHEN**

In 1848 the first bloody war of Independence broke out. On the field of battle thousands and thousands of men fell. In the streets of Turin groups of orphans began to gather, without a home and without a future.

Don Bosco enlarged his house. He knocked at the doors of the rich, he begged from the nobility and society ladies. By hook or by crook he found enough money to build and keep on building to house all those abandoned boys who had nowhere to go.

Many of these lads were intelligent but would be forced to live as unskilled labourers all their lives.

Don Bosco would accept that. He commenced night classes. He asked priestly friends and good people to teach. He conducted classes in the kitchen, in the sacristy, in the choir loft - anywhere there was a spare corner.

And by night whilst the boys slept, Don Bosco wrote textbooks for them. His writings were so easy to follow and were so economical that they were used in many of the schools of Turin.

But the boys who crowded into the Oratory courtyard were getting too numerous. Don Bosco thought of starting a second Oratory:

"My dear boys, when the bees in a beehive get too numerous, some of them hive off. We must imitate them. We will form a second family and open a secondary Oratory."

This was built near the Railway station and was called the Oratory of St. Aloysius. But this, too, soon became overcrowded and Don Bosco opened a third, dedicated to the Guardian Angels.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1851, was a red-letter day for Don Bosco. Four of the boys whom he picked up in the street and had educated with so much loving care asked to follow in his footsteps and to become priests. They were Charles Buzzetti, the little bricklayer he had met in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi and had slept through the sermon; Charles Gastini the little barber who had shaved him with trembling hands and two others: James Bellia and Felix Reviglio. From that day onwards they gave Don Bosco a hand in looking after their smaller companions.

With the help of these first young clerics, Don Bosco threw himself into enterprise after enterprise: in three years (from 1853 to 1856) he opened workshops for bootmakers and three little tables in the kitchen for his tailors. Don Bosco, himself, was the first instructor of the tailors, he was the first to sit down at the bench and hammer out the first sole for the bootmakers. But from that small seed there grew a mighty tree.

In March, Don Bosco had to demolish the Pinardi shed and put up a new building. He had to accommodate the workshops and the number of boys who kept on increasing.



But out of the blue, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August his whole new building collapsed in a cloud of dust. Enormous damage was caused. Don Bosco remained unperturbed:

"It's a trick of the devil. But with the help of God and the Madonna we'll build it anew".

By October the new building was ready.

Where did Don Bosco get the money to pay for food for his boys and bricks for his houses? When asked this question, the saint had only answer: "Divine Providence." The Lord sent benefactors, inspired good people, sent letters with offerings. And He even intervened directly with miracles at times.

Charles Buzzetti himself, was to witness such a miracle when Don Bosco was distributing chestnuts by the handful to his 650 boys. The basket out of which he was taking them out, only contained several kilos. Yet there was enough for everyone, even for Charles, who was one of the last to receive his portion and who, eyes open wide with amazement, was to see a miracle being performed a hand's distance away.

### **AND GOD SENT A DOG**

The Protestant sect of the Waldensians were attracting many people to them from the poor areas of Turin, mainly with financial attractions.

Those were not years of 'dialogue' but of bitter contest between Catholics and Protestants. Don Bosco, although up to his neck in work, founded the Catholic Reading: a series of easy-to-read books that aroused and reinforced the faith of the Catholics.

When did he write them? By night, in the hours robbed from his already brief time of rest.

These Catholic Readings brought down on his head the wrath of the Protestants, who did all they could to get him out of the way.

One evening, whilst he was teaching the senior boys, an unknown person fired a shot through the window, directing a shot straight to his heart. The bullet whistled between his arm and his chest, ripping his cassock. To his students, frightened out of their wits, Don Bosco said with a smile:

"The Madonna is watching over me and that chap is a poor shot."

Then he looked at his ripped cassock and added sadly:

"I'm sorry for my poor cassock. It's the only one I have."

One day, in the courtyard there appeared a savage looking man with a big knife. He was looking for Don Bosco to murder him. Luckily, not finding Don Bosco, he scuffled with one of the clerics who ran for his life.

Notwithstanding that the police were notified of this face, that ruffian was able to come back to the Oratory three times, giving all a terrible shock.

One evening when it was pitch dark, some men came to call Don Bosco, as a matter of urgency, to hear an old man's confession. Don Bosco went immediately. But when he entered the room, someone put out the light and three men attacked him with big sticks. Don Bosco just had time to grab a chair and put over his head as a shield. Retreating under the attack he managed to find the door and run for his life.

One evening Don Bosco was quietly returning home, a ruffian armed with a bid club, blocked his path. He was just going to deliver a hefty blow, when a big grey dog, with a face like a wolf's sprang out. Growling savagely, the dog jumped on the assailant who went for his life. Then, as tame as you like, he accompanied Don Bosco back to the gates of the Oratory and then disappeared.

That mysterious dog returned many times to save Don Bosco. A foggy, dark night of November 1854, two thugs jumped Don Bosco as he was walking along the street. They threw a bag over his head and were about to knife him when Grigio (the grey) came from nowhere. He jumped on them savagely and, if Don Bosco had not called him off, would have torn the two assailants limb from limb.

Another day, when Don Bosco was about to go out on an errand, Grigio blocked his path. He tried to brush him aside, to pass by. But the dog growled and refused to move out of the way. Mrs. Bosco, who knew the dog, said to her son:

"It's better you remain at home. Grigio does not want you to go out. It's quite evident it's not healthy for you outside."

This was the case. The next day Don Bosco learned that a thug armed with a pistol was waiting for him just down the road.

## **DEATH IN THE STREETS OF TURIN**

July 1854. Frightening news ran through Turin. The Cholera had struck the Province of Liguria and was spreading like an oil streak, through the cities of Piedmont. The King, the Queen and the Royal House had fled in closed carriages and had taken refuge in the Castle of the Casselletta, with Count Cays.

In the outer suburbs the first cases were reported.

The 5<sup>th</sup> August. Turin looked like a dead city. More than a hundred people were dying in their homes or in hospitals. All those who could, fled the city.

The mayor sent out an urgent appeal to priests, religious, sisters: in the hospitals people were dying without the help of doctors or nurses. There was a desperate need for good people who would risk their lives to save the city.

That evening Don Bosco spoke to the boys of the Oratory:

"The Mayor has launched an appeal. If anyone of you feel like coming with me to the hospitals and private houses to care for those struck down by the cholera, we would be doing a fine thing and something very pleasing to the Lord. I guarantee you, that provided you keep in the state of grace, and do not commit any mortal sins, not one of you will be touched by the cholera."

That very evening, fourteen of his bigger boys handed in their names. A few days later, another thirty followed their example.

They were days of intense work. Those struck by the sickness needed help, especially in the first hours, of massage to help the circulation of the blood and to provoke sweating.

For more than a month the 44 boys had to set timetable by day or by night. And Don Bosco gave the example; always ready to help, to comfort, to administer the last sacraments.

Among these 44 boys was John Cagliero, the future bishop and salesian Cardinal. There was also Dominic Savio, the young saint from Mondonio and it was just during these days that he showed a glimpse of his sanctity.

Walking along Cottolengo street one evening, Dominic looked up at a window and, as if a voice was calling him, entered the house and quickly ran up the stairs. Without a moment's hesitation, he knocked at the door. The owner came out.

"Excuse me", Dominic said, "there must be someone here who has been hit by the cholera and needs help."

The poor man stared: "No, no, there's no one here. If there was I wouldn't be here, for sure."

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely!"

"Then I think you have made a mistake. Let me have a look."

The master of the house knew that no one, thanks be to God, was sick. But that lad was so insistent that it seemed ...

"All right. Come in and have a look. But you'll find out you are mistaken."

Dominic went through the rooms, the kitchen, the storeroom. Nothing."

"But have you got any other rooms? An attic?"

"Ah" and the master struck his forehead. "The lumber room! Come on!"

They climbed up to the attic and came to a miserable little room. Curled up in a corner, her face contracted with grief, a poor woman was dying.

"Hurry, call a priest!" whispered Dominic. And he set about doing his duties as a nurse.

"Well, you wouldn't read about it", the poor man repeated to himself as he hurried down to get a priest. He just remembered that this poor woman, who went out early to work each day, had returned late at night, had asked him some time ago if she could sleep in the attic. He had forgotten all about her.

The priest came and was able to give the poor dying woman the last sacraments.

In a corner, his hat in his hand, the owner of the house scratched his head and asked:

"How in the world did that lad know about her?"

Then the cold of the autumn and winter came: the cases of cholera declined, then stopped altogether. Don Bosco's boys healthy and happy, were able to return to their studies and trades.

## **GREAT DREAMS COME TRUE**

Now the small handful of four clerics had grown. And now Don Bosco felt the time had come when all his dreams were coming true. The following years were years of hard work, of ever-growing problems, works that seemed out of time.

26<sup>th</sup> January 1854. In Don Bosco's room the Salesian Congregation was born. The first five salesians pronounced their religious vows.

30<sup>th</sup> July 1860. Michael Rua, that pale-faced boy Don Bosco had met at the Mill near the River

Dora and to whom he had offered half his bread, said his first Mass. From now on he was to be Don Bosco's deputy, his faithful shadow.

1872: Don Bosco founded the Congregation of the Salesian Sisters (Daughters of Mary Help of Christians). To the first Sisters he said: "You are few and poor, but you will have so many students you'll not know where to put them."

11<sup>th</sup> November 1875. In the Sanctuary of Mary, Help of Christians packed to capacity, Don Bosco gives the crucifix to the first ten Salesian missionaries who were leaving for South America. At the head of them was Fr. John Cagliero, one of the first Oratory boys. And so was born the Salesian Missions which have spread over all the world.

In the same year Don Bosco organized the Co-operators whom he called 'Salesians living in the world'. They are the friends of his work who help in many ways both the Salesians and the Church in general. Before his death, Don Bosco was to say to these friends: "Without your charity, I could have done little or nothing; with your help I have dried so many tears and saved so many souls."

1877: To keep in contact with his Salesians (now grown to several thousands) Don Bosco founded the Salesian Bulletin. It was an illustrated monthly that carried the news of the Congregation, letters from missionaries who were working on the other side of the world, the word of Don Bosco. It was to have an enormous development, this monthly. In 1977 it was being printed in 30 different editions with a total printing of over a million copies.

But the more the salesians spread throughout the world, the more the money that was needed to keep them going. To finance the American missions, to maintain thousands of abandoned boys, Don Bosco was forced in his last years to travel all throughout Italy, France, Spain. An enervating task. But the Madonna blessed his travels quit visible: Do Bosco's hands gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, health to the sick. All over Europe he became known as the 'miracle priest'.

1887: Don Bosco had completed his last trip throughout Spain looking for money. And now the Pope had asked him to finish off the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome. Don Bosco, bowed down by age and hard work, went on to the altar to say Mass in this great completed temple. It was time for the consecration. The priests who were standing alongside him saw him break down and cry. Don Rua is worried: "Don Bosco, what's the matter?" And he, in between sobs, could only answer: "When I was nine years old, the Madonna had said to me - in God's good time you will understand. And now, looking back over my life, I now really and truly understand; I understand everything ... I was at the cost of many sacrifices, hard work, for the souls of the young ..."

He died at dawn on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1888. To the Salesians who had gathered around his deathbed he murmured these words: "Help everyone, do harm to none ... Tell my boys that I am waiting for them in heaven. "

### **PRAYER TO DON BOSCO:**

Saint John Bosco, father and teacher of youth, you have laboured so much that people, especially the young, may be saved from danger. Be a guide to the youth of our world that they may grow to full maturity according to the plan God has for each of them and they be saved from all harm.

Just as you brought about a change among the people of your day and time, help us establish fearlessly and without concern for human respect God's kingdom of truth, peace, justice and love.