SUNSHINE IN THE SHADOWS

by Peter Lappin

Don Bosco Publications

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Mama Margaret: Mother of St. John Bosco

by

PETER LAPPIN

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To Sarah my mother,
who also had three sons,
two of whom she gave
to Don Bosco, this book is
lovingly and gratefully dedicated.

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A word to the wise

A glance at the Behavior *section of any bookstore shows how month after month best sellers are churned out which promise instant happiness and peace of mind, most of them requiring no more effort on the part of the reader than a wish.*

Unfortunately, each best seller and the theories it contains last only until the next best seller with its still newer theories edges it off the shelf, and its only lasting value lies in the pocket of the author.

Yet how many people rush to buy them despite the fact that most of them are little more than variations on the same theme!

Which is more surprising—the spate of psychotherapies or the eagerness with which people gobble them up? For in the final analysis these cure-alls, formulas—even the highly expensive psychoanalysis—are useless unless accompanied by self-discipline and reliance on a supreme being. Anyone who claims that he can change your life with a book of this kind is either a fraud or a market-place charlatan who, instead of selling bottles, now sells books.

What drives most people to the Behavior *shelf is an emptiness which they try desperately and sometimes even dangerously to fill. Witness the numerous fads they take up, the ridiculous antics they perform, and the extreme lengths to which they go. Some of these for*

the moment do fill the void, do satisfy the hunger, but in the end they lose either their appeal or their effect, and once again the seeker finds himself or herself empty, in the dark, and the last state of these people is worse than the first. In the long run, one has to fall back on oneself and one's God.

A like situation holds with regard to bringing up children. Every so often a new child expert pops up with a new theory on how mothers should bring up their child. Some point east, others point west, still others, like so many weathervanes, just keep twirling around. For too many of them the child is little more than a guinea-pig on which to try out their new theories. If these prove successful, well and good; if not, they can always walk away from the results of their experiments. The state in which the present education experts have left our children bears this out.

Such experiments show contemptuous disregard for the part played by God and by the mother's instinct given her by God to help her raise her child. They ignore the fact that, assisted by grace, this instinct becomes a cooperative effort in the rearing of the child, just as was, in the first place, the birth itself.

This little book puts forward no new theories. It promises neither instant happiness, nor instant peace of mind nor instant anything else. It does not even attempt to tell the reader what to do. It merely tries to show how one mother successfully raised her three children by putting to the best use the motherly talents God gave her, well aware that He would cooperate with her in that noblest of all tasks—the giving birth to and the rearing of a child.

Hopefully, her example will serve as something of a guide to those mothers who, in this confused age, find themselves at a loss, not through lack of direction but because much of the direction they receive too often is contradictory, so that they drift like ships at sea without guiding compass or steadying ballast.

What should encourage them is the fact that this woman was both poor and uneducated, was widowed early in life and left with a family of five to support and that the times in which she lived were as troubled as our own, plagued by war and famine, disease and death. In spite of all this, one of the world's greatest educators confessed that much of his teaching and practice was based on her example. She cooperated with him, moreover, in conducting one of the most successful experiments in the history of education. Today his methods exercise a vital influence in educational institutes around the globe.

If the problems she faced differ little from the problems mothers face today so, too, were the ways in which people, especially young people, reacted to events. The workings of the human heart have not changed.

From taking care of her own children she went on to caring for the hundreds of abandoned or forgotten children of others. In the process she grew and developed until today she stands in the great tradition of the women of the Old Testament who were a source of inspiration to those of the New. Mothers of the human race, they appear every so often in history as prophets sent to teach more by example than by word the people of God.

This short account of the life of a valiant woman, the mother of a famed educator and saint, should hearten and inspire other mothers to raise and educate their children in such a way that they, too, will grow and increase in wisdom and in grace.

I. PERCHANCE TO DREAM

I

Rich heritage

"*Ya—Ya! Ya—Ya!*" the soldiers sputtered as they slapped their knees.

"*Ya! Ya!*" the girl mocked in return, "and, *Boh! Boh!*, too!"

The soldiers now entered into the spirit of the game and began to echo her. "*Boh! Boh!*"

This went on until finally the girl had had enough. "*Boh! Boh!* and *Ya! Ya!*" she cried. "And the two together spell out *Boya*." In her dialect this meant a hangman or a villain. "That's what you are!" she shouted. "Hangmen! Villains!"

"Soldiers!" The girl uttered the word with a mixture of contempt and fear. "There's always trouble with soldiers!" Young though she was, unlike her companions who were dazzled by it, she already saw through the handsome uniform, the glittering apparel, and the waving plume. Behind this showy front lay what too often stood in direct contrast to the appearance. Stripped of their gaudy uniforms, these men too often revealed themselves to be men of the lowest birth and habits, even thieves and rapists who had so terrorized the countryside it was unsafe to let cow, sheep or goat out to pasture unattended, or for a woman to venture out alone.

The girl had been turning the corn drying in the sun in front of her home and taking great care with it for it

was this corn which would provide her family through the coming winter with polenta, their staple food. She was humming to herself because it was a glorious September day and the view before her had captured her attention.

From the side of the hill where her home lay she could see to the north the majestic Alps reflecting the rays of the afternoon sun and to the south the low hills and wide fertile plain of Montferrat.

Suddenly her attention had been diverted by the sound of jangling metal and the clatter of hoofs which changed to a clumping sound as a group of horsemen left the hard road for the softer ground of the fields. Even as she watched, the riders drew up by the side of a hedge and dismounted after what, judging from the panting of the horses and the sighs of relief of the men, must have been a long, grueling ride over country hilly enough to test the mettle of man and beast. Before settling down they turned their horses loose and these at once took off in search of fodder. After easing their plumed helmets off their heads, the soldiers loosened their jackets and, on finding a place to rest, began reaching in their pockets for their pipes.

All at once the girl lost interest in the movements of the soldiers and became intensely interested, instead, in the actions of the horses. While she had been watching the soldiers these had quickly found the corn and had begun to nibble at it. Even in ordinary times this would have been outrageous; but with food so scarce and prices sky-high, these were not ordinary times. She immediately ran to the horses.

"Off with you! Go away!" she scolded. Her attempts to drive them off, however, did not disturb the horses and merely amused the soldiers who by now, thoroughly relaxed, were contentedly smoking their pipes. Some of them, indeed, began to encourage her.

"Sehr gut, Madchen! Hör nicht auf!" they cried. "Good work, little girl! Don't give up!" To them it was

all so much fun.

Seeing that her efforts were having no effect, the girl, picking up her skirts, ran up to confront the soldiers, pointing out to them that her corn was too costly to be given to horses. To protect it her family hung their winter supply under the eaves of their home and in their barns away from the eyes of prowlers. Once again she appealed to them to round up their horses.

"They're eating our corn!" she protested. "We sweated all summer to grow it and if your horses eat it what do you think we're going to eat all winter? Are you going to call off your horses?"

Unfortunately, all this was said to the soldiers not in Italian, of which they might have understood a little, but in Piedmontese of which they understood absolutely nothing. After listening to her appeals they remained silent for a moment. Then they broke out in open laughter.

Seeing it was useless to argue she turned and ran to fetch a pitchfork and prodded the horses with the wooden handle. But since the pleasure of eating outweighed the pain of the prodding, they kept on eating. At this the girl turned around the pitchfork and began to jab them in the flanks with the sharp prongs. It was only when she began jabbing them in the tender nostrils, however, that they took heed and ran off, whinnying with pain.

Now it was the soldiers' turn to be angry. But first they had to catch their horses and tether them to some nearby trees, well out of reach of the corn. Then they had to deal with their opponent. Had their opponent been an ordinary farmer it would have gone hard with him for in those days a cavalryman would never have accepted such an insult. The calvalry was an elite corps, both proud and stupid, who were used to cutting down peasant mobs with their sabres. But what could they do with this slip of a girl? In the end, shrugging their shoulders and mumbling to themselves, they went back to their rest and to their pipes.

Who were these soldiers and what were they doing in this part of Italy?

They were Austrians who had just begun their occupation of Piedmont and the year was neither 1914 nor 1940 but 1799. This repeated and continuous presence of foreign troops—either French, Austrian or Russian—tells its own story. Even in her own short lifetime the girl had seen more than one flag fly over Piedmont and more than once had felt the effects of war.

If, as far as climate was concerned, the Alps proved a blessing, as far as peace was concerned they proved the opposite. For the Alps were the gateway to Rome. This meant that Piedmont lay across the path both of those armies intent on conquering it and of those equally intent on protecting it. Ever since Lodovico Sforza, "the Moor of Naples," in 1494, had begged the help of Charles VII of France to regain control of his lands, the peninsula had become a shambles and had lain open to invasions. These invasions, added to the confused wars among the Italian statelets themselves, had earned for the country a well-earned reputation for instability. To the Great Powers who came later, in the words of Metternich, it was merely "a geographic expression."

Who was this girl who had dared to confront these soldiers?

She was Margaret Occhiena, born on April 1, 1788, in Capriglio and now eleven, who, at the moment of their arrival, had been working on the side of a hill near the village of Capriglio, or "Hill of the Goats."

Heavy sabots protected her feet from the rough soil; a faded blue apron covered the brown ankle-length skirt and a red kerchief held down her chestnut-colored hair. She was fresh-complexioned with a touch of tan, caused by the biting Piedmontese winters and the burning rays of its summer sun. The eyes were brown and penetrating, and the whole body trim and lithe as much from hard work and the constant climbing up and down the vine-

yards, as from the sparse diet of her people.

Her features, like the blood that coursed through her veins, were not pure Italian. Foreign settlements and the invasions of foreign armies had begun long before the coming of the Romans and in some areas had replaced the original inhabitants and in others had been absorbed by them. Celtic, Roman, Gallic, Germanic and Slavic blood ran in the veins of this young girl and when she spoke her native dialect echoes of their tongues passed through her lips. The racial characteristics of so many peoples had endowed her with features so strong they compelled attention and called to mind great women of the past.

This rich heritage, drawn from the blood of warring princes and the prized manhood of so many nations, inevitably had produced such fruits that Piedmont had far surpassed the other regions of the peninsula in making theirs a land of "warriors, statesmen and saints."

Although she was only one-year-old when the French Revolution broke out, for years afterward she listened wide-eyed to tales of horror from some of the 50,000 refugees who had fled from the Terror and the guillotine across the Alps.

She was six when she was still listening to details of the bloody events which followed the Revolution and were the result of Napoleon's success. In 1797 he took Piedmont and in the rioting and looting that followed the rising price of food in Chieri, one Francis Bosco was caught and summarily executed. From then on the French, in one form or another became a permanent presence; from then on there was not a time when Piedmont was free of soldiers. She could distinctly remember the bells calling the men to arms to defend King Charles Emmanuel IV against the French and how the older folk had criticized the call-to-arms manifestos for their bombastic, mock-heroic language and for being so far removed from reality, always promising victory but never achieving it.

People had war constantly in mind. The making of

uniforms was a thriving business, many of these uniforms approaching the comic-opera level. This uniform and thoughts of honor and glory had glamorized the military career for the upper classes. For the common man, also, soldiering had its attractions. The poor peasant who had nothing better to look forward to than a life of endless drudgery on the farm could find in the wages, the uniform and the promise of adventure that soldiering held, a much more pleasant prospect. Besides, the recent thrilling victories of Napoleon had blinded them to the tragedy of war. Twenty thousand Italians died for Napoleon in Spain and fifteen thousand in Russia. These made up the unfortunate battalions he used to bear the brunt of initial attacks. By now, however, people had begun asking what Frenchmen, Russians, Poles and even Turks were doing in the peninsula.

Margaret had reason to remember all those things for that was when her father had been conscripted.

She was nine when Napoleon's emissaries and Piedmontese revolutionaries rose against Charles Emmanuel IV. The people rushed to the defense of their King and death sentences and summary executions became the order of the day. French troops marched in the following year to retaliate and although the people, enraged by their cruelty, rebelled, they were crushed. Napoleon's men next launched a harsh punitive action, dragging suspects from their homes and farms and shooting on the spot anyone found with weapons.

This was the same Napoleon who had emptied the churches of art and valuables, had placed their priests under surveillance, forcing them to teach a catechism that was filled with errors; who had even stolen their church bells to melt them down for cannon, who, finally, took away their sons to use them, as he had cynically declared, for cannon fodder. After listening to the people curse this man for having done all these things, for the life of her Margaret could not understand why every time she

went to church she was obliged, with the rest of the congregation, to pray that heaven might protect him!

She was now eleven and the Austrians had sided with the King against the French then occupying Piedmont. This meant another raising of taxes, another mustering of men into the army and another rounding up of those who opposed them. Food became scarcer than ever and the authorities banned the importation of wheat from Lombardy, causing a famine in the region. To her and to her people the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were familiar faces.

After a short rest the platoon leader uttered a sharp command. The soldiers rose, put out their pipes, buttoned up their tunics and saddled their horses. At a second command they mounted and trotted off, some of them jocosely waving good-bye to the girl who had defied them. She, however, ignored them, and instead, gave her attention to the corn.

As the day drew on the girl could hear little noise coming up from the countryside except for the barking of a dog, the sound of a woman scolding and the distant cries of children at play. As evening approached, however, these sounds gave way to the creaking of oxcarts, the braying of donkeys, their panniers piled high with brushwood, and the tinkling of tiny bells of cows and goats anxious to relieve their swollen udders—all making their way home.

It was only on Sunday or feastdays that the entire countryside echoed with the joyous sound of bells answering one another from the little churches perched on the summit of a hill or clinging to its sides. Margaret's church—the red brick church on the hill which contained the entries of her birth and baptism—dominated the village of Capriglio.

Great warriors and great statesmen may have illuminated the pages of Piedmont's history, but their saints

have brought even more luster to that history and have been numerous enough to add their provincial list to the universal list of the Church! Its traditional rulers, the Royal House of Savoy, could boast of its family saints! The font where this young girl had received baptism had already seen the baptism of three saints and when questioned, the names of Cottolengo, Cafasso, Lanteri, Bertagna and many others would at once spring to people's minds.

Religion based on centuries-old practices, customs and ceremonies, on the sacraments and on a firm belief in the four last ends formed part and parcel of her life. All of these things were taught in the catechism, explained in homilies and confirmed by the daily workings of providence and the seasonal rhythm of nature.

Certain now that with the departure of the horses the corn was safe, and judging by the height of the sun that her day's work was done, the girl slung the pitchfork over her shoulder, tucked up her skirt and started climbing the steep path through the rows of vines. The grapes were already laden with juice and the smell of must in the air meant that the vintage season was near. The picking and the pressing of the grapes, the picnics, the festive gatherings . . . all this promised such a happy time! This thought swept from her mind the recent unpleasantness and she was smiling as she kicked off her sabots and passed through the doorway of her home.

2

A full life

"Up! Everybody up!"

Domenica Occhiena began the day by waking her family early, from Marianne, aged fourteen, to Michael, aged four; in between came Margaret aged eleven, Francis, aged eight and Lucy, aged six. Reactions ranged from sleepy grumblings on the part of the older children to wide-eyed silence on the part of the youngest. Since little Michael was unable even to raise himself up, she slid her arms under his armpits, lifted him out and set him on his feet on the floor where he stood for a moment balancing himself and rubbing his eyes.

The Occhiena home was a crumbling, much lived-in house. The blue plaster on the outside walls kept peeling but creeping vines helped hide the disfigurement, and the door and window frames were of weathered, unpainted wood. The indoor accommodation consisted of a large white-washed kitchen-sitting-room—the only room they heated in winter—a bedroom on the ground floor and on the second floor two more smaller bedrooms. One side of the house was given over to the barn, the upper half of which served as a loft for hay and winter storage—all of this protected by a roof of curved terra-cotta tiles. The house itself commanded a breath-taking view of hills and valleys stretching to the distant west and in it lived the Occhienas with their five children. Five other children

had enjoyed short lives, infant mortality being a sad fact of life every mother had to contend with. To have many children was nature's protection against the emotional shock of loss. For the poorer families it was also an economic factor: if it meant more mouths to feed it also meant more hands to work. Melchior Marcus Occhiena was hale and hearty at forty-seven years and his wife, Domenica née Bossone, was of the same age as her husband, though of much less robust constitution.

Capriglio, the village where the Occhienas lived, was one of five making up the township of Castelnuovo, and had around four hundred inhabitants. The hill on which sat Margaret's home, being smaller than that of Capriglio, was considered a *frazione* of Capriglio and was named Cecca di Gaia (*cecca*—magpie or gossip). The inhabitants of even the smallest communities were always anxious to preserve their identity.

Those records which had survived the wars show that the Occhienas have demonstrated a strong attachment to their village, one descendant after another having chosen to live there, so that the number of Occhienas born in Capriglio runs into the hundreds. The name is well represented even today in Capriglio, in the public death notices and in the lists of the dead from WW's I and II. If it had no ties with nobility the name could still reach far back into the history of the area.

Since no one in Capriglio was rich the Occhienas could be considered as living in comfortable circumstances. There was always enough food on the table to satisfy even the hungriest member of the family and clothing cost little since garments were made to last long enough to pass on to the next in line. Like the rest of the villagers, none of whom were educated, for any business that required reading or writing they called on the pastor, who, unlike the "readers" at the markets, did it free of charge.

"Today's the day!" called out Papa from the yard. This set Margaret wondering how he could know that

neither yesterday nor tomorrow but only today could be the day to start picking the grapes. There were many things about wine-making that only Papa knew, but like the rest of the wine-makers, he was never anxious to share his secrets.

"Hurry! Hurry! We can't waste the whole day hanging around the house! Marianne!"

"Si, Papa?"

"Tie the oxen to the cart, Margaret!"

"Si, Papa?"

"Get the donkey and the baskets ready." Margaret was usually assigned the more difficult chores.

"Francis! . . . . "

One by one the members of the family received their tasks for the day.

Papa's orders had the effect of hastening preparations. It meant a quick wash and a breakfast of homemade bread accompanied by a slice of semi-solid polenta helped down by a mouthful of water or wine.

By the time the others were ready Margaret had already prepared the two huge panniers which she flung across the U-shaped wooden harness resting on the back of the donkey; Marianne took care of the cart drawn by the two long-horned oxen, while every one of them, except the very youngest, began strapping to their backs the baskets into which they would throw the bunches of grapes they had snipped from the vines.

Margaret led the donkey out of the yard to meet a bright October morn. To the north, glinting in the sun, lay the ice-blue peaks of Monte Rosa and farther to the east the Queen of the Alps, Mont Blanc, clothed in white and sharply outlined against a sky of royal blue, symbols of what was purest in nature and still unsullied by mankind. From where Margaret stood she could see not only those snowy heights but also the sweep of the land southward to where it levelled off to form the great fertile plain of Montferrat, broken only by countless risings

resembling so many giant mole-hills, the highest of them, Capriglio itself, rising to no more than seventeen hundred feet. How well she knew those hills and the pathways around and over them, for she and her companions had covered every inch of them! One had to be a good walker to live among those hills! She knew them and loved them and would be happy to spend the rest of her life among them. To her Italian nature all this spelt "home" as much as did the place where she ate and slept.

It was from these hills that *Torino* or Turin, the capital of the province, got its name. *Tor* was the Celtic name for hill and the inhabitants came to be known as the Torinesi, or "the people of the hills." Below her stretched the handiwork of her forefathers—a carpeted floor which changed color with every change of crops and was marked off either by rows of dark mulberry bushes, or bright green willows and dotted with groves of cypress. But nature herself had been even more bountiful, having planted on the uplands poplars, pines and acacias, in the lowlands plane-trees, oaks, and elms, and along the hedgerows pink and white dogwoods and bright golden fuchsia. In all this abundance the Alps also played their part, affording protection against the icy winds which otherwise could sweep down the valleys, so that even into early winter the hills stayed green and in summer their cooling winds made the heat of the region bearable while the rest of the country sweltered. On the part of nature, the farmer fears neither the excessive heat nor the killing cold. What he does fear are the murderous hailstorms which can destroy more crops than any army of invaders. Altogether, it was a land where mountain and valley and even more so weather, because of its effect on the crops, made men constantly aware of the power and the presence of God.

"Margaret!"

"*Si, Papa?*"

"Stop gawking and get to work!"

"*Si, Papa.*"

Work on the farm, Margaret learnt early in life, was a year-round affair. It began in spring with the tilling and preparation of the soil, the unclogging of drains and ditches, the while anxiously watching the skies; the swelling of the tiny grape buds called for spraying with that panacea for every ailment of the vine, copper-phosphate; more ploughing between the vines and then on to the harvest season which meant days that began with sunrise and ended only long after sunset. Nevertheless, harvest time was a happy time for Margaret and her friends would be working and laughing and picnicking together until every crop in the village had been harvested.

With nature alone to contend with the farmer could be content with his lot for nature provided enough to keep himself and his family fed and clothed. But this was not a gift the gods dropped in his lap. It had to be won by hard work from the soil he so intensely cultivated that not an inch of arable land was neglected and every hill was either covered with vines or dotted with trees bearing apples, peaches, plums, apricots and pears.

In a good year there were plenty of crops to harvest for happily the Occhienas lived in one of the most fertile regions in Europe. Oats, barley, wheat, maize, hemp all grow easily in that soil. So, too, do the mulberry bushes to provide food for the silkworms—an important cottage industry—and tobacco which the wives prepared uncured for their husbands.

Of all the happy moments in Margaret's life, without doubt the happiest was always the vintage season. No other crop, no matter how rich or bountiful, received the same loving care as the grapes, for no other crop brought so much prosperity or fame to the valley. From this region, boasted its inhabitants, flowed wines that would grace tables around the world, among them the *barbera*, the *nebbiolo*, and the *freisa*. Consequently, preparations to handle the grapes began long in advance of the trip to the vineyard. By that time the casks, the wooden buckets,

the baskets, the strainers . . . everything that came in contact with the juice of the grape had to be scoured clean as a whistle.

Arrived at the vineyard, parents and children worked their way up and down the rows snipping off the bunches and placing them in the baskets. The youngest threw their bunches into the panniers on the donkey. When baskets and panniers were full their contents were thrown into the cart and when that was full it would be brought home where Papa himself would take care of the next operation.

The family worked steadily along the vines, reminding Margaret of so many huge beetles feeding on the berries of a bush. By the time the sun had risen in the heavens they had already filled basket after basket and had stained a deep purple, fingers, arms, elbows and everything else that had touched the grapes.

The work continued unabated, however, until the bell of the Morialdo church began to toll out the *Angelus.* The sound was quickly taken up by other bells in the valley, some near and some far off, forming together a chorus of answering bells. Without a word from anyone the entire family began to gather around Papa at the foot of the vineyard, glad of the halt, for climbing up and down those steep vines was a backbreaking task at any time but never more so than under a hot midday sun.

"The Angel of the Lord . . . . "

When the prayer was finished, like some patriarch of old, Papa threw up his arms. "Let's eat!" he cried.

With screams of delight the children ran to where Mama had already prepared an alfresco meal for them under the shade of a huge elm. Here they sat in a circle and she handed each their share of food and drink to which, for this special occasion, she had added appetizing slices of salami.

"Now that you've finished the meal," said Papa when they had eaten, "I want you all to rest. We've still got a lot of work to do."

At this the whole family settled down to enjoy a moment of quiet.

Margaret lay back on the soft ground, fixed her gaze first on the heavens, then let it wander over the tops of the trees below. Idly she watched a bee come buzzing into her ken, bounding several times over a single flower before finally settling on it to suck the nectar; that done, it swooped up and away in a wide arc and disappeared; a butterfly landed lightly on top of a second flower, fanned its petals briefly with its extended wings before taking its share of the nectar, then, like the bee, fluttered off into the distance.

As yet Margaret had not defined her attitude toward nature. The cold, cruel winter, and endless, backbreaking drudgery, the hopelessness of catching up with things when the weather turned against one and especially the heartbreak when the crops failed; the uncouthness of those who worked on the land, who cared nothing for dirt or of being dirty—these things gave her no pleasure. Against them, however, stood the beauty and fascination of nature, the breathtaking sight of the hills, the valleys and the mountains, of moments such as the present when heaven and earth smiled, when she . . .

"*Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!*" The sound startled Margaret until she realized what had happened.

"I've forgotten to feed the donkey!" she cried. With that she bounded to her feet to attend to this all-important chore. If there was one thing Papa kept drumming into their heads it was that animals had to be taken care of even before people.

This was another thing that puzzled her—the unspoken understanding that existed between Papa and their animals. Apparently unconcerned, Papa accorded them nothing more than an occasional pat on the head or a gruff word of recognition but would take great care to see that they were fed and otherwise looked after. On the other hand, the children could pet and fuss over them as if they loved

them more than anything else in the world, yet once they tired of them they could abandon them without a qualm.

"Let's go, children!" called out Papa. "We've rested enough."

At this the family rose to start the second half of the day. Papa, however, returned home to prepare for the arrival of the first cart loaded with grapes.

"Margaret," he called out before he left. "Bring the cart back to the house."

When Margaret reached the house, she found Papa dressed for the occasion in bare feet and short pants. Although she thought this funny not for all the money in the world would she have let Papa see her laughing.

Margaret's assistance—and everyone else's—stopped at the huge vat. To bring the grapes from the vine to the vat, and to stomp them, everybody's help was needed, everybody's help was welcome. But after that, only Papa was allowed to touch that juice. Through the fermentation, when the clouds of gnats would appear from nowhere to assist in the process, and he would add (in complete secrecy) a touch of salt, a touch of sugar, a touch of this and a touch of that until he was completely satisfied with the taste, to the pouring of the wine into the casks where it was sealed and ready for sale—he alone would handle it. This was a process which could transform the juice of these grapes into either a good wine or a great one. Each man had his own way of handling it and each produced a wine that was different, to a greater or lesser degree, from that of his neighbor; each convinced that his method was the best, that his method gave his wine its special quality and by the same token gave him the courage to ask more for it when the time came to haggle with the buyers. In these days the vintners of Piedmont were more inclined than ever to demand good prices, since the French Revolution and its devastating effects on the French vineyards had sent up the price of wine.

The vintage season was always followed by a round of

fairs and festivities that delighted the hearts of both young and old. But all too quickly it passed, giving way to the approach of winter. To Margaret this meant trimming and pruning in the cold and damp weather and gathering up the discarded twigs and branches for firewood. Coal was expensive and charcoal even more so. When winter did come it brought with it the indoor tasks and different ways of occupying one's free time. For the young people one of the indoor occupations was shelling chestnuts and stringing them up to dry to be used later in soups and a variety of dishes. The young people, however, considered it more fun to roast them and eat them while snuggling together for warmth in the barns and haylofts, listening to ghost stories, tales and legends, while outside the bitter cold winds whistled and moaned through the woods across the hills. For the women it meant knitting, sewing, making boxes, weaving willow-baskets, and gossiping; for the men it meant doing indoor repairs to the house or to the equipment or taking care of the cattle.

When Margaret awoke each morning it was to begin a full day that was the lot of every country boy and girl. The only difference between her and her companions was that as she grew older she earned for herself the reputation of always doing more than her share, in fact, as much as any grown man.

She had felt obliged to push herself ever since she had understood how her father's life was a continual trying to catch up if not with nature, then with his debts. A dry roof overhead, a dry floor underneath and a satisfied stomach in between were the only luxuries people like the Occhienas could expect from this world. For herself, however, there was more to life than just that. Besides the consolations of homelife, the get-togethers with friends and the occasional feasts, she had her religion. To Margaret religion was a constant source of comfort and strength.

Supper over, the girls would clean up and Margaret would lead the family rosary. After that they would go

visiting, unless "devotions" were being held in a church within walking distance; the children—daylight permitting—would go out to play, and father would either go to work for another hour or stroll down to a friend's house for a glass of wine and some congenial company.

It was a small simple world as circumscribed in action as it was in space, where children could be born, grow up, marry and die all within an area of a few square miles.

As night fell darkness covered the land, punctuated here and there by the light from an isolated farmhouse peeking through the trees, or the glowworm of a lamp creeping along the road as a late traveller made his lonely way home. Then it was to bed for everyone. Lights went out as if the village were drawing a blanket over its head and Capriglio, putting aside the cares of the day, settled down for another long and undisturbed night's sleep.

3

Mother

"Come along, Margaret. Let's go to the dance and have some fun!"

Margaret looked over her companions for a moment, noting, among other things, how they were dressed. "I don't think I'll go," she said at last. "I mightn't enjoy myself, after all. I might even meet some who prefer to dance with the devil. Anyway, I've already had my walk—to the church and back—and I don't feel like more."

There was something to this, for if the distance from her home to the church was not great as the crow flies, the hills in between made it exercise enough to satisfy even the most energetic for one day. The real reason for her objection, however, was that in those troubled times dances had degenerated into unruly affairs that continued far into the night, were accompanied by too much drinking and had become such a source of danger to the young that the pastors kept speaking out against them. The attitude of Margaret and the strength of her influence was enough to make the girls at least think twice of what they were about to do.

Margaret was growing into a girl attractive enough to draw the attention of the village swains. Since, every Sunday morning, in order to free the other members of the family for church, she attended a later Mass, some young bloods decided to wait for her hoping that she

would let them accompany her. As soon as she appeared they attempted to walk beside her. "Attempt" is the word, for once aware of their intentions, she prepared to frustrate them by the simple expedient of walking so fast that by the time the young men reached the church they were completely out of breath and made to look foolish. Another of her stratagems was to select as her companion the ugliest and most unpleasant of the women. One look at this woman was enough to scare off any would-be suitor! In church Margaret could feel at ease for the women were seated on the gospel side and the men on the side of the epistle. Since at that moment, because of Piedmont's many wars, the female population greatly outnumbered the male, this says something for Margaret's attractions.

As she grew older she also found much less time hanging on her hands, and since Marianne preferred outside work and her mother was frequently ill, the more she was entrusted with household tasks. Soon she became responsible for preparing the meals. At the Occhienas, however, these were simple affairs, consisting in the main of polenta or lentil soup with garlic and onions, accompanied by cheese, vegetables, wine and home-baked bread. Meat was expensive and rarely seen on the table. Even then it was usually the result of a successful day of hunting by Papa.

Her other tasks included going with her younger brother to the markets, and in particular, to the one in Castelnuovo, to sell whatever the farm had produced in season, to pay the family taxes and to buy what was needed for the home. Since the heat and the dust and the steep hillclimbing made the trip less than pleasant, and since the new road cut through the land belonged to a family named Bosco, Margaret, the wife of Francis Bosco, invited her to stop by at her house which lay halfway along the journey. Having already met Margaret Bosco several times, she was more than happy to accept. Both

made frequent visits to the church in Capriglio, to the one at Morialdo and, on special occasions, to the parish church in Castelnuovo, and both of them took their religion seriously. Like the Occhienas, the Boscos were simple folk with not much more to their name than a few acres of land. Becchi, the hamlet where they lived, was nothing more than a cluster of seven or eight houses perched on top of another hill which lay on the north-west side of the valley and got its name from the people who had first settled on it.

The Boscos lived in quarters attached to the farmstead belonging to Biglione, the landowner. It was in Biglione's interest to see that the Boscos were comfortably housed and well provided for since Francis was his overseer and enjoyed an excellent reputation as efficient and trustworthy.

While Margaret was living out her busy but uneventful life, history was still on the march. Unfortunately, it was a history filled with events which brought neither peace nor prosperity to Piedmont. Taxation became an insupportable burden for the poor, and even for those not so poor it was heavy enough to make many of them paupers.

At Marengo Napoleon defeated the Austrians in the battle of the century—a battle in which her father fought—then launched a campaign against the robbers, criminals and deserters who had been terrorizing the countryside to the extent that each village had mounted an armed guard to protect its homes and crops. In the years that followed, the presence of foreign troops continued to speak of the unhappy state of the region. In swift succession Piedmont passed from the hands of the French, to the Austrians, again to the French and then back to the Austrians. If the people in Turin saw fit to cut their cloth to suit each new set of rulers, the people of the countryside, however, ignored them and their fashions, asking only to be left in peace to till the land and not to be taxed to death in support of armies they detested.

Margaret developed into a woman of independent spirit who was considered what the neighbors called a good match. Several suitors did ask for her hand but were refused. She did not seem to be the marrying kind, preferring to lead a single life, doing whatever was expected of her in the home and paying attention to her religious duties. Nevertheless, when a girl reached the age of twenty-four, people expected her to marry and settle down with her husband in her own home. That is, unless she intended to enter a convent. When Margaret showed no interest in convent life, either, the gossips concluded that since she was so good-living but still did not "enter," it had to be because she was too independent to be tied down by rules, and too bossy to be led by others.

What they said or thought, however, worried Margaret not one whit and she went on happily living her own life.

On her way back from the market at Castelnuovo she continued to drop in at the Boscos to pass on whatever items of interest she had heard in town. The Boscos always insisted that she accept some refreshment before she undertook the last leg of her journey home. In return, Margaret would press on little Anthony some of the "blessed bread" she had brought from the market, and some fruit in season to the aging mother of Francis—another Margaret—who was so happy that all three women had the same name! Francis Bosco she rarely saw, since in the afternoon he was usually at work, and the only time he spoke was when he offered her a courteous greeting. All she knew about him was that he had the reputation of being a God-fearing and hardworking man.

One day she called on the Boscos and was met at the door not by Margaret but by Francis.

"My wife is sick," he greeted her as he stepped aside to let her enter.

When Margaret went inside she was shocked at the change in her friend's appearance. Little Anthony was crying and Granny, when she saw Margaret, also burst

into tears. Margaret did what she could to console not only the sick woman but also the other members of the family.

During her friend's illness she paid more than one visit to the Boscos, each time bringing with her some little dish for the sick woman, but with each visit she became more and more convinced that Margaret Bosco was not long for this world. In fact, during one of her last visits she found the family in despair. They had just received the doctor's verdict and he had held out no hope.

She helped prepare the house to receive the final visit of the priest and assisted the unhappy family in preparing the body for burial. Nor did her part end there for she continued to drop in at the Boscos on her way home from the market and the sad consequences resulting from the loss of the mother in the home became more noticeable as the weeks went by. Since Francis' own mother was sickly and Francis himself was out at work during the day the home soon began to show the lack of a woman's touch. What to her was most disturbing, however, was the way in which this lack of a mother's care was affecting little Anthony. In order to make up for the loss of a mother's attention, both Francis and Granny were bending over backwards to make him happy. Unfortunately, all this was having an adverse effect so that Anthony was gradually becoming, if not utterly spoiled, at least a greatly disturbed child. How she wished she could have done more for him! She felt sorry for Francis, too, who appealed to her as a good man who had suddenly found himself facing a situation he found impossible to handle, with a sick mother to take care of, a difficult child to look after, and a full day waiting for him at the farm.

Francis Louis Bosco was born February 4, 1784, one of a dozen children, six of whom had died by the time he had reached the age of twelve. When his father, too, had died, Francis, at the age of eighteen, had taken over the running of the home. In 1801 he had married Margaret

Cagliero and she had borne him two children, Anthony, born March 1, 1808, and Theresa, who was born February 16, 1810, but died two days later.

The Boscos had long lived within the boundaries of Castelnuovo, honored and respected for their spirit of industry and their integrity. Francis could trace his name back to the town's earliest surviving records where, in the year 1624, the name *Bosco* appears on the *consegna,* or list of men capable of bearing arms for the King and in the *Salt Register* wherein the salt needs of every family were noted. The family had known many ups and downs, mostly due to the effects of the wars, and Francis, with his ability for managing affairs, was now in the process of rebuilding its modest fortunes. Given this new turn of events, he was not going to find it easy.

After the death of his wife he did, indeed, find it difficult to keep his house in order. Besides his work as overseer for Biglione, the local landowner, and the odd jobs he took on, he had his own land to look after so that at night when he returned home he had the strength to do little else but rest. His mother was too old and too infirm to do more than see that Anthony did not get in trouble. Even when he had obtained the services of a cleaning girl and the occasional help of a neighbor these were not enough to keep the home the way his wife had kept it. As month followed month he became painfully aware that unless he took some drastic action his home would turn into a shambles. Nor was he blind to the effect all this was having on his little son.

When his mother saw what was happening, she decided it was time to do something and began dropping hints then finally added her name to the list of those who were counseling Francis to marry again. One day with her usual directness, she forced her son to face the issue.

"Don't you think, Francis," she began, "that it's about time you thought of taking another wife?"

"It's not that long, Ma," was his response.

"It's seven months," said his mother. "Nobody around here waits that long to get married again. A month or so is long enough. And seeing what's happening to your home, that's already far too long."

"Should I take a wife for that?" hedged Francis.

"Should you take a wife for that?" echoed his mother. "You certainly should take a wife to save your home from going to rack and ruin! You certainly should take a wife for the sake of your little son. If he's not looked after better he'll turn into a little monster. That's why you should take a wife."

Francis did not reply. What his mother said was true.

"Well?" she insisted.

"Who is there around here to marry?"

"Are you blind? Can't you see that Margaret Occhiena would make a fine wife for you and a fine mother for your children? She's one of the Occhienas and that already says a lot. She's God-fearing, hardworking and thrifty, a good housekeeper and a good cook into the bargain. Don't tell me that you haven't been noticing a thing or two while she's been here."

This was also true. Francis had not only observed Margaret while she had been taking care of his wife but had also heard about her from the neighbors each time he had dropped in to visit his sister Madelene in Capriglio. Still, he was not sure. "How do I know she'll have me?"

"There's only one way to find out," said his mother. "Ask her!"

After a certain amount of deliberation Francis was convinced that he should remarry and in due course presented his suit to Margaret. His proposal, like all such proposals of the time, had little in it of the romantic. It was a practical matter, carefully weighed for its advantages and disadvantages. In due course he was refused. When friends and relatives joined the chorus, Margaret still excused herself on the grounds that she had to take care of her ageing father.

"Take care of me?" was Papa's explosive reaction when he heard this. "If I was taking care of myself since I was a kid; if I took care of myself during the wars, surely I can take care of myself now. And what's all this about 'ageing father'? You'd think I was about to die! Well, let me tell you something, I have no intention of dying for a long time yet!" And he did not die until he almost reached ninety-two!

After that, Margaret, who actually felt sympathy for Francis, finally gave in.

The description of Margaret's dowry is conceived in legal language so convoluted that only a lawyer could decipher it! In substance it declares that Margaret brings a dowry of 250 *lire* and a chest (described in detail down to the type of hinges) containing articles of clothing and other belongings. Later these will figure in a dramatic decision.

Family affairs settled, Francis and she had their marriage registered in the Town Hall, and on June 6, 1812, blessed in the parish church of Saint Andrew's in Castlenuovo. The marriage license was written in French, the church record composed in Latin and the ceremony conducted in Piedmontese!

When Margaret married Francis she came into a home which, if not rich, by common standards was not poor. Besides his acres of land Francis owned some livestock—a few sheep, two cows and some pigs and hens. He was also such an able administrator that the local landowner employed him as overseer. In fact, he was a man on his way up. Food was fairly plentiful and Margaret was a housekeeper who could make everything go a long way.

Perhaps the only cloud on Margaret's horizon was the attitude of Anthony. He had for so long enjoyed the run of the house and had been the center of attention that he looked on her as an intruder, a threat to his privileged position, and a competitor for his father's affection.

One thing he openly resented and showed it by throwing an occasional tantrum was the fact that he was no longer allowed to sleep with his father. Because of Margaret he was being deprived of this privilege and would have to sleep in the hayloft—and alone. Although aware of all this, Margaret was certain that, given the time and the opportunity, she could win both his confidence and his love.

In this way the four of them—Granny, Francis, Margaret and Anthony—made up a happy family. Their happiness was increased when on April 18, 1813, Joseph, Margaret's first child, was born.

Life moved along for the Boscos until two years later, on August 15, 1815, Feast of the Assumption—an auspicious date!—it seemed that Margaret's time had come again. But it was not until past midnight, on August 16, that a second child was born to the family. As was the custom, on the following day he was brought to Saint Andrew's church in Castelnuovo where he was made a child of God and given the name of John Melchior Bosco.*

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*For a long time it was believed that Don Bosco was born in what is called Becchi House. Later research, however, seemed to say that this was not so. The purchase of the Becchi House was the last business transaction which Francis conducted before he died. Only after his death and when Margaret had wound up his affairs did she move into the house which she could now call her own. It follows that both Joseph and John were born in rooms which Francis occupied in the Biglione residence. Unfortunately, this was torn down in 1958 to make way for the large plaza laid out in front of the church-shrine of Saint John Bosco.

In 1880 a benefactor offered to build a monument around the place where Don Bosco was born. This would certainly have preserved his birthplace for future generations. Unfortunately, again, in his humility Don Bosco declined the offer.

In all this there is at least one consolation—the altar of the shrine stands on the spot where Don Bosco was born.

Francis returned from the baptism a happy man. Not only had he three fine sons, but he had also a capable wife who had proved that she could provide him with plenty of children who would fill his home with laughter, work side by side with him in the fields and carry on his name.

As for Margaret, each night as she looked down on the innocent faces of her sleeping children she felt strangely moved. She, who lived in a land filled with great works of art in canvas and in stone, knew that when all those great works of art and even the marble halls which housed them had long since crumbled to dust, when time itself would be no more, these works of art in flesh and bone, these children which she, Francis and God had brought into being would go on living and, by their very existence, enriching the lives of others and honoring their Creator. Nor was any of this mere fantasy; it was her conviction founded on her faith.

4

"Till death do us part"

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" they chorused as they ran to him.

Like a man who has suddenly had a heavy burden lifted from his shoulders, Francis at the sound straightened up and a broad smile spread across his face.

First to reach him was Anthony. Raising the boy aloft, he held him there, happy to see in his face the face of Domenica, his former wife; next was Joseph, his first child by Margaret, whom he shook affectionately before releasing him; last came John, the youngest. Hoisting him up like the others, he kept him at arm's length for a moment to enjoy the sight of that cherubic face capped by a shock of chestnut curls. This time he did not put the child down but spun him around and sat him astride his shoulders. With John holding on tightly and the other two seizing each a hand, Francis covered the few remaining yards to his home.

"Mama!" he called out. "The men are here!"

Work on the land was always hard but especially so in early spring, and Francis, bent over with fatigue, had wearily climbed the steep hill that led to his home. He had not only to take care of his own acreage, but also of the land belonging to Biglione, a taskmaster who exacted from him the value of every *centesimo* he paid him. In ordinary times Francis might have left him for some less exacting

master, for he enjoyed an excellent reputation in the countryside.

But these were not ordinary times; these were the ill-fated "Hunger Years." Consequently, they were times that were precarious, that even approached the critical. Piedmont was forever being dragged into wars which not only sapped it of its manpower but also drew off in taxes whatever the land could produce. To top it all, the weather of recent years had not been kind to the farmers. Last year a drought had burnt a good portion of the crops and the winter which followed had been one of the severest Francis could remember. These calamities, both man-made and natural, had caused a near-famine, and if things did not improve soon the province would find itself in serious trouble.

So far, however, he had been able to provide enough for his family and he hoped that he would be able to do the same for the next few years when conditions were bound to improve. But he did not have time to dwell too long on what the future held for the sight of three small figures racing down the hill to greet him had quickly dispelled those somber thoughts.

At the sound of his voice Margaret appeared at the door, wiping her hands on her apron and smiled as she offered her cheek.

After releasing the children, the first thing Francis did when he entered the house was to approach his mother who was sitting in her chair by the side of the fire.

"How are you today, Mother?" He bent over to kiss her.

"A little better than yesterday, son. Thanks be to God. And how was your day?"

"Not the usual routine," said Francis. "Most of it was spent at the market in Castelnuovo for Signor Biglione. Things are getting scarcer and prices going higher by the minute." He shook his head in despair. "And nobody knows where it's all going to end."

After supper he sat back and waited while Margaret filled his pipe with the uncured tobacco she had prepared for him.

"What news did you bring from Castelnuovo?" she asked.

"For one thing," said Francis, "Napoleon will give us no more trouble. He'll never get away from Saint Helena like he did from Elba. That means no more of us will be killed fighting for his empire. We should have peace now—at least for a while."

"It won't be for long," said Granny. "Our men will always die fighting other people's wars."

"Since the French vines haven't yet gotten over the destruction caused by the Revolution," went on Francis, anxious to change the subject, "our wines are still fetching a good price."

By now the children had gathered around their father's chair, each one anxious to attract his attention. Anthony began to edge out Joseph who made no protest; but when he tried to edge out John, John protested vigorously. Observing all this, Francis laughed and, putting one arm around Anthony and the other around John, started to tell them the story they expected to hear before being sent off to bed.

When the story had ended Margaret broke in. "You'd better get to bed with them," she admonished her husband. "You've had a long day and of late you haven't been looking too well."

"You're overdoing it for that slave-driver, Biglione!" scolded Granny. "For what he pays you, it's not worth all that trouble."

For the next few years after the birth of John, the family lived the simple life of country folk with only minor family problems to contend with and only the rumors of larger outside problems to disturb them.

The children enjoyed the full, happy life of all children

who have the good fortune to live in the country. For them it was paradise, a place where each day they happened on a fresh discovery, on a new delight, on another miracle of nature and the reflection of this happy life could be seen in their bright looks and ruddy cheeks.

Francis would be up and out early, not only looking after the Biglione holdings and taking care of his own affairs but even accepting odd jobs on the side to supplement the family income. This would go on every day of the week except Sundays which the Boscos observed as days for resting and for giving honor to God.

Besides taking care of Granny, who most of the time was confined to the chair or to the bed, Margaret attended to the needs of her husband and home. But by far the greatest amount of her attention she gave to the rearing of her children. While doing this it never entered her mind to consider Anthony anything less than a son, and she gave him the same love and care that she gave the other two.

Early one morning Margaret opened her eyes and lay awake wondering why she had wakened. She listened to hear if she could discover any reason for it, but the only sounds that disturbed the quiet of the house at that hour were the usual ones of Granny mumbling in her sleep and the soft breathing in the little room where the children slept. What was it, then, that had awakened her? She was preparing to settle back into sleep when she heard someone groan. This was followed by silence and then by another groan and it was coming from Francis who lay beside her. Thinking that he might be doing it in his sleep, she shook him.

"Francis," she whispered. "Wake up! You're dreaming!"

"I'm not dreaming," said Francis hoarsely. "I've been awake for hours." Margaret knew then that what she had feared most had happened.

The sirocco which in early spring blows up from the

southeast had sent a heatwave over Piedmont which would last for several days. Yesterday, Francis, at work in the fields, stripped to the waist and covered with sweat had gone down into the cellar where Biglione kept his wine and vegetables. Above ground he had been sweating from the heat, but down below he had quickly found himself shivering from the cold. That evening, feeling that he was getting a temperature, but thinking that it would pass after a good night's rest, he had gone to bed as usual. Instead, he had suffered this attack, and now kept assuring Margaret there was no need for alarm.

"Fevers come and fevers go," he told her, "but men go on forever."

Margaret rose at once, lit the lamp on the night table and brought it close to her husband's face. It was both flushed and swollen. For a moment she stood wondering what might be the best remedy to apply as her husband was evidently suffering from some kind of fever. Since she was no novice when it came to treating the sick—scarcely a family in the district had not benefited from her help—she went downstairs to prepare a potion to lower his temperature, doing everything very quietly so as not to disturb the rest of the family.

As the day wore on Francis showed no sign of improvement. In fact, he showed signs of getting worse. This forced Margaret to make up her mind. Telling Granny to look after the children, she hurried to a neighbor's house and asked them to send someone to Castelnuovo for the doctor. Her request was granted at once, for the neighbors knew that when they needed Margaret she was always there. The doctor, in turn, sent back word that he could not come to Becchi earlier than the following morning. In the meantime, the patient was to be kept warm and given hot potions of camomile tea to lower his temperature.

The doctor did arrive on horseback the next morning and the children watched every move he made as he

entered, placed his black bag on the table and drew off his gloves.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Upstairs," said Margaret and she led the way.

Once in the room Margaret would have preferred to stay but the doctor turned to her. "I'd rather you'd leave," he said.

Margaret at once went downstairs where she did her best to comfort both Granny and the children.

Finally they heard a noise above as the doctor clumped his way downstairs. When he reached the kitchen, he drew on his gloves, took up his bag and signaled Margaret to follow him outside.

"Your husband is a very sick man," he said.

"How long will it take for him to get better?" she asked.

"Much longer than you might think."

"A week? A month?"

At each question the doctor kept shaking his head.

"Doctor," said Margaret at last, "are you trying to tell me that my husband might never get better?"

This time the doctor nodded.

"Never get better!" gasped Margaret. "I can't believe it!"

"Your husband has had an attack of pneumonia," said the doctor, "a very serious attack which was aggravated by the fact that while he was already in a weakened physical condition he went from extreme heat to extreme cold in a matter of seconds. That would prove too much for even the strongest constitution."

In those days the word *polmonite* (pneumonia) covered a multitude of diseases of the lungs. While the doctor may have been well aware of the possible ramifications he still had no means of determining anything of a specific nature beyond the tapping of the thorax, observations of swellings, the sound of the breathing, and so on. What he did know was that acute forms such as the one which had

attacked Francis were easier to cure than the chronic, and less deadly. External remedies included *salassi*, or bloodletting, local or general, slow or sudden; the application of blistering ointments, hot poultices . . . ; the internal included doses of antimony and tartar in various combinations, cassia, sweat-producing medicines, emetics, enemas . . .

"Can't we do anything for him?"

"All that you or I or anyone else can do at this stage is to hope and pray."

For the next two nights and two days that was mostly what Margaret did—hope and pray. She also kept looking for signs of improvement in her husband's gaunt eyes and hollow cheeks but none came. On the morning of the fourth day, not only were there no signs of improvement but the patient was visibly growing worse. Familiar with the signs of death, she could now see those signs clearly written on her husband's face. Toward midday she called in some relatives and, in a final gesture of resignation, sent for the priest.

The neighbors learnt of the coming tragedy by the arrival of a somber little procession made up of a priest in a long black soutane and white surplice, preceded by two altar boys bearing lighted candles and ringing a bell to warn them of the approach of the Viaticum and calling on them to pray for the soul who was about to set out on the long, lonely journey. In such moments they understood that if the same end lay in store for them, they had the consolation of knowing that they belonged to the same community of the faithful and that they, too, would be prayed for when their time came.

During these critical moments Francis showed himself to be the least perturbed of the family, in death, as he had been in life, a deeply religious man. That Friday he called Margaret to his bedside. "What a great grace God has granted me!" he told her. "He has called me to Himself on the day of His own death while I find myself at the same

age, and at the very same hour when He died on the cross."

Before leaving her forever he had one final message. "Take care of all my children," he said, "but take special care of little John." On May 11, 1817, at thirty-four years of age, he passed away.

Margaret herself saw to the preparation of the body for burial, enclosing it in a white sheet and covering the face with a white cloth.

On the day of the funeral, holding Anthony by the hand, she led the cortege behind the donkey and cart borrowed from Biglione to carry the coffin. Arrived at the ancient cemetery of Saint Peter's in Castelnuovo which had been neglected to the extent that the air filled her nostrils with the odor of death, she watched as into the recently-opened grave were lowered the remains of Francis Bosco, and the symbolic handfulls of earth were scattered over them before they were cut off forever from the eyes of men. Because of the increasingly unsanitary condition of the cemetery he was the last person ever to be buried in it.

The reaction of each member of the family to his death was as different as their temperaments.

Apart from the sorrow Granny felt at the loss of her son, what most preoccupied her was the answer to the question: Now that Francis has gone how would her daughter-in-law treat her?

On Joseph it did not have too much effect for the simple reason that he understood little of what had happened, and his easy-going nature was able to absorb the shock.

Its effect on Anthony, the eldest, was both deep and lasting. He had lost his mother when he was three years old. For more than a year he had been denied a mother's loving care, and had lived in a home which had offered little in the way of family atmosphere. When his father remarried he had been forced to sleep in the loft by himself

and brood. Now that he was losing what he considered his only remaining parent he felt abandoned and, in a way he could not understand, even betrayed. All this added up to a near traumatic experience. In fact, the thought of what was happening to him at times drove him into extremes of grief during which he would throw himself on the floor writhing and moaning at what he considered the hopelessness of his fate.

The reaction of the youngest, on the other hand, when his mother brought him in to see the body, carried with it something of his innate stubbornness.

"Why doesn't Daddy speak to me?" he wanted to know. "Why doesn't he say something? I won't leave the room if he doesn't come with me."

"Daddy is dead," was all Margaret could say.

"What does 'dead' mean?"

"It means that Daddy has gone to heaven." Having said this, Margaret burst out weeping.

On seeing his mother weep John's reaction was to follow her example and he was led crying from the room. His mother then said something to him which was to remain fixed for ever in his memory: "You have no father now."

The death of a young child was a common occurrence in those parts and if it left a wound this was healed when another child came to fill the void. The death of an older person was different. An older person had had time to intertwine the threads of his life with the lives of others, so that his sudden departure always tugged at one's heartstrings, often left an open, bleeding wound. This was how it was with Margaret.

During the funeral it was all she could do to keep from breaking down. What sustained her was the thought that from this moment on she had to become a pillar of strength for others to lean on, the one from whom they would draw strength and courage. The destiny of the three children now lay in her hands. Since in those days a

woman could not be named guardian, John Zucca, a cousin of Francis, was appointed before the law for the children.

Although Francis was anything but rich the inventory of his possessions in the will had read like something left by a Rockefeller! It had included articles ranging from two oxen valued at 200 *lire* down to the iron seat of a three-legged stool valued at 25 *centesimi*, seventy-four articles in all set out in six legal-size sheets! Of the eight signers of the will, five put only the cross of the illiterate opposite their names. Margaret was one of these and the other four were members of the Becchi family.

Not until late that evening when the others had been put to bed could she find time for herself. She had been preoccupied with many matters, such as taking care of Francis during his illness and later with the details surrounding the funeral.

These things had prevented her from feeling the full impact of his death and the consequences of his disappearance. Now she was alone, now she had all the time in the world to think of these things.

She thought of the years she had spent with Francis, smiling with regret at their rare quarrels, with pleasure at the moments of joy they had spent alone or with the rest of the family. Francis, she reflected, had been a good husband and a good father. She turned to thinking of life without him, without his help and encouragement, without his gentle, yet strong presence . . . As the darkness slowly closed in on the room, so did it close in on her soul. That God would one day take him from her, she could understand. But that He should have taken him away so soon, just when she and his family had most need of him, when it was becoming each day more and more difficult to put food on the table . . . More important still, that he had been taken at a time when the boys would need the strong, steadying hand of a father, for it was a father's job to take care of the boys in the family . . . this

was more difficult to understand, more difficult to accept.* They were not going to be easy boys to raise, since each of them was so different from the other. Considering the fate of the children alone it was hard to understand why Francis should have been taken away from her and from them, harder still to bear. Suddenly overcome, she dropped to her knees and, bending over, let the tears flow. This untimely death of Francis would make her bear an inner loneliness for the rest of her life.

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*If one looks on Francis' death with the eyes of faith, one can see in it the hand of providence. When he died he left the rearing of the boys in the hands of Margaret. Had he lived he would have brought up John in the way every Italian father brought up his sons, that is, in the masculine tradition of *machismo*. In the light of such a development one can imagine what kind of person John might have become.

5

Sharing

If a long and uphill road lay ahead she was ready to face it. This was how Margaret felt next morning. The worst was over. Never again would she allow herself to dwell on the past. It was a weakness she could not afford. From now on she would look only to the present and to the future. That would be more than enough for she had plenty to keep busy both head and hand. The family would take up every moment of her attention, the farm use up every ounce of her strength. She knew that in running the farm she could neither rely on nor expect the help of others, not even of her relatives. Like everyone else during those difficult times, they had their own problems. Francis had always urged her to trust in the goodness of God. She would do that and somehow, with God's help, she would manage.

From that moment on, assisted by the two hired hands she not only did all the woman's work in the home but also the heavier tasks on the farm usually reserved for the men. This lasted until November when all farm contracts ran out. Then she paid off the two hired hands, gave up the keys of the rooms and went to live in the house Francis in his last business deal had bought from Biglione. This was an old, weather-beaten dwelling with three bedrooms, a kitchen-living-room, a stall for cattle and a loft for hay. But what counted most with Margaret was that

she was now living in her own home.

She continued to hire help by the day although she did more than her share of the ploughing, the sowing, the scything . . . Often enough she tired out the help even though they could little stomach being outdone by a woman. While Margaret was working in the fields, Granny took care of the children.

Although heavily burdened, she was gradually bringing things under control and was as content as could be expected under the circumstances when, like a thunderbolt from the blue, a suit for damages dropped on her head.

In common with everyone else in the area, the Bigliones, who although they owned a great deal of property around Castelnuovo, because of the difficult times were hard pressed for money to meet obligations. Accordingly, Biglione's mother, who preferred the high life and lived in Turin, pressured her son into suing Margaret for loss of rents. Biglione then accused Margaret of not having taken proper care of his vineyard and of having neglected his fields to the extent that neither had brought him the profits to which he was entitled.

When the case came up for trial, the court made an inspection of the properties. As far as the vineyards were concerned the court found that these had been kept in perfectly good condition and that the yield had been excellent. Where the fields were concerned, however, Margaret did not fare so well. The loss was there and the law could not take into account the special circumstances under which all this had occurred. Neglect was proven to the satisfaction of the court which decreed that she had to make good the loss. But when the two litigants were ordered to present themselves in court, Margaret appeared, Biglione did not. The court, in consequence, found him in contempt, ordered him to pay the costs, and released Margaret of all future liability. Evidently, Biglione had not been brazen enough to face up in public to the fact that he was suing a woman who, having recently been widowed,

had not been able to take care of his fields and at the same time hold together a home broken up by death.

The weather also added to her misfortunes. The winters were so severe and the summers so dry that the crops failed twice in a row and food became so scarce it was not to be had for love or money. People perished from starvation and in desperation turned to heaven for help, practicing extraordinary penances, and making pilgrimages to favorite shrines. Things got so bad that the wolves, unable to find food in the forests of the northern regions, began to threaten the inhabited areas on the edges of the city to such an extent that hunters were awarded bounties for killing them!

The Boscos suffered with the rest of the population and all too soon Margaret's own meager supply of food ran out. When things were at their worst and her children began to suffer she begged a family friend to go to the markets or farms and buy food for them. But no matter where he went, and no matter how much he offered, the friend, after a two-day search, returned empty-handed, unable to buy anything to stave off the hunger of the Boscos. Nor could any of the neighbors whom she had so often helped do anything for they found themselves in the same predicament. Since her children had been fasting for several days and their health was in danger, Margaret, unwilling any longer to stand the sight of them in pain, to a desperate situation applied a desperate remedy. Taking down a large kitchen knife, she hurried to the stable, slaughtered her only calf and gave the meat to her children. The sacrifice of such an important part of her capital shows both the straits in which the family found themselves and Margaret's determination never to let her children suffer. Fortunately, a short time after that the situation eased a little when cereals were brought in from the south.

Another lawsuit entered against Margaret over such a simple thing as the possession of a walnut tree is one more

indication of the importance of any item of production in times of near-famine. The tree had become an important element in the struggle for survival. In those days, the land one owned was not marked out on maps by lines but by the names of people, of lanes and roads with so many modifications and clarifications that the delineation of property limits was an almost impossible task. Disputes like these over land have provided courts and lawyers with work all through the ages.

It was characteristic of Margaret that even during the height of her own troubles she could never turn down a neighbor's request for help. They could borrow whatever she had to lend in the way of food or medicine, wine or wood. Nor would she allow anyone to finish the sentence which began, "Margaret, I still owe you . . . " If the sick needed something she had she gave it willingly and never thought of asking for anything in return.

On one occasion she went to the flour-bin to prepare some dough when, to her surprise, she found it empty.

"Don't you remember, Mama," John pointed out, "that you gave all your flour away to that family the other day? You said they needed it more than we did."

Such generosity could not go unnoticed and a neighbor who was better off than the others sent her a sack of flour. On learning where it came from, Margaret protested to the donor.

"You gave all you had to help the needy," he protested in his turn. "It's only right that we should do something to help you."

"When you have nothing left for the poor," added his wife, "come to our house and take what you want. And when you visit the sick let me know if you need anything for them."

The last offer refers to one of Margaret's special charities. Since medical attention and nursing were rare in those days, she not only visited the sick, she took personal care of them, even at times staying up all night to look

after them, and because inns were scarce in that area and the roads especially bad in winter, Margaret took in more than her share of weary travelers, even though, since these were often unexpected, there was not always food enough to feed them.

Nevertheless, she usually managed to scrape up something to take the edge off their appetite, be it only polenta, gruel, cooked dandelions, chestnuts, soup or bread, offered with all the warmth she could put into it. She relied on John not only to help with the cooking but also to find some of the ingredients.

This habit of never refusing help to anyone led to amusing and sometimes even to critical situations.

Given the political unrest and general lawlessness it had become common for armed bands to roam the countryside either in search of booty or in flight from the *carabinieri*, the recently formed national police. Napoleon's invasion had forced the Italians to look upon the peninsula not as a multitude of separate states, but as one nation which they thought should be free. To obtain this freedom secret societies sprang up from one end of Italy to the other, and in no place were they more numerous than in Piedmont. Most famous among these were the *Carbonari*, or charcoal-burners, formed in 1811, who started the first of what was to become an unending series of attempts to chase out the invader. By 1820 the number of those belonging to such societies was put as high as 700,000. Not all held patriotic aims. Many were nothing more than loosely connected bands of outlaws, smugglers, deserters or escaped convicts. These so terrorized the countryside that people did not dare go abroad after dark and in daylight only in groups capable of defending themselves.

During winter some of these would end up at Margaret's because of her reputation for hospitality, in search of food or shelter. Slipping in at dead of night they woke her up by knocking softly on the door or by throwing a

handful of gravel at the upstairs window. Margaret would then wake John, tell him to put some *pasta* in the pot and hurry down to open the door for the shivering men. The men would eat quietly in a darkened corner of the kitchen and when they had finished would ask the inevitable question, "Where can we sleep on this cold night?", well aware that the hayloft or the barn was always at their disposal.

Because of Margaret's reputation and of the central location of her house it eventually became a rendezvous even for the police where they would meet to exchange information while taking some refreshment. To avoid any encounter with the bandits in the home of Margaret, however, these adopted a little stratagem. Whenever they approached the house Joseph, who was a favorite with them, would rush to meet them and they would call out, "Anybody home?" While there was little danger of his revealing the presence of anyone, the bandit would hear the voices and have sense enough to lie low until the police left, certain that as long as he was enjoying Margaret's hospitality they would grant him sanctuary.

Nevertheless, the fact that neither side ever divulged its movements to the other did create some awkward situations. On one occasion nothing more than a paper window separated the bandits from the police! Although aware of the presence of each other neither gave the slightest indication. Another time the police unexpectedly burst in to discover a bandit sitting half-hidden in a corner enjoying a dish of spaghetti! A desperate confrontation was avoided only when the police, seating themselves at a distance from the bandit, simply ignored him. They did this not only because they did not want to upset Margaret, but also because it would have been unwise to attempt to try to take any bandit on the spur of the moment. Since these went about armed to the teeth and were ready to resist to the death, the police naturally considered it prudent to wait for a more opportune

moment to make the arrest.

Nor did Margaret by any means limit her charity to the material needs of her neighbors, or allow herself to be stopped by the embarrassment some feel when it comes to defending moral values or protecting those whose virtue is in danger. When any of the local girls who wanted to attend a dance would come to her for advice she would first examine both the conditions surrounding it and the people who were running it. Only when she was satisfied that it presented no moral danger would she declare it fit entertainment.

If she chanced to meet young girls too scantily covered she would try to persuade them to dress more modestly.

"But we are poor and have no other clothes!" would be the response.

"Then come with me. I'll fix you up so that at least you won't offer temptation to others."

She would take them home and despite her own limited resources dress them up in such a way that their clothes would be less ragged and at the same time less revealing.

Her special concern, however, was for those girls who found themselves for one reason or another in immediate moral danger. She would make every effort to draw them to her by means of little gifts of bread, polenta, salami, fruit, or something she knew they fancied. Every time she found them in need she would assist them as far as her means would allow, never letting them go without offering them a word of advice or encouragement.

Because of this concern for them she was loved by the young people of the locality and in many ways these showed their affection and esteem for her. In very hot weather, for instance, when they learned that she was about to visit their homes, they would rush to clothe themselves in such a way as to meet with her approval.

When a woman who lived alone near Becchi took in a male lodger the neighbors talked a lot about this open

scandal. Margaret, however, was the only one with enough courage to do something about it. She went at once to the house of the woman and knocked at the door.

"Martha!" she called out.

In a few moments the door opened slightly and Martha appeared. "Yes?"

"Are you Martha, the daughter of So-and-so?"

"You know very well I am."

"Are you a Christian?"

"Of course!"

"Have you been baptized?"

"Now you're being silly."

"And you go to church and do your Easter duty?"

"Look here, Margaret Bosco! . . . "

"Do you understand why I used the word *you* all the time? Do *you* want to force me to tell *you* that *you* are going to hell. *You*, my friend, Martha."

Having understood only too well the reason for the questioning, Martha now tried to excuse herself. "You know I'm poor and nobody should be surprised if I take in lodgers."

"Rich or poor," insisted Margaret, "you have to avoid going to hell."

"What else can I do?" Martha was now disturbed.

"Send that man away."

"But it's already late and I don't know how I . . . "

"Send him away," Margaret repeated. "And if you don't know how, I'll show you!" Throwing the door wide open she shouted inside, "Clear out of here, you servant of the devil! Clear out at once!"

By this time other neighbors had gathered around and these provided moral support for Margaret. Hearing the clamor, the man inside, concluding that flight was the better part of valor, took to his heels.

On another occasion, one of the men in the neighborhood took in a woman of evil repute. When he fell critically ill, again it was left to Margaret to go to the house

and try to persuade the woman to leave at least to give the man time to set the affairs of his soul in order. The woman, however, refused. When the sick man reached death's door the priest was sent for, and Margaret explained the circumstances to him.

"Are you sure of what you're saying?" The priest, who had never seen Margaret before, wanted to make certain that he was not listening to idle gossip.

"Ask the woman yourself."

When he did so the woman tried to brazen it out. She was an honest woman, she declared, who had her own good reasons for living in the house. When the priest announced that if she did not go he would, she finally broke down and, after debating with herself for a while, decided to leave. Once she had gone, the priest was able to persuade the dying man to prepare himself. When it was all over he tried to find out who the woman was who had acted so courageously on behalf of the dying man, but Margaret declined to give her name.

This love of her neighbor often drove her beyond the limits set by ordinary kindness, making her reach out even to those who apparently did not deserve it. A short distance from the Boscos lived a man named Cecco who was described by the neighbors as being "very fond of eating, but not so fond of working." He soon discovered that since he would not work he would have to beg for his food or go hungry. Beg he could not because he was ashamed and because he was well aware of the reception he would get from the neighbors. Consequently, he was forced to live alone and suffer the pangs of hunger.

As usual, when Margaret learnt of his plight she could not bear to see him starve. Every so often, after making sure that no one was around, she would drop a supply of bread through Cecco's open window.

She had been doing this for some time when she ran into Cecco who showered her with a profusion of thanks. Margaret was so moved that she went a step further and

offered to bring him some soup. To spare him embarrassment she made up the following plan. After nightfall, she would raise her voice as if she were scolding one of the children then place a pot of soup at Cecco's door. Having done so, she would withdraw and again raise her voice and that would tell Cecco that the coast was clear. Cecco would quietly open the door, take up the soup and disappear inside.

One winter night when the roads were covered with snow and ice another beggar came knocking at her door. While he was begging for a night's rest, Margaret noticed that his toes were sticking out from his shoes. She willingly gave him a place to sleep but, unfortunately, had no shoes to give him to protect his feet from the cold. But she was not to be put off by that.

The following morning she sat him down and slowly and carefully wrapped his feet in warm cloth and, in the manner of the ancient Romans, bound the cloth with cords. It was such a successful operation that the man was able to walk in the snow and ice without discomfort or difficulty.

Sometimes the recipient of one of these little acts of charity would offer her something by way of compensation.

"Thank you," she would say, "but what I do I do for the love of God."

6

"God sees you"

"God gave me a husband and God took him from me. When he died he entrusted the three children to my care and I would consider myself a cruel mother if I were to abandon them just when they most needed my help."

Margaret had not been long widowed before she received several offers of marriage. One of these was especially advantageous. This man was well-off and, aware of her love for her children, had assured her that they would be taken care of. Friends and relatives had urged her to accept. The above comment was her reaction.

When it was pointed out to her that a tutor would be provided for them, she still refused.

"A tutor," she pointed out in her turn, "at best can be only their friend. But I am their mother and I would never entrust their care and upbringing to anyone else for all the money in the world!"

Margaret now began to train her children to accept the hardships of life, and as a start insisted that they accustom themselves to getting out of bed before sunrise.

"Our lives are so short," she told them, "we have little enough time to do good. Every hour we put in sleep that's not necessary is time lost where heaven is concerned. Every minute we take from unnecessary rest lengthens our lives, for sleep is the image of death. How much good we could do during those minutes,

how much merit we could gain!"

When wool mattresses for the winter and horsehair for the summer came into use, she refused to get them for the boys. Summer and winter they would have to be content with sleeping on mattresses of cornhusks and straw. "Later on," she told them, "if you ever have to sleep on a cornhusk mattress, you won't find it so hard to put up with." If some of the neighbors fell ill during the night and called for help, she had no hesitation in waking one of the children to accompany her to the house. For breakfast she gave them a piece of dry bread to wash down with water from the well. However, she did allow them to eat at any time whatever fruit they wanted.

She was a successful mother in that she was able to obtain from all three children something which every mother yearns for, namely, obedience to her wishes, especially when it came to their choice of companions, and the assurance that they would not leave the house without her permission.

"Mama," they would call out. "So-and-so wants us to play with him. Can we go?"

If she said, "Yes," they would run out and play to their hearts' content. If the answer was, "No," then they would not leave the house but would be content to amuse themselves with whatever simple toys she had brought with her from the market, or which they had made for themselves. Sometimes when she was not at home, the boys would still refuse to go out. When anyone asked them why, their response was, "Mama wouldn't like it." When they were absent for any length of time she would insist on knowing where they had been and what they had done.

On market days when the time of her return approached, the three children would stand outside the house staring at the hill where she would first appear and then would run to meet her. She would come into the house dusty and sweating from the long trek and would hardly have time to sit down before the chorus would

strike up. "The blessed bread! The blessed bread!"

Before she handed out the blessed bread, however, there were several questions she felt had to be answered.

"Did you recite the Angelus?" was the first. "Did you give that message to So-and-so? Did you get the seeds and the tools from So-and-so?" . . . And the last invariably was, "Did you do what Granny told you?" According to the answers she received Margaret would either congratulate the children or give them some advice on how to conduct themselves in the future. Only then would follow the distribution of the goodies.

If she insisted on obedience from her children she first set an example which they could see for themselves in her dealings with her mother-in-law who was obliged to spend the better part of her day either in bed or on a chair. When Francis had died Granny had been worried as to how her daughter-in-law would accept her. She was both surprised and grateful when she discovered that Margaret intended to treat her as if she were her own mother. She had promised as much to her husband on his deathbed and for as long as Granny lived Margaret looked on her as the head of the house. She went out of her way to make life comfortable for Granny, keeping her company during the long winter days, preparing for her some favorite dish and taking special care of her when she was more than usually indisposed. Whenever Margaret went to the market she always returned with *grissini*, or breadsticks, biscuits or fresh fruit for her, and for the children she laid down this standing order: "Obey Granny even more than you obey me."

On her part Granny tried to make herself as useful as possible, doing odd jobs around the house, knitting and darning, and looking after the children when Margaret was absent. Even when confined to her chair, she had enough spirit to make sure that they did what she thought was right. Nor did she close an eye when she thought they should be punished.

"Bring me the rod," she would command.

The *verga*, or rod, stood in the corner of every home. It was traditionally administered by one of the parents or by the oldest member of the family and had to be brought over by the culprit. Since the boys knew that Granny was quite capable of giving them a whack with it if she thought they deserved it, they would try to excuse themselves.

"It wasn't my fault!"

"Now you get two strokes," would be Granny's reaction. "One for what you did and another for telling a lie."

"O.K., Granny. It was my fault but I won't do it again."

"Are you sorry for what you did?"

"Yes, Granny. Very sorry."

"Hmn! Put the rod away. But next time you won't get off so lightly."

When the companions of the boys heard of this they showed surprise. Aware of Granny's immobility, they asked a very natural question. "Since the old lady can't catch you, why don't you run away?"

The answer of the boys was equally surprising. "Our mother wouldn't like that."

Margaret, on the other hand, although she never relinquished her punitive authority, never made use of the rod, never raised her hand to the children. Punishment, for her, meant the loss of some privilege or favor. Even when punishment was called for she never punished when she was upset, and before she administered the punishment she would explain to them why she was punishing them so that the punishment usually was not needed. In any case, she was more concerned about teaching the boys how to reflect than she was about punishing them.

Another way of hers was to encourage them to talk to her. She never tired of listening to what they had to say, be the subject ever so unimportant or the story ever so long. What mattered was that they were opening up their

hearts to her and at the same time revealing to her their inclinations and desires.

One phrase continually on her lips was, "God sees you." If she suspected that they harbored resentment she would whisper in their ear, "Remember that God sees you." Or, if, while questioning them, she feared that to excuse themselves they might tell a lie she would again remind them that, "God sees into your heart."

The ordinary events of the day were used to teach them some useful lesson.

In the morning she would point out to them the glorious sunrise, in the evening the equally wonderful sunset. "God created both these wonders of nature," she would say, "and if He created them how beautiful must He not be?" Next it was a flower or a star that would inspire her, or the beauty of whatever God had created for the service and enjoyment of man. If, instead, the heavens resounded with the crash of thunder and the lightning flashed, she would point out that all this was but a mere fraction of the power of God, so that those who opposed Him had little hope of victory.

Did a disastrous hailstorm destroy all or part of their crops?—"The Lord gives and the Lord takes away," she told them. "He knows what is best for us." Was the harvest abundant?—She told her children to bless the Lord for he had given them their daily bread; and when winter came and they gathered around a warm fire, telling stories or roasting chestnuts, she reminded them to thank God who was such a good father to provide all they needed in the home.

The Bosco's farm was enclosed by a ring of trees and a stone hedge, and one part was given over to a little vineyard which was Margaret's special care. When the grapes were ready, she and the three children worked all day gathering them in wicker baskets for the market. While they were doing this, Margaret noticed a stranger lurking at the back of the farm. Although he pretended to be

unconcerned she knew what he was waiting for. Since that year there was a shortage of good grapes, thieves went about at night trying to steal them.

"Tonight we're going to have trouble," she warned her children. "We can't attack the man for he's too strong for us. But neither can we stand by and let him steal our grapes. So I have planned something else. Don't make a noise until I tell you, but when I do, start shouting at the top of your voices, beat the barn door with sticks and stir up all the hullabaloo you can."

That night the children gathered at the barn door and waited for her signal. Suddenly, they saw a shadowy figure flit about the bottom of the vineyard. The three boys fidgeted with excitement, but Margaret did not move. Without making the slighest sound, the shadow now moved up to where the grapes lay and reached out his arm . . .

"There he is, officer!" cried Margaret at the top of her voice. "Arrest him!"

"This way, officer!" cried John.

"Don't let him get away!" shouted Anthony and Joseph.

At the same time all four stamped their feet, beat their sticks against the barn door, and set up such a clamor that the thief, frightened out of his wits, stumbled off in the darkness.

"We had neither rifles nor pistols," Margaret pointed out, "yet we scared the life out of him. He was afraid of everything because he was doing wrong."

A sight that inspired local people was to see Margaret accompanied by her two youngest children—Granny was taking care of Anthony—leave early in the morning for work in the fields and return tired and hungry in the evening with the two still by her side. At the sound of the evening bell she would recite the *Angelus* and this would be followed later by the rosary. With her no reason was good enough for omitting these evening prayers and

if anyone, stranger or friend, happened to be in the house at the time, they were invited to join. It mattered not if it was only some poor straggler who had wandered in for a night's shelter, or, as it sometimes happened, it was the *carabinieri*, or even the bandits! Under Margaret's gentle persuasion they would slowly get down on their knees to pray—something many of them had not done since childhood days!

From their earliest years she groomed and trained the children to neatness. On Sundays she made sure they wore their Sunday best, with their hair neatly tied, as was the custom of the day, in ribbons. The neighbors would often comment on this charming picture as Margaret and her children made their way to church.

"Don't you like to hear people say such nice things about you?" she once asked them.

"Of course, Mama!"

"But do you know why I have dressed you out in your best?" she insisted. "It's because I want you to show the joy that every Christian should feel on Sunday, this special day of the week. I want the outside cleanliness of your dress to reflect the inside beauty of your soul. What would it matter if you wore beautiful clothes if all the while your soul was ugly? Remember, also, you should not pay too much attention to the praise of others. It only makes us proud and ambitious, and God does not love such people. They told you you looked like angels, so you must act like angels, especially in church. Don't turn around, don't start whispering or talking and pray with your hands joined. Then the good Lord will bless you."

Another characteristic which stands out in Margaret's make-up was her love of purity. Neither puritan nor prude, she could deal serenely with matters of sex. She was, nonetheless, unyielding in her efforts to protect the innocent and the unwary, and to prevent anyone from either wittingly or unwittingly harming others. This love she inculcated in her children and in all those with whom she

came in contact.

It happened on occasion that a salesman who asked for shelter would have hidden among his wares samples of indecent literature. On noticing this Margaret would persuade him to destroy them before they fell into innocent hands.

Once on the way to church with her children, she passed by a village character named Secondo who was telling off-color stories to a group of youngsters. He was also annoying passersby with his foul language, much to the amusement of the youngsters.

Unable to believe her ears, Margaret stopped in her tracks, turned to the man and called out his name. "Secondo!"

"What's the matter?" Secondo wanted to know.

"Would you like your daughters to hear you talk that way?" asked Margaret.

Secondo brushed aside the question by saying that since everybody talked like that why shouldn't he.

"Even if everybody did talk like that, which they don't," said Margaret, "that doesn't make it less harmful. And if you end up in hell will it help to say that everybody's doing it?"

The man forced a laugh and the others joined in.

"At your age and with your gray hairs," Margaret concluded, "you ought to be giving good example to the young instead of being a source of scandal."

She was still upset as she drew her children aside. "You know I love you more than anything in this world," she told them. "But I'd rather see the Lord take you away this instant than see you grow up to be like that wicked man. I'd strangle you with my own two hands before I'd let that happen!" On questions of modesty she would not compromise and would even order to leave the house at once people who offended.

One afternoon she overheard two youngsters in her hayloft talking in a way that sounded offensive to her ears.

"Leave this yard at once," she ordered them. "This is my house and I will not tolerate such language here. Off you go!"

Nor did she ever again allow the two boys to take part in the little evenings the children of the locality held in her loft during winter.

If she watched over the conduct of her children she did it in such a way that her presence was never burdensome.

Whenever they did not seem to be taking her objections too well, she would gather them around her and tell them stories she had heard when she was young. The noise they made in their childish games never annoyed her. Indeed, she often joined in these games and even invented new ones for them.

Once a traveling mountebank stopped by and the blare of his trumpet sent shivers of excitement racing down the spines of the three boys. They pleaded with their mother to let them join in the fun.

"Wait until I find out what's going on," she responded.

Since the entertainment was all right for them she told them to go ahead. If, on the other hand, there had been something about it she considered harmful, the answer would have been a decisive, No.

"But, Mama," the boys sometimes would object, "the others . . . "

"What the others do is their business," was her answer. "But one thing I don't want and that is to see *you* sliding down to hell!"

7

"The mother alone forms the heart"
—A. Auffray

Margaret went on praying until they came to the words, *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* She stopped and turned to Anthony. "You'd better not say those words," she told him.

"Why not? They're in the prayer."

"Of course. Still, you'd better not say them."

"Then what'll I say?"

"Whatever you like. But coming from you those words would be a lie; even an insult to God. How can you expect Him to forgive you when you refuse to forgive others?"

Anthony hung his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was wrong."

With the return of a certain tranquility under the Austrians, living conditions began to improve for the Boscos, and in time the boys began to contribute the strength of their young arms to the work on the farm.

If outside the home conditions had improved, the same could hardly be said of conditions inside where, with the passage of time, the atmosphere had undergone a change. As the boys had grown older they had started to exhibit very different temperaments. By the same token they had begun to demand more of Margaret's individual attention.

Joseph was developing into a warmhearted and affectionate boy whose only acts of wilfulness occurred when-

ever he was unduly upset or contradicted. Then he would roll on the floor in childish tantrums which did not last long, nor did they continue beyond his childhood years. In fact, as time went on, he developed a distinct balance and stability of character. Yet even as he grew older his attitude toward John continued to hover between admiration and awe.

Anthony, now twelve years old, had grown into a sturdy boy able to do a man's work, who felt more at home on the farm than in the house, a hard worker who loved the land. Margaret had no quarrel with this; it was his attitude in the house and toward the others that was causing her concern. She wondered if he had ever really considered himself part of the family and felt that he was beginning to look on the others as intruders.

From the moment that she had stepped into the Bosco home he had shown her in various little ways that she could never take the place of his mother. He had made it equally clear that to him Joseph and John could never be more than half-brothers. He now understood that with their arrival he had lost two-thirds of the family inheritance, which, as far as he was concerned, meant part of his father's land—that is, land which belonged to him. As the boys grew older, Joseph and John grew closer and he saw in this a joining of forces against him, not understanding that his own attitude was partly responsible. He included Margaret in this conspiracy since he now looked on everything she did with a jaundiced eye. The result was that the only member of the family who had any influence over him was Granny.

On one occasion when he struck John, Margaret refrained from punishing him but for the rest of the day maintained an attitude of reserve toward him and of not addressing a word to him. At day's end he came to ask her what the matter was.

"I'm too upset now to discuss it," she answered. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

The next day he came to her again, this time to beg her forgiveness. "They started it," was his excuse. "I want them to respect me."

"If that's the way you feel, there's no use talking. How can you expect them to forgive you?"

"But I was right!"

"In the beginning, maybe. But you were wrong to take the law in your own hands. Admit it and promise to do better next time. That's the only way you can prove you're sorry."

"I'm sorry and I won't do it again."

That is how it was at the best of times. But there were other times when on no account would he admit that he was either sorry or ready to forgive and all attempts at accommodation would fail. Since Margaret was never inclined to use force, things continued like this on one particular day until the time came for evening prayers. She literally had to drag Anthony to them and the most he would do was kneel down in a corner apart from the others.

On another occasion, however, he flew into such a rage that he raised his clenched fist. "You viper of a stepmother!" he screamed at her. "You're not my real mother!"

Although Margaret was strong enough to have knocked him down with one hand she refrained. That was not her way. Instead, she merely stepped back and waited until he had calmed down.

In the meantime the other two children, frightened by this violence, rushed to their mother and clung to her, appealing to Anthony to stop fighting. Granny, too, added her voice to theirs, scolding Anthony and telling him to stop acting like a madman.

"You're wrong, Anthony," said Margaret once she had regained control of herself. "You *are* my son. When your father died he told me to take care of you. That I have always done, I love you as much as I love the other

two. I shall always do so. I won't strike you because I won't use force on any of my children. Just try to see that what you're doing is wrong."

This gave Anthony time to reflect and in the end he again apologized for his conduct. No matter how upset he was, as yet he never went beyond the angry stage or failed to apologize once the fit of rage had passed.

To Margaret John presented a challenge of a different kind. At eight years old he was beginning to show traits which made him more difficult to manage than the others. One of these was a tendency to manipulate people to his own advantage. She could see that in the way he handled Joseph. When anything went wrong he could always turn up with a wide smile and an appeal in his big brown eyes. He was also impetuous, hot-tempered, self-willed and obstinate.

On the other hand, he was by far the most interesting of the three boys and if any of them was to amount to anything in life it was certainly John. He was so full of promise he had already begun to stand out from them. Despite his faults he was generous, good-natured and intelligent. Although there was much about him that she still did not understand, if there was anything that she had to teach him it was to check his impulses since these could lead him into trouble, to reflect before he acted.*

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*In a book entitled *I Santi dalla Scrittura* (The Saints from their Handwriting) Padova, 1952, p. 217, Father Girolamo M. Moretti, handwriting expert, analyses a sample of Don Bosco's handwriting. His summing up, although too long to be given here in its entirety, reveals some interesting details concerning the temperament and character of her son. It does warn us, however, not to conclude from the picture presented to us of Don Bosco in later years that he was born with a gentle and loving disposition. All his life, it seems, but especially during his earlier years, he was engaged in a fierce struggle against impulsive, manipulative, domineering and sensual drives.

Even when he had reached the mature age of sixty-one he tells us, "Don't think that whenever I have given someone an assignment

John and his brother Joseph, one hot summer day, ran home. They had worked so long in the sun their mouths were afire with thirst.

"A drink, Mama!" they chorused.

Margaret poured out a cup of cold water, ignored John's outstretched hands and gave it to Joseph.

"I asked before him!" protested John.

When Joseph had finished Margaret took the cup, refilled it and handed it to John. He, however, pouted and left the kitchen in a huff. Margaret emptied the water down the sink, put the cup on the shelf, and went back to her work.

Five minutes later John reappeared. "Mama."

"Yes?"

"I'm thirsty!"

"Oh?"

"Can I have some water? Please!"

"I offered you some a few minutes ago."

"I'm sorry, Mama. Like to try me again?"

"Now you're being sensible. Here."

Another time in a quarrel with Joseph, the quick-tempered John threw a stone and struck him. Margaret saw this.

"John!" she called out. "Come here at once!"

John came over and on the way his temper had time to cool.

"Yes, Mama?"

"See that rod?" Margaret pointed to the rod in the corner of the room.

"Yes, Mama."

"Bring it to me."

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that is either important, delicate or needed in a hurry, I find it either not done in time or else badly done that it doesn't cost me to keep my temper. I can assure you that there are moments when my blood boils and all my nerves tingle like a swarm of ants." (M.B.XII,456)

John did not move.

"I said, 'Bring it to me.' "

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked tearfully.

"Give it to me and I'll show you."

Slowly John walked to the corner, took up the rod, and holding it at arm's length, brought it to her. "I know what you're going to do with it!" he wailed. "You're going to lay it across my shoulders!"

"And why shouldn't I?" said Margaret grimly. "Seeing the way you behaved to your brother."

"I'm sorry, Mama." John appealed with his brown eyes. "I'll never do it again. Solemn promise, Mama." He held up his hand and smiled, and after a moment's pause she smiled back at him. She never found it easy to punish John but she had to teach him to reflect before he acted.

On another occasion he was told to take care of the turkeys. While he was distracted, however, a thief ran off with one. As soon as John discovered the theft he accused a complete stranger simply because, as John saw it, he was the only one who could have stolen it. Fortunately, he happened to be right and John got back the turkey. When he returned home and told his mother the story he waited for her approval. Instead, her reaction, to say the least, surprised him.

"I know, John," she said, "that you expect me to praise you for having stopped this man from stealing the turkey. But I want you to know that you put yourself in danger not only of accusing an innocent person but also of receiving a warm pair of ears!"

"But, Mama," he protested, "I was right, wasn't I? And I did get back the turkey."

"Yes, you did get back the turkey," Margaret conceded. "But just think: if we had lost the turkey wouldn't we have lost very little? But you ran the risk of seriously offending your neighbor. Next time be careful not to do anything against charity."

One evening he went to take a look at a nest of night-

ingales and watched in horror as a cuckoo killed both the mother and her young, pushed their little bodies out of the nest then calmly settled herself in it. Next day she had laid an egg of her own in the nest. When the cuckoo, in turn, was killed by a cat and its place taken by a thrush John wondered what would happen to the egg.

Eventually, out came a little cuckoo with two large claws and an ugly beak. When it was ready to fly he took it home and put it in one of his cages.

Since it was harvest time, however, he was so busy and so tired he forgot all about the cuckoo.

"How is your cuckoo, John?" Margaret asked one day.

John slapped his forehead. "I forgot all about it!"

He ran all the way home to find that the poor bird, left to starve, had tried to escape by pushing its yellow beak in between the wires and had strangled itself to death. As he showed the dead bird to his mother he burst into tears.

Margaret pointed out to him that the cuckoo had already inherited trouble from its parents. "Those who steal from others," she told him, "pass on to their children their misfortunes along with their ill-gotten goods."

Later he found a little magpie whose mother had been killed, put it in a cage and watched it grow into a big bird possessing a huge appetite, always ready to eat more than it could hold.

One day he brought home a basket of cherries and gave one to the magpie. The magpie swallowed it and immediately squawked for more. He gave it a second cherry, then a third. He thought this so funny he forgot how many he had given it, for each time it opened its beak he popped in a cherry, crying, "And down goes another!"

At a certain moment, however, the magpie again opened its mouth, but this time, instead of squawking for more, it merely gaped and a glassy look crept into its eyes. It turned its head from side to side and the next moment

slid off the perch to the bottom of the cage, keeled over and stretched out its claws.

"It's dead!" A horrified John ran out to his mother. "It's dead!"

Margaret again took care to point out the lesson. "Gluttons die quickly," she told him, "because intemperance shortens their lives."

As soon as the boys were able to make their First Confession, she herself prepared them and only after she had gone to Confession would she introduce them to the priest. Every Sunday she would bring them to the little country church to assist at Mass, hear a sermon and be taught catechism. When they returned home, she would question them as to what they had heard in the sermon and how it affected their lives.

She did the same for their First Communion. When John reached the age of eleven he was granted permission to prepare himself. Two difficulties, however, presented themselves: the pastor did not know him personally and to attend the required catechism lessons he would have to travel too far. Since Margaret did not want him to be denied this sacrament any longer than was necessary, she took it on herself to prepare him. On the morning he was to receive she would neither let him speak to anyone nor let anyone speak to him. She accompanied him to church, helped him with his preparation and thanksgiving, and for the rest of the day tried to shield him from distractions.

The religious instruction which she gave her children by word and example, by comparing their conduct with the teaching of the catechism and so on, succeeded in making religion an integral part of their lives.

In bringing up her children Margaret may have been at a disadvantage in that she possessed neither wealth nor station in life, nor had she had any education or training. Whatever religious knowledge she had she had gained through the instructions she received in church, the

catechism classes, the readings from the Scriptures and the Sunday sermons. What she did possess, however, and that to a high degree, was a mother's love. Before she could deal effectively with her children she knew that she must not only love them but that she must also show them that she loved them. She had a profound trust in her maternal instinct, believing that this, too, came from God to assist her in what she considered the noblest of human endeavors—the rearing of her children. At night, after she had put them to bed she would sit by the fire and discuss them with Granny; or if Granny was indisposed she would think about them and wonder what more she could do to help them.

All this gave her such a lasting influence over her children that even when they became grown men she still could ask them if they had performed their religious duties or if they had said their morning and evening prayers.

To act according to the law of God was the only limitation Margaret placed on the freedom of her children. Correct in her conscience, controlled in her affections, frank in her speech and sound in her judgment of people and things, she herself did not know what it was to falter, to fear, or to blush with shame. One cannot understand her attitude toward her children unless one first understands her detestation of wrong-doing, her abhorrence of sin. Because of this she succeeded in communicating to them a love of truth, a love of purity, courage, constancy in adversity, a spirit of charity toward their neighbor and a concern for the salvation of their own souls and the souls of others.

8

"Some mothers have the souls of priests"

—René Bazin

One bright May morning when young John came down to breakfast, his eyes glowed with such an odd light and there was such a curious air about him that the others stared at him.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Granny.

"I had a strange dream last night," he announced.

"Did you?" was Anthony's immediate reaction. "Do a little more work during the day and at night you'll be too tired to have strange dreams."

"Let's hear your dream, John," insisted Granny.

Margaret said nothing but sat down to listen while her son described his strange dream.

He dreamt he was in a field surrounded by boys, some laughing and playing, others fighting and using bad language. On hearing the language he had lost his temper, dashed in among them and laid about him with his fists. Those struck by his flying fists had lost their tempers, too, and another fight had started. This one ended up with everybody attacking John.

In the middle of this uproar suddenly appeared a Man whose face and dress shone as if made of light. His bearing was so striking that the boys stopped fighting to stare at him.

"Come here, John," said the Man, putting his hand on John's shoulder. "You will never help these boys by

beating them. Be kind to them. Teach them that sin is evil and that purity is a precious gift."

But John was still too upset to listen. "Who are you to tell me to do all these difficult things?" he demanded.

"I am the Son of the Lady your mother taught you to salute three times a day," said the Man. "And these things are not difficult. By obeying the Lady I shall send to you, you will do everthing with ease."

The Man then disappeared and John watched as the boys at once turned into dogs, wolves, and other wild animals. Trembling with fear, he turned away to find standing at his side a beautiful and gracious Lady who wore a mantle of gold.

"Do not worry, John," the Lady said, taking his hand in hers. "What I shall do for these animals, you must do for all my children. But if you are to succeed, you must first become humble and strong."

When she had finished speaking, John saw that the wild animals had indeed been changed into lambs and were cavorting about her feet.

Confused and frightened by what he saw, he burst into tears. "I don't understand!" he cried.

"Do not worry, my child," the Lady repeated. "You will understand everything in good time."*

When he had finished, everybody had a comment.

"You'll be a goatherd when you grow up!" teased Joseph.

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*Although little is said here of the dreams of Don Bosco, they play an important part in his life. Called "the greatest dreamer of all time" over 150 of his dreams have been recorded. They contain forewarnings, prophecies, revelations . . . touching on the lives of people, of his Society, of nations, of governments and of the Church. Only recently have they become the subjects of serious study.

"No," taunted Anthony. "You'll be the leader of the *carbonari*!"

"Don't be silly!" scolded Granny. "You can't put your trust in dreams. Besides, John, you're too fond of telling tall tales. I've heard some you tell the children. That one about the man who could put his ear to the ground and hear what was happening a thousand miles away! . . . Is this just another one of them?"

As for Margaret, she began to wonder if the dream did not have some special meaning, some special message for herself as well as for her son. True, he had dreamt some very odd-sounding dreams before, true he was a great story-teller. Nevertheless, this dream seemed to hold something out of the ordinary. It tied in with the other strange things that were happening around her son, things which as yet did not form a pattern, or if they did, it still eluded her. Finally, she put her thoughts into words.

"Who knows," she said, half to herself. "But one day you may become a priest."

When she had said this there was silence in the room until Granny spoke up.

"Some day he might become what?" she burst out. "Don't go putting fancy ideas into the child's head, Margaret! We're poor and people like us don't rise above our station. We're down and they're up and that's all there is to it and the sooner we accept that the happier we'll be. There's something to what Anthony says. We belong to the land and in the land alone lies our security. Let's be very careful, Margaret, about raising false hopes in the child."

Granny's response was the natural reaction of a peasant to the idea of one of themselves being elevated to the priesthood. The clergy belonged to the world of the upper and educated class, even to the nobility. The peasants, including those with money, were the dependent class, people who always received orders, never gave them. Hence Granny's determination to exclude

any such "clergy" association from the dream.

There was no more comment after that and all except Granny left the house to go about their daily tasks.

For the rest of the day, however, and for a long time afterward, Margaret could not put the dream out of her mind. Had it been merely as isolated incident in her son's life she might not have given it a second thought and have treated it as lightly as had the others. But it did not stand alone. It was connected, she was certain, in some strange way with the other curious incidents in his life.

For one thing there was his intense interest in jugglers, acrobats, magicians and especially tightrope walkers. Provided he had her permission, he would dash off, pay his two *soldi*, and watch any performance within reasonable distance. He attended these shows so often and watched so intently that the performers began to note his presence and even to grow suspicious of him. They would open up their booths to find him, right up front, all eyes and ears, so that whenever they prepared their tricks they would turn their backs to him. When he told her that he would like to put on his own show, the only condition she imposed on him was not to expect any money from her for she had none to give. Besides, she was not anxious to see her son turn into a common clown.

At first she thought that it was merely a passing whim but as he became more and more involved she began to wonder if there was not, as far as her son was concerned, much more to it. She grew concerned as she watched him practice on the tightrope. One day he had even frightened her to death when he had fallen flat on his stomach, knocked the breath out of his body and for the rest of the day had been unable to move or eat or drink. And when the day came for his first appearance in public she was more than a little apprehensive.

She watched him set up a table for his props on the stretch of level ground not far from the house. Between two trees he strung the length of rope on which he would

perform his dangerous tightrope walking. He had chosen the time well, namely, the hour when people had finished their Sunday after-dinner nap and were ready for any diversion.

Clapping his hands he announced in what was his nearest approach to a barker's voice: "Roll up! Roll up for the free show! Everybody welcome! Roll up for the free show!"

About a dozen wide-eyed children with a sprinkling of adults gradually gathered around him. Before beginning, however, he insisted that those who wanted to enjoy the show would first have to listen to an outline of the sermon the priest had delivered that morning in church. This produced an uncomfortable shuffling and a show of impatience, expecially on the part of the adults. An occasional scoffing whisper of *pretin* or "little priest," was heard. This sermon, however, was short and delivered in such simple language there were few interruptions. Although surprised by her son's boldness, Margaret quickly became as interested as the rest of his audience, holding her breath while he did his tightrope walking. But he went through his routine with such ease that he soon had his audience staring at him open-mouthed. He closed the show with a short prayer.

She was still wondering what all this could mean for her son, when one of the neighbors took her aside.

"What do you think," she asked, "will become of such a child?"

For the present she was satisfied that he had found a way to put to use some of the talent which the overbearing presence and the constant ridiculing of Anthony was stifling. Besides the talents of a performer, he also possessed the gift of being able to hold an audience with his storytelling. He demonstrated this especially during the winter nights when people were accustomed to gather in the warm barns and haylofts to hear stories culled from history and legend. Young or old, before the night was

out they would insist on John telling them a story. Often she would hear him repeat word for word either a story she had told him or, when he had learnt to read, one he had read for himself.

Even as a child of five he had been able to hold the attention of other children and to teach them little items of catechism. When she had teased him about it he had replied to her with a seriousness that had surprised her.

"I love to do it, Mama," had been his answer. "It's the only thing I want to do!"

There was also the time when he had come home, his head bleeding from playing with some of the rougher boys. When she had tried to stop him from going with them he had pleaded with her.

"When I'm with them," he had told her, "they don't give any trouble. They don't fight or use bad language."

Then came the moment when, opening his heart, he had confided to her his desire to become a priest so he could help boys like these. If, as a devoted mother, she was anxious to see her son advance, as a hardheaded peasant woman she also knew her limitations. She knew that what he wanted called for social standing, money and, above all, a good education, and neither the Occhienas nor the Boscos could afford any of these. At the thought of all these difficulties, her courage failed her and she began to think that maybe Granny was right, and that her love for John was clouding her judgment. Then, for the hundredth time she would remind herself that John was no ordinary child, that even at such an early age he stood head and shoulders above his brothers. If this was prideful thinking, God forgive her, but the fact remained that he had also proved himself to be far above the children of the neighborhood. Social status or wealth she could not give her son, she concluded, but an education? Only if he had an education would he have a chance to fulfill his dream and his talents not go to waste. In that moment she made up her mind that, come what may, her son would

get an education!

It was all right for Margaret to decide that her son should get an education but she quickly learnt that more than one obstacle lay in the way. To begin with, education in Piedmont was not by a long chalk a common patrimony. Only recently had elementary education for the masses been decreed by Napoleon, and even that was still a rudimentary affair where the government provided nothing and where each *commune* provided only what it could in the way of teachers and classrooms. The teachers were usually the local curates and the classrooms so few that several grades were taught in them at the same time. Parents were expected to provide not only books but whatever else was needed, although many of them were too poor to provide anything more than food and clothing for their children and sometimes not even that. Obviously, if John was to get a proper education he would have to go to the school at Castelnuovo which meant an outlay the Boscos could ill afford.

If obstacles which seemed insurmountable lay in wait for her in the outside world, still others awaited her closer to home. There was Anthony's opposition.

"Let him swing a hoe like the rest of us," was his reaction. "Book-learning for people like us is a waste of time and money."

"We're not giving him any special treatment," pleaded Margaret. "You learned to read and write, so must he. School's no longer a privilege. Even the tinkers go to school."

"School means spending money—our money," retorted Anthony. "Look, if I'm strong and healthy, it's not because I went to school. In fact, I missed more classes than I attended and I never studied. It's because I work on the land. Let him do the same. Let him stick to the land. We belong to the land."

There was so much truth in what he said, that had it not concerned John she would have fully agreed with him.

To the Boscos, to the Occhienas and to the neighbors, the land presented a safe and sound future. At the best of times to possess land was the nearest thing they knew to independence and even to the good life; at the worst of times it was their surest safeguard against hunger. This Margaret herself believed. But where John was concerned his special gifts and all the other signs which she saw surrounding him made him someone to whom the ordinary rules of life did not apply. Since there was no use trying to explain either her attitude or her reasons to Anthony, there for the moment, the matter rested.

Margaret, however, was a persistent woman. On thinking it over she concluded that when winter came since there would be no need for John on the farm, Anthony could have no objection to her sending John to the free school at Capriglio.

Accordingly, she approached Father Joseph Lacqua who was in charge, and that was when she met with a further disappointment. Because her son lived at Becchi which lay outside the limits of the *commune* of Capriglio, he pointed out, he could not accept him. Perhaps the real reason was that he already had more children—over fifty—than he could handle, as many as four grades at the same time in the one classroom! In the meantime, a local farmhand offered to teach John his *abc's*. Margaret saw more than a little irony in the fact that her son should owe his first step along the road to learning to an ignorant and unknown peasant.

She now felt completely at a loss. No way seemed to exist in which she could get her son into school.

But providence had its own plans. Father Lacqua's housekeeper died suddenly and he at once invited Marianne Occhiena, Margaret's sister and John's aunt, to replace her. Being very fond of John and aware of his predicament, Marianne promptly informed Father Lacqua that she would accept only on one condition: that he take John into his school. Under such pressure, Father

Lacqua quickly broadened his interpretation of the law and agreed.

In this way began for John a period of progress in his studies, for during the school years of 1824 and 1825, under the guidance of Father Lacqua, he advanced rapidly. The only drawback was that he had to walk those roads in winter when they were covered with snow and ice, when the wind pierced or the rain soaked his threadbare clothes. Over and above this, since it was the only way to placate Anthony, he also took care of the cows and worked on the farm, making up for lost time by studying at night in the stall under the light of an ancient oil lamp.

Aware that such a situation could not last, Margaret, still concerned for her son's education, could only hope and pray that God might send him a more favorable opening.

9

Separation in sorrow

[illegible] it became [illegible] not live much longer. She was [illegible] seventy-four and despite all her efforts to preserve her independence and not to be a burden to Margaret, she was becoming more bedridden and less able to fend for herself. Aware that she was growing weaker by the day, she awaited her approaching end with calm. Margaret stayed constantly by her side, giving her all the attention she needed to make the end less painful. Nor did she stint when it came to spending what little money she could scrape together for special food and medicine, either to ease Granny's pain or to prolong her life.

How quick the neighbors were to point out that in their opinion she was wasting her money!

"She's the mother of my husband," was Margaret's response, "and therefore my own mother. I'm bound to respect her and serve her. I promised that much to Francis before he died. And if everything I spend on her were to prolong her life for another hour I'd think it well spent."

Before her death, hastened by a bitter winter, on February 11, 1826, Granny's last words to her three grandchildren were in the nature of a reward for Margaret.

"Never forget," she told them, "that your own happi-
ness and the blessing of God depend on the respect and
kindness you show your mother." She urged them to be as
obedient to their mother as Margaret had been to her, and
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[illegible]

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relationships took place within the household. Anthony now considered himself the last of the Boscos and this added to his sense of separateness, even to his sense of aloneness. He was now eighteen, physically well developed, and since he worked part-time for outside farmers, he was the only one who brought into the house money of any kind. He began to look on himself as the sole support of the family. All this added a new truculence in his attitude toward the others and especially toward John, against whom he was forever voicing his usual objections. "He takes it easy while I slave to keep the house going." He was not about to let anyone take advantage of him. He also thought that John had already received enough of the privileges of education, and was going to make certain Margaret did not spend any of his hard-earned money on books for the little gentleman! The idea of John receiving higher education he saw as nothing more than the outlandish whim of a doting mother.

Although aware of all this Margaret held her peace. She had begun to wonder for how much longer she would be able to control Anthony especially during one of his angry outbursts, now that Granny was no more there to act as peacemaker or to put him down with her sharp

get an education!

It was all right for Margaret to decide that her son should get an education but she quickly learnt that more than one obstacle lay in the way. To begin with, education in Piedmont was not by a long chalk a common patrimony. Only recently had elementary education for the masses been decreed by Napoleon, and even that was still a rudimentary affair where the government provided nothing and where each *commune* provided only what it could in the way of teachers and classrooms. The teachers were usually the local curates and the classrooms so few that several grades were taught in them at the same time. Parents were expected to provide not only books but whatever else was needed, although many of them were too poor to provide anything more than food and clothing for their children and sometimes not even that. Obviously, if John was to get a proper education he would have to go to the school at Castelnuovo which meant an outlay the Boscos could ill afford.

If obstacles which seemed insurmountable lay in wait for her in the outside world, still others awaited her closer to home. There was Anthony's opposition.

"Let him swing a hoe like the rest of us," was his reaction. "Book-learning for people like us is a waste of time and money."

"We're not giving him any special treatment," pleaded Margaret. "You learned to read and write, so must he. School's no longer a privilege. Even the tinkers go to school."

"School means spending money—our money," retorted Anthony. "Look, if I'm strong and healthy, it's not because I went to school. In fact, I missed more classes than I attended and I never studied. It's because I work on the land. Let him do the same. Let him stick to the land. We belong to the land."

There was so much truth in what he said, that had it not concerned John she would have fully agreed with him.

To the Boscos, to the Occhienas and to the neighbors, the land presented a safe and sound future. At the best of times to possess land was the nearest thing they knew to independence and even to the good life; at the worst of times it was their surest safeguard against hunger. This Margaret herself believed. But where John was concerned his special gifts and all the other signs which she saw surrounding him made him someone to whom the ordinary rules of life did not apply. Since there was no use trying to explain either her attitude or her reasons to Anthony, there for the moment, the matter rested.

Margaret, however, was a persistent woman. On thinking it over she concluded that when winter came since there would be no need for John on the farm, Anthony could have no objection to her sending John to the free school at Capriglio.

Accordingly, she approached Father Joseph Lacqua who was in charge, and that was when she met with a further disappointment. Because her son lived at Becchi which lay outside the limits of the *commune* of Capriglio, he pointed out, he could not accept him. Perhaps the real reason was that he already had more children—over fifty—than he could handle, as many as four grades at the same time in the one classroom! In the meantime, a local farmhand offered to teach John his *abc's*. Margaret saw more than a little irony in the fact that her son should owe his first step along the road to learning to an ignorant and unknown peasant.

She now felt completely at a loss. No way seemed to exist in which she could get her son into school.

But providence had its own plans. Father Lacqua's housekeeper died suddenly and he at once invited Marianne Occhiena, Margaret's sister and John's aunt, to replace her. Being very fond of John and aware of his predicament, Marianne promptly informed Father Lacqua that she would accept only on one condition: that he take John into his school. Under such pressure, Father

Lacqua quickly broadened his interpretation of the law and agreed.

In this way began for John a period of progress in his studies, for during the school years of 1824 and 1825, under the guidance of Father Lacqua, he advanced rapidly. The only drawback was that he had to walk those roads in winter when they were covered with snow and ice, when the wind pierced or the rain soaked his threadbare clothes. Over and above this, since it was the only way to placate Anthony, he also took care of the cows and worked on the farm, making up for lost time by studying at night in the stall under the light of an ancient oil lamp.

Aware that such a situation could not last, Margaret, still concerned for her son's education, could only hope and pray that God might send him a more favorable opening.

9

Separation in sorrow

"Medicine at her age? Can't you see it's not only useless, but if you keep spending your money on medicine, you won't have much left for your children."

Another trial faced Margaret that year when it became clear that Granny would not live much longer. She was now seventy-four and despite all her efforts to preserve her independence and not to be a burden to Margaret, she was becoming more bedridden and less able to fend for herself. Aware that she was growing weaker by the day, she awaited her approaching end with calm. Margaret stayed constantly by her side, giving her all the attention she needed to make the end less painful. Nor did she stint when it came to spending what little money she could scrape together for special food and medicine, either to ease Granny's pain or to prolong her life.

How quick the neighbors were to point out that in their opinion she was wasting her money!

"She's the mother of my husband," was Margaret's response, "and therefore my own mother. I'm bound to respect her and serve her. I promised that much to Francis before he died. And if everything I spend on her were to prolong her life for another hour I'd think it well spent."

Before her death, hastened by a bitter winter, on February 11, 1826, Granny's last words to her three grandchildren were in the nature of a reward for Margaret.

"Never forget," she told them, "that your own happiness and the blessing of God depend on the respect and kindness you show your mother." She urged them to be as obedient to their mother as Margaret had been to her, and to treat their mother the way Margaret had treated her for so many years. Despite all the opportunities Margaret had received to do so, she reminded them, she had refused to change her state in life. Instead, for the sake of her mother-in-law and her three children, she had condemned herself to a life of hardship and self-sacrifice. She was well aware, she said, of how much Margaret had suffered on her account and ended by urging them to give as much consolation to their mother as their mother had given her.

With the death of Granny another important shift in relationships took place within the household. Anthony now considered himself the last of the Boscos and this added to his sense of separateness, even to his sense of aloneness. He was now eighteen, physically well developed, and since he worked part-time for outside farmers, he was the only one who brought into the house money of any kind. He began to look on himself as the sole support of the family. All this added a new truculence in his attitude toward the others and especially toward John, against whom he was forever voicing his usual objections. "He takes it easy while I slave to keep the house going." He was not about to let anyone take advantage of him. He also thought that John had already received enough of the privileges of education, and was going to make certain Margaret did not spend any of his hard-earned money on books for the little gentleman! The idea of John receiving higher education he saw as nothing more than the outlandish whim of a doting mother.

Although aware of all this Margaret held her peace. She had begun to wonder for how much longer she would be able to control Anthony especially during one of his angry outbursts, now that Granny was no more there to act as peacemaker or to put him down with her sharp

tongue. Her great fear was that in one of these outbursts, he might do bodily harm to John.

To avoid any confrontation, she quietly arranged for John to go to school in the morning and to work in the afternoon. And when would he do his homework and prepare the next day's lessons? Whenever he could find time. This meant that she was obliged to watch him bring his books to the fields, lay them on the ground and study them while digging, raking or hoeing. During the midday break she would see him withdraw from the others and take out his books. She herself put in extra hours to make up for the time he took out for his books, and even went as far as to assure Anthony that she would make good any loss he might suffer in the division of the family property.

Even this, however, was not enough for Anthony. "Who needs Latin to work in the fields?" he shouted at her. "A peasant studying Latin! My God!"

Margaret was well aware that much of Anthony's opposition stemmed from the fact that he had not got an education and from the thought that his younger step-brother was not only advancing in his studies, but was also becoming a popular figure in the neighborhood. On John's part, too, there was the frustration of knowing that he was good at studies but could find no outlet for his talents. What worried her was the fear that, given Anthony's frequent eruptions and John's quick temper, something was bound to happen between the two.

It happened sooner than she expected. One day Anthony came home to discover John's head buried in a book. After working hard in the fields to bring much-needed money to the family, he had come home to find his step-brother taking it easy with a book in his hands. Angered beyond reason, he seized the book and flung it across the room.

"I've had enough of this book business!" he roared at John. "I'm big and strong and I never look at a book!"

His temper roused both by the rude gesture and the insulting words, John flared up. "Our donkey is bigger and stronger than you," he retorted, "and he never looked at a book either!"

This was too much for Anthony. With a bellow of rage he rushed at John. If it was John's quick temper that got him in trouble, it was his quick legs that got him out of it.

Margaret had given her word to her husband that she would look after Anthony as her own son; moreover, as a devout Christian mother her conscience obliged her to direct and to protect him until such times as he was able to do all this for himself. She had always made sure that he would never feel he had been treated unjustly at home for if he ever left home, she felt, with his difficult character he would soon find himself in trouble. She still felt the same way and now she had to come up with a solution which would both allow her to help Anthony and at the same time keep the peace.

Only one solution seemed possible. She would have to find a place outside the home where for the time being she could place John. Since it was the custom for parents to hire their children out or even to let them live with other families who were either related or well-known to them, the move would not seem strange to outsiders. Still it was not a solution she came to easily. She thought, prayed and wept a great deal before she arrived at this heart-rending decision. Calling John to her, she tried to explain the circumstances to him. She would send him to some friends in Buttigliera to find work, she told him, and if these could not help he was to go to the Moglias who ran a prosperous farm.

On a bitterly cold morning of February, 1828, therefore, John was forced to leave home and all he carried was two shirts, a handkerchief and a few of his treasured books.

As Margaret watched the diminutive figure of her son stumble his way down the hill, bundled up against the

cold, yet not quite protected against the bitter winds that pushed against his little body, tears started to her eyes. Only when he was out of sight did she turn away weeping and even before she reached the house she had begun to question what she had done. Had she played the part of a mother protecting her home and the safety of her child?—or the part of a mother who, disregarding the happiness, the well-being and even the future of her son, had sent him away for the sake of a little peace? Now that he was gone she began also to wonder where she had found the strength to come to such a harsh decision. She had sent her son out of the house in the depth of winter: among strangers; at a time when farmers were firing not hiring help. Nor did her torment end with his absence. For many days and as many nights after that she found herself haunted by the thought that he might become ill, or wondering what he might be doing at that hour. Was he getting enough to eat? Where was he sleeping? Was he happy or unhappy? Had she not, after all, made a mistake in sending him away? What did he think of her for doing what she did?

But what else could she have done?—she would ask herself for the hundredth time. And had she not done it all for his sake? He wanted to advance in his studies. But how could he when he had already finished the elementary classes and had nowhere else to go? Anthony would have objected to any more moves on her part favorable to John and would almost certainly have become violent. Besides, she consoled herself, it would last only until Anthony came of legal age. When that day arrived, no matter what the cost, she would take the necessary steps to set things straight.

Time proved that at least on one point she had made the right decision. When she was called to the Moglias to sign a generous contract for John's services, she learnt that her son had already made such an impression on them that they considered him one of the family.

For two years he worked there and would have been

completely happy, as he himself later confessed, had it not been for one thing—he could not carry on his studies.

What else could Margaret do except hope and pray that things would get better?

Then one day to her astonishment he appeared at Becchi, completely unannounced. She could not believe her eyes. Had he been sent home? Had he run away? What had he done? Questions like these flashed through her mind until he set her at ease by telling her that in a chance meeting with Uncle Michael he had complained to him about not making any headway in his studies. Uncle Michael had then told him to leave the Moglias, go home and wait for him.

Nevertheless, Margaret was still fearful of what might happen if Anthony saw him in the house.

"Hide in the bushes for the time being," she said. "When Uncle Michael shows up you can come in with him."

John immediately ran to some nearby bushes, waited anxiously until Uncle Michael appeared and then hurried up to meet him. With Uncle Michael on the scene he had no fear of Anthony.

After talking things over, Margaret and Michael decided to ask Father Dassano, pastor of Castelnuovo, if he would give John some lessons. Both he and his curates were already overburdened, was his answer, and he suggested that they try the pastor of Buttigliera. When he, too, refused, the outlook for John began to look bleaker than ever.

When Archbishop Columban Chiaverotti of Turin decreed that the Extraordinary Jubilee Indulgence granted by Pope Pius VIII to celebrate his election on March 31, 1829, to the See of Peter, could be gained by his people during November 8 to 22, he also decreed that Buttigliera, where John had spent some time as a cowherd, because of its central location, was the place where the parishioners

of Becchi could obtain it. Because the rest of the Bosco family was tied up with work in the fields, Margaret sent John to represent them, knowing that he would be able to repeat for them the sermons of the evening.

On one of these evenings he returned with an exciting story to tell her. On his way back from the mission he had approached the new chaplain of Morialdo which formed part of the parish of Castelnuovo, to say hello. The priest had been so pleased with the answers he had told John that he wanted to see his mother to discuss plans for his education.*

This sudden change in her son's fortunes took Margaret by surprise. Seeing in this the answer to her prayer, she hurried down the following Sunday to Morialdo to meet Father John Calosso. She found him to be a kindly man well on in years who told her that he considered her son an intelligent child who should be offered some sort of

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*Students of the early life of Don Bosco have long been puzzled by the non-appearance of Father Calosso at the most critical moments in John's childhood, namely, when Margaret was forced to send him from home to preserve some sort of peace in the house. If Father Calosso had been helping John all along why did he not step in when he was most needed?

Research done by such authorities as Klein and Valentini has provided what may be the solution to the problem. Simply put, it runs like this:

When Don Bosco speaks of the Jubilee which was the occasion of the meeting between himself and Father Calosso he places it at the time of the Jubilee of 1825, a *regular* Jubilee which occurs every twenty-five years. This was an error, a lapse of memory. He should have placed it at the time of the Jubilee of March 31, 1829, an *extraordinary* Jubilee which Pope Pius VIII declared to celebrate his election to the Papacy. This means that he did not meet Father Calosso in 1827, *before* he went to the Moglias, but two years later in 1829, *after* he had returned from the Moglias to Becchi.

opening. He proposed that she should send her son to him every day for schooling—a proposal she readily accepted.

When she returned home with the news Anthony stubbornly rejected any sort of agreement which would allow his younger brother time off to study. This impasse remained for several days until Father Calosso wanted to know why John had not shown up. When told of Anthony's resistance, he grew indignant.

"I insist on this boy's schooling," he responded. "Tomorrow I want to see him at the rectory to begin his studies." In the face of such insistence on the part of authority, Anthony immediately backed down.

Early next morning with tears of consolation filling her eyes, Margaret watched her son depart with his books under his arm. This was an important step John was taking if he were ever to reach his goal. She was also happy to receive assurance that she had not over-estimated her son's ability. According to Father Calosso's first report, for John to read anything once was to remember it for good.

"If he keeps on like this," he told a delighted Margaret, "in no time at all he'll have learned all there is to learn! Remarkable child!"

This arrangement, however, did not sit well with Anthony. Day after day he kept badgering John about his books until John finally complained to Father Calosso.

Calosso's reaction was immediate.

"Leave this unreasonable brother of yours and stay with me!" he cried. "I'll be a father to you!"

When told of the offer, Margaret was more than happy to accept.

Since Anthony balked at taking a stand against the priest and Joseph promised to do John's share of work, John went to stay with Father Calosso. As a compromise to keep Anthony quiet he would, when needed, return home to help out on the farm.

Father Calosso was true to his word and became a father to John. On his part, John did everything he could

to help his benefactor, working about the house, cleaning up, attending to the rectory and the chapel—all by way of recompensing the other for his keep and education. Perhaps for the first time he felt secure about his future and he was grateful to Father Calosso not only for that but also because it was the first time he remembered experiencing anything in the way of fatherly care or affection. Besides helping John with his education, Father Calosso also introduced him to the deeper beauties of his religion, and fostered in him a greater love for the priesthood. No wonder John made such excellent progress in his studies! No wonder the future had never looked so bright!

"No one can imagine how happy I was," he confessed. "I loved Father Calosso more than a father . . . I would even have given my life for him. He told me, 'Don't worry about the future. As long as I live you'll want for nothing and if I die I'll still provide for you!' "

The future continued to look bright until one day in November, 1830, when John came home to pick up some articles of clothing. A messenger arrived to tell him that Father Calosso had suddenly taken ill and was calling for him. Although he ran all the way to the priest's house, by the time he arrived Father Calosso had already lost the power of speech from a stroke and could only make signs for him to approach. With trembling hands he took a key from his pocket and gave it to him. Aware that his sudden departure might upset his plans for John, with more signs he made him understand that he was not to give the key to anyone and that what was in his desk was meant for him. John put the key in his pocket, then knelt down to join in the prayers being said for his dying benefactor.

Although sorrowing greatly over the loss of his friend and benefactor, he still had the consolation of knowing that Father Calosso had left him enough money to provide for his future.

As soon as the relatives arrived, however, he received

another rude shock. Since he was an outsider why should he get any of their uncle's money, they wished to know. It was all very well for him to say Father Calosso had wanted him to have it. But there was no proof of that except the idea some witnesses got from some vague signs the old man had made before he had died. But that would never, if contested, stand up in court. Someone even hinted at pressure having been applied to a lonely and sick old man . . .

Once aware that if he insisted on claiming the money he would start up a hornets' nest and might even drag his old benefactor's name into the courts, John began to worry about accepting it. When it was pointed out to him that in the absence of any will or documentary proof, he might even be acting unjustly, his conscience began to bother him. He was so upset by all this that when a nephew of the dead man came to offer him the money, saying, "It's yours. My uncle wanted you to have it," he refused to accept it.

"I wouldn't risk doing anything wrong," he said. "Not for all the money in the world."

While this decision may have been heroic, unfortunately, it was not a wise one, and was dictated in part, as he later confesses, by the fact that he did not know the value of money. He was far more concerned about the loss of his benefactor and the opportunity for study. To his young mind since Father Calosso had been such a good man and they both had been working for such a good cause it never should have happened. The experience was traumatic.

"I wept inconsolably for my dead benefactor," he writes. "If I was awake I thought of him; if I was asleep I dreamt of him . . . "

So disturbed was he that he could neither eat nor rest and Margaret, fearing even for his sanity, sent him to stay for a few days with her relatives in Capriglio. In the meantime she tried to find someone who might be able to

help him in his studies. Eventually she did find a priest in Castelnuovo who agreed to teach him Latin, but after a few months, this priest, too, died.

During these days John was consoled somewhat by another dream which appeared to be connected with the dream of the Lady. In this dream, he told Margaret, he had been reprimanded for having placed his trust in the uncertain help of men rather than in the providence of God.

For Margaret the whole affair was painful. It was difficult to understand why so many obstacles should be placed in her son's path. As soon as one means had been found to enable him to move ahead, another obstacle would rise up to block him. Nevertheless, the thought that her son was being so frustrated, that it was a matter of a priestly vocation made her more determined than ever to see that he succeeded. Besides, she kept assuring herself, if God wanted her son to become a priest, God would find the way.

10

The fruits of sacrifice

The sight of her son's distress and the thought of his talents going to waste finally decided her. Cost her what it might, she would send him to high school at Castelnuovo.

Since Margaret often went to market in that town, the ruined fuedal manor of crumbling red brick which topped the highest hill, its sloping streets, and the *Duomo* with its flat roofs and domeshaped cupola were familiar sights. She was only too familiar with the length of the road her son would have to travel—six miles there and six miles back. To make it easier for him she arranged with a tailor who would provide him with soup while she would supply the rest. But as winter closed in, when the roads were covered with snow and ice and the rains pelted down, it was often impossible for him even to attempt the journey home. That meant he had to find a cubbyhole where he could bundle up for the night in order to be on time for class the following day.

Since this was too much to expect from a boy of his age, Margaret arranged for him to board with the tailor during the school year. It was not an ideal situation, she knew, but what else could she do?

In the meantime, convinced that there was no hope of obtaining Anthony's cooperation, and since Anthony had reached the legal age of maturity, Margaret decided

to take another serious step, one which caused her no little anguish. She began legal proceedings for the division of the family property. Anthony vigorously objected since if the land were broken up there would not be enough to occupy a man of his ability. Despite his objections, however, Margaret went ahead. Since she had long considered this step as the final solution to the quarrel over John's schooling and to Anthony's domineering, this was another reason why she had sent him away from home until this division could be arranged.

The division of the land was agreed on; as regards the house the eastern half was given to Anthony; Margaret kept the rest. Some months later Joseph signed a sharecropper's contract at nearby Sussambrino where he went to live. Margaret soon followed him, dividing her time between there and the house at Becchi.

Unable to put up with the lonely state to which he had condemned himself, Anthony, on March 20, 1831, married a local girl named Anna Maria Rosso. At first he wanted to bring her to the now partitioned house, but on discovering how impractical this was, built a small house nearby for himself.

Everything now seemed to be moving along fairly well for her family when one day John came home to tell her that the teacher whom he loved so much and under whom he had made such wonderful progress had been reassigned. His place had been taken by Father Nicholas Moglia, (cousin of his early benefactor, Louis), who had helped teach him the rudiments of Latin while they were both at the Moglias. Unfortunately for her son, he had, meanwhile, developed the fixed idea that anyone coming from such a lowly place as Becchi could not be anything but a clod. "Ugly ignoramus," was only one of the names he called John. In fact, his treatment of her son amounted to nothing short of persecution. This sudden turnabout shocked Margaret. The only explanation she could offer was Moglia's age (seventy-five) and the fact that since he

could not hold discipline he preferred to curry favor with the stronger element of the class, namely the well-to-do. He thought he could do this by making country-boy Bosco the butt of his jokes. Although during the weekly tests John had proved that a country clod could also be the cleverest boy in the class, Margaret concluded that she would have to find for him a school where his progress would not be blocked by a prejudiced and incompetent teacher. She decided to send him to the advanced school at Chieri.

"Chieri of the Hundred Towers" had once been a powerful minor republic where great families had erected stately homes as symbols of their power. Its fifteenth century cathedral was still without equal in the whole of Piedmont. Slowly its influence had waned, however, until it had been reduced to the status of a satellite of Turin, a town of students and teaching orders. Saint Louis Gonzaga and Saint Joseph Cafasso were two of its more illustrious pupils.

The school at Chieri, like most schools of the time, was run by the clergy, who ran it like a seminary. Students had to attend daily Mass and Sunday evening services. Before they could take the examinations they had to present a ticket to show that they had performed their Easter duties. Supervision was strict and a moral assessment of the student was presented to the school board each month. Even the outside boarders were closely supervised not only by the school inspectors but also by the owners of the *pensione*, or boarding house for students, to be approved by the school. Any teacher who allowed bad language in his class courted dismissal.

Since her son was poor Margaret not only had to find cheap lodgings for him but the way to pay his landlord. Fortunately, she was introduced to a widow who was sending her son to school in Chieri and was also opening her own *pensione*, so that she could keep an eye on him! She agreed to accept John free of charge provided he

would help her son with his studies and perform some minor household tasks. To supplement John's meager diet, Margaret each week would have to make the journey on foot to bring him a supply of bread, Indian corn, flour and chestnuts. Since her means were limited she would also have to seek help from the neighbors.

Either because of what Margaret had done for them or because of what John had done for their children, these responded generously.

On the day after All Souls Day, 1831, Margaret pointed to a sack of wheat and a sack of Indian corn. "That's all I can give you, John," she told her son. "Providence will supply the rest." The problem of how to get the sacks to Chieri was solved when a friend, who had nothing else to give, carted the sacks there free of charge.

On the day of his departure Margaret gave him another small bag of flour and one of Indian corn. These he was to sell at the market in Castelnuovo and use the money to buy his school supplies. At Chieri she introduced him to Lucia Matta, the woman who owned the *pensione* and, in true country fashion, dumped the sacks on the floor.

"Mrs. Matta," she said, "this is in payment for my son's keep. I have done my part, my son will do his. I hope you'll find no reason to be displeased with him."

After warmly embracing her son, and scarcely able to control her tears, she turned and left for Becchi.

For the next nine years this was to be Margaret's contribution to the progress of her son: every week or so she would make the long trip to Chieri on foot bringing these things with her as food for John or as payment in kind. If it was not for his tuition which he paid for himself by winning monetary awards or by his own initiative, then it was to meet those other expenses inevitable in the life of a student. Not only did John work his way through college, but while doing so learnt the rudiments of a number of trades—carpentry, shoemaking, smithying . . .

There were also the times when he fell sick and she

had to bring him home and nurse him back to health, when she had to keep him and those of his fellow-students who wished to stay with him during the long summer vacations . . . The list of demands made on her is endless. It adds up to a history of self-sacrifice on the part of a mother that should never be forgotten.

The chilly December sun was still high in the heavens when the priest urged his horse up the steep, snowy patch with an occasional dig in the flanks with his heels, until finally they reached the plateau at the top where both horse and rider straightened up. A few more paces led him to the cluster of houses that went by the name of Becchi. But long before then his arrival had been noticed by a crowd of children at play.

"Don Dassano!" they chorused.

The pastor acknowledged their greeting with a smile and a wave of his hand.

Hearing the commotion, many of the women now appeared at their doorways, wondering whom the pastor had come to see and why.

The priest pulled his horse to stop outside the door of the Boscos and stiffly dismounted, surrounded by the children who divided their admiration and awe between the pastor and his lovely black horse. By this time both Margaret and Joseph had come out and Joseph took the reins from him.

"Goodday, Margaret," he said as Margaret came forward to meet him. "Do you think you could spare me a little of your time this afternoon?"

"Of course, Father." Margaret stepped aside to allow him to enter the house. Before entering, however, the pastor turned and waved a blessing in the general direction of the women who responded by crossing themselves.

Once inside, the pastor removed his round "soup-plate" hat, but before handing it to Margaret, with the sleeve of his cassock smoothed back the hairs of the felt.

Margaret took the shining object and gingerly laid it on top of the dresser.

"Theresa!" she called out and one of the grandchildren appeared. "Get some wine for the good Father. Then tell the others not to disturb us." The girl brought a flask of red wine and two glasses which she set on the rough wooden table. After making a sort of curtsy she left them alone. Margaret poured and she and the priest toasted, making some comment about the wine of that year.

"Margaret," began the pastor as he settled back in the chair, "John has been to see me. Frankly, the more often he comes to see me the better I'm pleased. He's a great credit to you. Now that he has finished his schooling he tells me that he's decided on entering the priesthood and the only doubt he has in his mind is whether he should enter one of the orders—the Franciscans, I think—or join the seculars and work for the diocese. Did he talk to you about it?"

"He did mention something. But I've always thought it better to let him make up his own mind about his vocation."

"And you do very well!" agreed the pastor. After a second sip of the wine he went on. "He should be left quite free to choose. But—now listen carefully to what I have to say for it concerns your own welfare—if your son decides to enter one of the orders, for the next few years you'll have nothing to worry about. They will take care of all expenses, food, clothing, books and the rest. Once he is ordained, however, that will be the last you'll see of him. You might as well forget him. He will belong lock, stock and barrel to the order. He could even be sent out of the country to God knows where!" Father took another slow sip to let what he had said sink in. But there was no reaction from Margaret other than an occasional nod of her head.

"If, however, he decides to become a secular priest like myself," went on the pastor, "you will, unfortunately,

have to somehow meet all those expenses by yourself. And that includes the patrimony required by Canon Law. I know that won't be easy. Still, you have managed to carry him this far and, God knows, that must have cost you. But—listen carefully—once he's ordained then his worries—and yours—are over. From what I've heard and from what I know of John he need have no anxiety about his future. He is bound to get ahead. He could even be working with me here in the parish. And I see no reason why you should not end up as his housekeeper and live with him in a certain amount of comfort. To sum up: if he joins an order I can see nothing in it for you, but if he joins the diocese then you will have your reward for all you have done to help him reach his goal. He'll be able to pay back some of the debt he owes you. What do you say to that, Margaret?"

It was some time before Margaret could say anything. Finally she raised her head. "I have first of all to thank you, Father," she said, "for thinking so much of my son and for trying to advise both him and me in the best way you can. I shall tell him what you've told me. But the final decision will be up to him."

"Very good, Margaret. That's all I ask. I'm sure you'll do the right thing by him and by yourself."

True to her promise, the next time Margaret went to Chieri with her basket under her arm, she related to John everything the pastor had told her.

"What do you think, Mama?" John wanted to know.

"I think that you should examine with the greatest care the step you are about to take," she answered. "But I want to make one thing clear. On no account are you to worry about me. I want nothing from you; I expect nothing from you. I was born poor; I live poor; and I wish to die poor. And remember this:" She paused for a moment to give more emphasis to what she had to say, and when she did speak she could not hide the slight tremor in her voice, "If you do make up your mind to

enter the secular priesthood and by some great misfortune do become rich, I will never darken your doorstep!"

Although of his own free will and for his own particular reasons he chose to study for the secular priesthood, these striking words of his mother remained engraved in his memory and became one of the guiding principles of his life.

On the eve of his departure for the seminary she had something more to tell him. "My son," she said, "you are now dressed in the garb of a priest and at this moment I feel the greatest satisfaction any mother can ever feel. But don't forget: it's not the soutane that will make you respected, but a good and holy life. If ever the day comes when you begin to doubt your vocation, I implore you to do nothing to dishonor your Maker. I'd rather a thousand times have my son remain a poor peasant than see him a priest but forgetful of his duty."

Margaret was moved and John himself was close to tears as she went on, "When you were born I consecrated you to Our Blessed Mother. When you began your studies I told you to be devoted to her. Now I ask you to belong entirely to her. Go a step further. Choose your friends only among those who love her and if you do become a priest spread devotion to her."

During his years at Chieri John returned each summer to spend the vacations with her and with Joseph and his family. He helped with the harvest and put to good use the skills he had learnt as a carpenter to make articles of furniture for the home.

This was how it was every summer except that of 1840 when he would be returning to the seminary for the last time. He had received permission to shorten his stay if he would study during summer and could pass the regular examinations. This he did successfully, and was ordained on June 5, 1841, not as he should have been in the cathedral, but in the private chapel at the Archbishop's resi-

dence. The Archbishop,—*persona non grata* to the government,—was not even allowed to enter the city! He said his First Mass quietly in the church of Saint Francis of Assisi in Turin.

To her great disappointment, Margaret could not be present. She had been picking mulberry leaves for her silk-worms when she fell from the tree and the branch above her broke and struck her on the forehead. It was a mark she carried for the rest of her life. She was determined, however, to attend his Mass at Castelnuovo.

Perhaps it was because she was still weak from the mishap but as she walked up to the altar rail, she felt that her strength was about to desert her. Joseph's strong arm supported her, however, and she knelt down at the altar rail with the rest of her family ranged on each side of her. At Communion time she watched as John made his way to where she waited. When he gave her the Host, she felt a shudder run through her, but before it could immobilize her, she rose and made her way back to her seat. By deliberately concentrating on her thanksgiving, she was able to maintain at least an outward calm.

It was different when she went to receive the blessing her son would give to each member of the congregation. Once again it was her privilege to receive this before the others and once again she had to struggle with her emotions. When John placed his outstretched hands on her head such a surge of emotion filled her soul that her body went cold and she pressed her palms against her cheeks with such intensity that it hurt. Afraid to move lest she should lose complete control of herself she stayed like that until she heard a whisper.

"Let's go, Mama." Taking her gently by the elbow, Joseph helped her rise and led her back to the pew.

After a while she had calmed down enough to observe her son as he moved along the altar giving his blessing. Was this her son, she had to ask herself, who was blessing the people—this her little boy who had walked the tight-

rope?—whom she had prepared to receive his First Communion?—whom she had once sent among strangers? Her eyes now rested on her son's hands, hands which would bless as long as they had strength; hands which would prepare so many souls for life on this earth, so many more for a life in heaven.

After the ordination some of the neighbors could not wait to remind her of her changed status now that her son was a priest . . . How little they understood what she really thought! she kept telling herself. How could she ever describe to them the moment she was enjoying, this experience which was never theirs and never again would be hers? How could she convince them that she now felt that her life had been fulfilled, that if she were to die on the instant she would die happy? How she wished that she were alone so that she could openly weep for the sheer joy of it all, even cry out in exultation! In her own way she now understood how the Blessed Mother must have felt when she had burst out into that wonderful canticle, *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord!* And she wanted—oh, so desperately!—to cry out with the prophet Simeon: *Now, dismiss O Lord, your servant in peace!*

When it was all over, she and John found themselves together, reminiscing, laughing over the happier moments and growing serious as they recalled the more somber memories of the past. Conversation then turned to the future. As Margaret looked fondly at her son, she summed up her thoughts in a few words.

"Now you are a priest and you will celebrate Mass," she told him. "You are closer to Jesus Christ. But never forget that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You won't become aware of this at once, but little by little you'll find out that your mother was right. I'm sure you'll pray for me every day, whether I'm living or dead and I ask for nothing more. From now on you must never worry about me. You must think only of saving souls."

John received several tempting offers for his services, and Father Dassano did more than anyone to try to keep him in the parish. Naturally, John would have listened to any advice his mother would have cared to give him, but she kept to her rule never to interfere in his vocation. The only time she voiced an opinion was when the neighbors sought to convince her that she should persuade John to accept an appointment as tutor to the son of a wealthy Genovese. It was then common practice for the clergy to accept such appointments. This would mean, they assured her, that while her son would lead a comfortable life with a generous annual salary of 1,000 *lire*, he would also be able to take care of her.

"My son living in the homes of the wealthy?" she responded. "And what would he do with all that money? For that matter, what would I do with it, or what would my son Joseph do with it, if, in earning it, John were to lose his soul?" She was well aware that life in those wealthy homes was not always calculated to promote the spiritual welfare of their chaplains.

Chaplaincies in the homes of the nobility and the wealthy at that time were being brought into question. The least of the complaints against them was that they were drawing off the services of priests who could be doing much more good for souls elsewhere. The superabundance of chaplains in the homes of the wealthy was cited by those who were pressing for the passage of an anti-clerical law. In fact, some of its sponsors said that the law was not anti-Church, but merely anti-clerical!

Uncertain as to which course to follow, John, as was his his habit, sought counsel from one on whose advice he could rely—Father Joseph Cafasso whom, years ago, Margaret had pointed out to him as a saint. Still, the advice Cafasso gave surprised even her. John was to accept none of these offers but was, instead, to go to the *Ecclesiastical Institute* in Turin for several more years of study and training!

The Institute had been established by Father Cafasso

and others to provide advanced training and study for priests just out of the seminary. Immediately after the fall of Napoleon a need was felt to build up a well-formed and zealous clergy who not only would set an example but who would also oppose the errors introduced under the banners of the Emperor.

Although convinced that such was God's will, it was a sad mother who said good-bye to her son when he left. She could not help wondering if it might not be for the last time. If men like Father Cafasso were so concerned about her son, it must be because they, too, had discerned in him some special qualities. It was for this reason they could not see him being left in the position of a country curate. It was neither a mother's pride nor ambition that made her think so, it was merely a recognition of what long ago she had seen and of what others were now seeing in him. Her sadness at this parting was mixed with the joy she felt at his success.

What a difference between this parting and the parting of so many years ago! Then he had left her to seek food and shelter among strangers; now he was leaving her to begin his mission in life. What that mission was she did not know, nor was he himself quite certain. All she knew was that it would include two things: a complete giving of himself to God and to the care of the young.

What eased her pain at losing him was the conviction that whatever good he might do, whatever souls he might save, whatever else he might accomplish, she would share in all of it. If he had reached the point where he was today, it was not only because of her prayers and sacrifices but even more because of her own persistence often in the face of the impossible. Moreover, with the ordination of John and his departure for the great city to begin his new life, Margaret felt that her own life had, so to speak, been rounded off, brought to a completion. God had given her three sons, each of whom was now settled. For all this she was grateful.

II. NEW LAMPS FOR OLD

11

"Your son is dying!"

At fifty-eight years of age Margaret Bosco stood five-foot-eight inches tall with little extra weight on her because of her insistence over protest in doing her share of the work both on the farm and in the home. Besides, with so many grandchildren about there were plenty of occasions when a granny was needed. Her dress, despite efforts of the family to improve on it, was that of the common peasant. Her feet were encased in thick cotton stockings and protected from the rough soil by heavy sabots, her body was covered with cotton dresses, the number of which varied according to the season and were always made from a stuff and of a color that would not easily betray the wear and tear of working on a farm. A bonnet tied under her chin and a cape or shawl thrown across her shoulders completed her outfit whenever she ventured abroad.

Her features were rather square with a strong jaw and firm, rounded chin. The lips full, set and smiling, were surmounted by a slender Italianate nose and eyes which still kept their deep brown shade even if dulled ever so slightly by the passage of time. These in turn were surmounted by a high, wrinkled forehead and a head of gray hair still retaining a strand or two of its original auburn tint. The face shone with the warmth and understanding of one who, while not condoning evil, was always more anxious to discover and to encourage the good.

Life was now moving along pleasantly for Margaret. Her health was excellent, the neighbors looked to her when they needed help and she could still make her influence felt in the community whenever it was a question of standing up for what she believed was right.

Anthony had five children whose ages ranged from three years to fourteen, a sixth having died the year before. To support his large family he not only worked hard on his small farm but hired himself out as a day laborer. He had since become reconciled to the others and especially to Margaret. Her patience and unfailing kindness had gradually won him over to the extent that he frequently sought her advice. Further proof that he had changed was the fact that he was much in demand at the local gatherings for his cheerful company.

Joseph had grown into a steady, hardworking man with a talent for business who was much sought after for counseling and for helping others solve their problems. In 1833 he had married a girl named Mary Calosso and had since built a new house large enough to hold his growing family of five whose ages ranged from six months to eleven years. This meant that Margaret now had two sons, two daughters-in-law and ten grandchildren on whom to lavish her care and affection.

John, of course, still occupied her thoughts. Indeed, he was rarely far from her mind. All she had to do was look around the house and her eyes would light on some article of furniture he had made during his vacations. Moreover, from time to time he would pay her a visit, since he thought nothing of covering on foot the fifteen miles from Turin, leaving in the afternoon around two and reaching home around eight.

For that matter, he was rarely out of the minds of the neighbors, most of whom remembered his good influence on their children while he had lived among them. There were others, however, who had some reservations about him.

"Isn't it odd," one of them remarked within her hear-

ing, "that his only job so far has been as assistant chaplain—*assistant* chaplain!—in a home for wayward girls! With all the talent he had? He was certainly worth better than that. It makes you wonder."

"When he comes to Becchi to visit the mother," another added, "he doesn't give me the impression that he's at all successful. If you ask me, he looks down-at-heel. Doesn't he have to walk because he can't afford the price of the coach?

"As far as his supporting Margaret in her old age, like we thought he would," a third concluded, "it looks the other way around! With some help from the two brothers, she seems to be supporting him!"

As for Margaret, based on what he had told her, she saw her son as a priest who was caring for those who most needed care, those unfortunate creatures whom the rest of the world finds it easier to forget, namely, the poor and neglected children of the slums. She was not in the least concerned about his "success." Her only prayer was that he might finally have found the way God had marked out for him. To discover that had always been his greatest concern.

That was how things stood one sunny day in July 1846, when the family was at work in the fields. A messenger arrived who would neither eat nor drink until he had found Margaret. When he did find her his message was short and to the point: "Don Bosco is dying and if you want to see him while he's still alive, you'd better come at once!"

Margaret at once prepared to set out for Turin. Given her concern, she would have departed with the next coach had not Joseph pointed out that since she might have to prolong her stay in the city, certain preparations were called for. She insisted on bringing a loaf of her own bread and a bottle of wine, both of the kind which once before had cured her son of serious illness.

When, finally, she and Joseph were seated in the coach and on the road to Turin, she had no eyes for sightseeing.

Her mind was all on John. What plans had he not discussed with her, plans so ambitious she had at first put them down to his lively imagination! What dreams and what schemes had he not laid out for the poor and abandoned children he had taken under his wing! Still, he did possess those qualities which might have made all his dreams come true. She could not help smiling when she recalled that one of these was a definite stubbornness. The neighbors were fond of reminding her that they knew where that came from! But of what use was all this if now he was going to die? Of what use all those wonderful plans, all those ambitious schemes? But in her long life she had come to accept many happenings like these. She had come through trials equally severe and had lived to see them fade into nothing more painful than memories. She would get over this trial the way she had gotten over others, by accepting them as the will of God. Once she had accepted His will He would give her the strength to bear it.

Poor John! How did he feel about all this? After so much striving to end up with nothing to show for it! To have labored so much in vain! But, then, had it really been in vain? Had not he, too, always tried to do the will of God? If God wanted him to leave this earth before he had accomplished anything great or worthwhile, then, like herself, he would have to accept that as another test of his faith, another test of his love.

During the three years he had spent studying at the *Ecclesiastical Institute** he had paid her regular visits at

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*From this small space, then part of the Ecclesiastical Institute of Saint Francis, an eagle took flight to soar into the heavens, the immortal genius of Don Bosco, taking with him, under the protection of Bl. Cafasso, the souls of the Oratory boys.

Turin, 1941

The above inscription is engraved on a marble tablet surmounted by an eagle and stands in the courtyard of the Institute, the first playground of the Oratory.

Becchi, taking great pleasure in keeping her informed of what he was doing and, what was still more important to him, of what he intended to do. He had loved the studies, apparently, and the opportunity of staying with men like Cafasso. He had told her how being at the *Institute* had given him the opportunity of meeting with important figures both in the Church and in government and she had been impressed. But he had moved her to tears when he told her how he had befriended a poor boy who had wandered into the church where he had been saying Mass. With the help of this boy he had gathered around him a group of other poor boys to teach them catechism. After his time at the *Institute* was up he had accepted a position as chaplain in the *Rifugio*, a home for wayward girls, simply because this had provided him with a place to stay and money for his keep.

The boys with whom he spent all his free time—and all his money—must have included some difficult ones for he had confessed that because of them he had run into trouble with the authorities. He had been warned that he was wasting his time with them for they could not come to any good end, that they were not the type to benefit from his efforts, that many of them were even beyond redemption. When he would not give them up the police had accused him of training them to fight the government—a thought that had more amused than upset her. Even his friends in the clergy had concluded that he must be insane to bother with them and had tried to put him in the asylum! How she had laughed when he had told her how he had outwitted them and had put them, instead, in the asylum! Because he would not give up caring for his boys his employer, Marchioness Barolo, had dismissed him. And now, after all this, he was about to die. Maybe he should never have gone to the great city. Things were so different there. Maybe he should never have left his native hills.

Arriving toward evening, she and Joseph made their

way on foot to the *Rifugio* and the crowd of boys gathered beneath one of the windows told her where her son lay dying. As she pushed her way upstairs she was followed by a line of boys anxious to catch a glimpse of their friend and benefactor. These were stopped, however, by several sturdy youths who had received strict orders from the doctor not to let anyone disturb Don Bosco.

As soon as she entered the sickroom she rushed to embrace her son. For a long time neither spoke, neither moved. Only after she had finally released him did she regain enough self-control to step back and take stock of his condition. The sunken eye sockets and hollow cheeks told her experienced eye of a prolonged high temperature, the bony forearms of a loss of weight. Her son was not dead but he was a very sick man. The extent of his illness and how it had been brought about she learnt from his close friend and chaplain of the *Rifugio*, Father John Borel.

"He hasn't led an easy life during the last two years," he told her. "He kept running around Turin looking for a place for his Oratory—five different sites in eighteen months!—finding jobs, clothes, books and sometimes even food to keep his boys from starving; the visits to the prisons, the long hours in the confessional, teaching catechism . . . This slowly but surely wore down even his strong frame. We warned him more than once that something had to give and it was not in John's make-up to give up his boys.

"Two Sundays ago, after an unusually busy day he walked into his room at the *Rifugio*, collapsed from an attack of pneumonia so violent that the following Sunday I had to bring him Viaticum and give him the Last Rites. Imagine the effect on the boys! They mobbed the place! But we let only a few of the older boys come near him and these took turns at sitting by him day and night. The others said prayers, made promises of sacrifices, even went on fasts for his recovery."

"On the other hand," Father Borel protested, "Don Bosco seemed to be taking things so calmly I couldn't stand it any longer. 'Don Bosco,' I told him, 'you've got to do something about your illness.'

" 'Like what?' he says.

" 'Like praying to get well,' I told him.

" 'Let the will of God be done,' he says.

" 'Yes, but think of the boys,' I insisted. 'What will they do if they lose you? Where will they go? Imagine them running around the streets again the way they did before they met you?' Would you believe it?" Father Borel went on excitedly. "It was the one and only motive that could move him!"

" 'Very well, I'll pray,' he said. 'How do you want me to pray?'

" 'Just repeat after me,' I told him. 'Lord if it so pleases you, let me be cured.' and he did exactly that. 'Now we can be sure that you will indeed be cured,' I told him. That was Saturday night. Although it was touch and go whether he would see Sunday morning, when the doctor examined him he declared him out of danger. With proper care and attention, he would regain his health."

Shortly after this, John was ready—not for work—but only to leave the *Rifugio* for his native air. Margaret would then see that he got the food and rest he needed to set him on the road to recovery.

When he arrived home Margaret soon discovered that he had far more wrong with him than had appeared at first sight. His legs were so swollen with varicose veins he could not sleep at night from the pain; she eased that pain by providing him with a pair of elastic stockings. His eyes, too, had become inflamed both from overuse and from the effects of a near strike by lightning when he was in the seminary, and he was altogether so weak and so run down! What on earth could have so exhausted him, she wanted to know. But all she could get out of him was that he had

studied a lot, had preached a lot, had taught catechism a lot, had visited the hospitals and the prisons a lot and had taken care of his boys a lot . . .

"About the only thing you haven't done a lot of," she concluded, "was eat, rest, and take care of yourself! Just how long do you think that you can carry on like this?" While saying this, she knew she might as well be talking to the wall for he would never do any of the things she suggested. She would just have to build him up and let the future take care of itself. To this end she kept insisting that he take as much rest as possible, made certain that he did not tire himself on the walks he loved to take, and fed him with the best food she could provide. Besides the meats, little delicacies and good wine the neighbors brought him, she saw to it that his diet included her own *riccotta* and *mozzarella*, goat's flesh and milk, and polenta accompanied by some kind of meat.

The days John spent at Becchi convalescing were happy ones for Margaret. Besides the pleasure of just having her son close she had also a mother's pride in seeing him surrounded by so much affection and esteem on the part of the family, of the neighbors, and of the local clergy. These were happy to have him as often as he would accept an invitation to dinner or to stay overnight. But what gave her most pleasure was the way in which the young people ran to him. This reminded her of the old days when as a boy he would gather them around him to teach them catechism.

On learning that it would be some time before he would be back among them, his boys in Turin decided that they could not wait that long and began first to send him letters urging him to return, then to arrange walking trips to Becchi. They would leave the city early in the morning and return late at night.

During these visits it became obvious to them that the boys of the locality were growing equally attached to John. Some of them even expressed to Margaret the fear

that these might persuade him to stay at Becchi instead of returning to the center.

"Either you come back to Turin," they told him, "or we move out to Becchi!"

"Don't worry," he reassured them. "Before the leaves start falling I'll be back."

At the end of three months' convalescence, in fact, John felt his health was restored at least enough for him to think of returning. Margaret, instead, agreed with his friends who opposed the move, arguing that he needed a much longer stay to restore his broken health.

"I have to go back," he insisted.

"But that's impossible!" she responded.

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm not the only one who says it," was her answer. "The pastor says it, your brothers say it, your priest friends say it, and if you want more proof, the doctor says you'll need at least a year to get right again."

"But, Mama. I've got to go. The boys need me."

"If it's only for that, the boys here need you, too."

"Let's compromise. I'll leave in a week or so."

Although he declared, "From then on, for twenty-five years and more, I've had need neither of doctors nor of medicine," he was to pay a high price for his hastiness. For the rest of his life he was to suffer from bouts of emphysema.

As Margaret had already noted, his health had begun to deteriorate while he was at the seminary. Several times he had returned home to recuperate from attacks of ill-health. On one occasion she had happened to visit him at the seminary to find him even close to death. Seeing that she had brought with her a loaf of her own bread and a bottle of good wine, he had devoured the loaf and drunk the wine. Having done that, he had fallen into a deep sleep which had lasted forty hours and had awakened completely cured! Twice he had almost been struck by lightning and on top of all this was, she had often complained

to him, utterly careless about himself. Yet he never ceased telling others to take great care of their health.

"John, darling," she concluded, "you'll never change."

For a moment they both looked at each other. Then they burst out laughing.

John's persistence won over even the Archbishop who finally agreed to let him return but only on condition that he confined himself to directing the boys, and absolutely refrained from preaching, hearing confessions, teaching catechism and all such demanding tasks. Despite her son's assurances that he would abide by the Archbishop's injunctions, Margaret knew that, once surrounded by his boys, he would soon find reasons to cast them aside.

Having overcome the difficulty presented by his friends another serious obstacle arose which threatened to delay his return. Since he had been dismissed from his post as assistant chaplain, he had been obliged to give up his quarters at the *Rifugio*, and would now be living alone in rooms rented for him. These were located in a building which housed some disreputable characters and lay in the vicinity of several taverns of ill repute. He would also need a good housekeeper. But how could he protect her reputation and his own while they were living in such unsavory surroundings? As usual, he sought the advice of his pastor who at once saw the solution.

"I can think of no one better suited than your mother," he said. "Not only will you protect each other's reputations but she'll also be an angel of comfort at your side."

"My mother? Ask her to leave all this? At her age?"

"What age is she?"

"Fifty-eight."

"Hmn. But I still think she's your best bet. All she'll have to do is look after you and that's not asking too much of her."

Although the advice was sound John still did not see how he could ask his mother to leave Becchi where she

was surrounded by her children, grandchildren and all the friends she had made through the years. Here she was loved by her family and held in high esteem by everyone, but there? . . . Apart from everything else, he had such veneration for her that, as his biographer puts it, "An empress could not have asked more from her subject." For him and his brothers, even when they were grown men, her word was law and her slightest wish was not to be denied. Only when he had given the matter much thought and had prayed for guidance did he become convinced that no other course lay open to him, and only because he held her in such veneration did he dare ask her.

"My mother is a saint," he concluded, "and only for that reason can I ask her to come with me. Because it will be for the good of souls, I'm certain she'll feel as I do."

"Mama," he began one day, "since I'll be living alone I need a housekeeper." Carefully he outlined the reasons why and only after he had done so did he put before her the all-important question: "Would you be willing to come with me?"

The request came as a shock to Margaret. Never for a single moment had she considered leaving her comfortable home, her native surroundings, her family and her friends. Yet her son was asking her to bid farewell to the place where she was born and had lived her entire life, and to the people from whom she had never been separated. She had spent all her days around Becchi, knew and was known by everybody, and had earned a privileged position in the community. She loved every inch of land about her, not only the portion which she had planted, ploughed and sowed, but every hill and dale. All this—her friends, her family, the farm, the church, the countryside—for her spelt home. She was the mother not only of John and of the rest of her family, she was a mother of the people. And now he was asking her to give up everything to go to what sort of strange place?—to live what sort of strange

life?—among what sort of strange people?

As the enormity of the sacrifice dawned on her, she bowed her head and her face took on a serious expression.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord. The words began to ring in her ears. How often had she not uttered them in honor of the Mother of God! And the response had always been, *Be it done unto me according to Thy Word.*

This had been the response of Our Lady when the Lord had demanded such a sacrifice from her. Could she, Margaret, then do less? Raising her head, she looked up at her son for a moment.

"You know how happy I am living here with your brothers, their wives and children and everyone else around Becchi," she answered quietly. "But if you think that it would please the Lord, I'm ready."

"In that case," John told her, "we'll leave after the feast of All Saints."

Once that was decided, Margaret, with her usual foresight, sent ahead a supply of vegetables, wheat and corn, to make sure that for the first few days, at least, they would not starve. She also brought a basket of linen and some necessary kitchen utensils. Her son, instead, carried only his breviary and a missal.

Departure was a painful experience also for John who had to say good-bye to the young friends he had made during his short stay at Becchi. The local parents gathered about him appealing to him to take care of their boys and promising to provide him with everything he needed. They could not understand why he should want to leave. But this only added to the burden of sorrow which both Margaret and he bore as they bade their sad farewells.

After embracing each member of the family, smiling through her tears when Anthony promised to visit her often and Joseph did the same, Margaret turned to face the future, ready to trust in her own strength, in the wisdom of her son, and in the goodness of God.

Because they did not have money for the coach, on November 3, 1846, they started out on foot for Turin.

As she left Margaret's heart was filled with mixed emotions. She felt sorrow at having to leave all her family and friends. She felt uncertain about the future, for what she had already seen of Valdocco where her son had his lodgings had not been encouraging. It had, instead, filled her with foreboding. But, she reminded herself, she had faced and overcome difficult situations before and with God's help, she would face and overcome this one. Besides, she was convinced that her son possessed special gifts, that in all this he was without a doubt doing God's will and she wanted to help him succeed in his undertaking. She loved him so deeply she was happy to share his lot. Her last thoughts turned once again to her family. While she had been saying good-bye to them she had been able to hold back her tears, but now that the parting was over the tears began to force themselves to her eyes.

"This won't do," she thought hurriedly to herself. "I can't upset John like this. He's got enough on his mind. John," she said, turning to her son, "let's sing some of our old songs and hymns."

"Good idea!" agreed John, happy to provide some sort of distraction for her. He began to hum to himself for a moment before breaking into a Piedmontese ditty to which Margaret added her voice.

In this way they lightened the journey to Chieri, about halfway to Turin, where they stopped at the home of a friend who provided them with a nourishing meal that lasted them the rest of the way.

Even before leaving Becchi, Margaret was aware that neither her new home nor their new surroundings could have much to recommend them. Else why would her son have begged her to accompany him for the sake of his reputation? The closer she approached her destination the better she could see why.

Valdocco, the district where John's youth center was

located, consisted of fields and ploughed land, hedges, woods, and clumps of bushes, with here and there a few buildings. Most of these were low-class taverns and the men who came out of them with women hanging on their arms, slouched past the two travelers without a word of greeting, which Margaret, coming from the country where everybody saluted everybody else, found very strange. To get to their destination, they had to cross a field, but before setting out along the pathway, her son blessed himself.

"Why did you do that?" she wanted to know.

"Because we are passing the *Rondo della Forca.*"*

"What's that?"

"That's where they hang the condemned criminals," her son explained and went on to tell her how he himself had often accompanied these unfortunate men to the scaffold. But he had suffered so much anguish and it had made him so ill he had been forced to give up the practice.

It was now Margaret's turn to bless herself.

The evening had almost covered with its mantle of darkness the other unpleasant sights of the area—the garbage dumps, the strewn filth, the empty bottles. What most repelled her, however, was the foul smell that hung in the air. They had almost reached their destination when

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*The people of Turin possess a touching reminder of the love Saint Joseph Cafasso had for his brother in distress. In the center of *Rondo della Forca* (Rotary of the Scaffold) stands a particularly moving statue in bronze portraying Father Cafasso in the act of comforting a condemned criminal on the way to the scaffold.

John first met Father Cafasso in 1829 when the latter was still a young cleric and in 1833 assisted at his ordination. Even then he impressed John as being concerned only with the things of God. Baptized at the same font, John was to follow Father Cafasso first to the seminary at Chieri, later to the Ecclesiastical Institute in Turin and finally to the honors of the altar. All during his life Father Cafasso was for John not only counselor and guide but also defender and benefactor.

they were surprised to meet Father Joseph Vola, a friend of her son.

"You both look tired and you're covered with dust," he greeted them. "Where are you coming from?"

"All the way from Becchi," said Don Bosco.

"On foot? I can't believe it!"

"The coach costs money we couldn't spare."

"Where are you going to live?"

"In Pinardi's boarding house. Some friends have rented rooms for me."

"But you have no money and no work! What are you going to live on?"

"For the moment we're trusting in providence."

Once Father Vola had recovered from his astonishment, he dug in his pockets and drew out his watch.

"I admire your trust," he said, as he handed the watch to John. "And I wish I could help you more. But this should tide you over the first few days. Sell it to buy whatever you need. I don't need a watch to tell me when it's time to go to bed." Shaking his head in admiration, he bade them godspeed.

The travelers moved on to their new home, or rather, to that part of the boarding house rented for them—two small bedrooms reached by an outside stairway, one of which doubled as kitchen and two other rooms completely bare. The floors had been scrubbed, the windows cleaned and the walls whitewashed in preparation for their coming.

John took the west room, Margaret the adjacent room-kitchen so as to be near him to take care of his needs; the other two rooms would serve as the center. For furniture all she had was two small beds, two benches, two chairs, a small table, a trunk, a cooking pot, two saucepans, and a few plates. There was little to be optimistic about, but she was determined to be neither downcast nor depressed. It was enough that she could share her son's lot with him.

"At Becchi I had to see to everything," was her first reaction as she surveyed this cheerless scene. "I had to

begin tidying up and giving orders first thing in the morning. At least here I'll have it much easier. Right, John?"

John did not answer. He merely looked up at his mother and smiled.

12

A threatening world

Margaret awoke in a cold, whitewashed room wondering for a moment where she was, but everything quickly came back to her. Shivering from the damp and the cold of that November morning she rose and started preparing her son's breakfast—a cup of coffee and a dry roll. She had intended to discuss things with him that morning but he had no sooner finished his coffee and roll than he had stuck his round clerical hat on his head and walked to the door.

"John," she said.

"Yes, Mama?"

"You know what the doctor told you. You're not ready to start work for a while yet. You should take more rest."

"I'll rest when the devil does," was his reply. Then he smiled at her and was gone.

Having arrived late in the evening, Margaret had not been able to see anything of her surroundings, and since the other inhabitants were now at work there was no time like the present to examine the rest of the building. Certainly, the impression she had received last night had not been very favorable. "Is this where my son lives?" she had asked herself. "No wonder he got sick!"

As she glanced out through the window her gaze fell on an even more cheerless sight. A gray November fog had

enveloped the area which lay in a basin providing a natural settling place for both dampness and fog. This gray fog rose and fell in a melancholy dance over the ugly scarred landscape. Valdocco lay to the north of and outside the "tax city" or city proper. This was surrounded by a wall patrolled by the authorities to prevent any attempt to introduce contraband.

The boarding house itself, lying on an east-west axis, consisted of two floors and a shed running along the northern side. An outdoor balcony gave access to the upper rooms on the south side, and an indoor stairway access to the others. The entrance lay on the south side and in front of this stood the pump which supplied ice-cold water to the inhabitants. The over-all measurements in feet were sixty by twenty by twenty. A dormer window supplied the attic with a modicum of light and air, and a small cellar provided storage space. Margaret and John occupied the rooms to the west side, these eventually serving as a dining-room for himself and his helpers. Her son had transformed the shed into a chapel for what he called his *Oratory*, "a place to play and a place to pray." The roof of this shed slanted so much that the boys outside could jump up and down from it with ease, while the boys inside could touch the ceiling with their hands.

When Margaret came to Valdocco, her son had rented only the four rooms they lived in, the shed and the adjoining slice of field. On December 1, however, he subrented from Pancratius Soave, the lessee, the entire building with the stipulation that Soave would vacate the premises by March, 1848. This still left a few boarders whose leases had not yet run out.

Pinardi boarding house stood in a meadow shaped like an irregular pentagon and had a liberal sprinkling of trees, the whole enclosed by a wall of sorts. Twenty yards to the east lay another boarding house for the drivers of the municipal cars, their apprentices, and an assortment of drunkards, thieves, and murderers. These even stole

his only soutane which he had hung out to dry! About the same distance to the west lay Madame Bellezza's boarding house which included a tavern with the poetic name of the *Giardiniera* (Basket of Flowers) where drinking, gambling and general roistering took place. Some of the women who stayed at the Pinardi house worked here. Both houses proved to be a source of annoyance to her son, although in different ways. Whereas on weekends the first was for the most part empty, the drivers and company having gone home, it was during the weekends that the second knew its busiest moments. It did not improve matters that the *Giardiniera* directly overlooked the Oratory chapel so that whenever the boys used the chapel they could hear and even see what was said and done at the *Giardiniera.*

One Sunday afternoon was the occasion for an unusual uproar at the *Giardiniera.* Curses, obscenities, threats . . . all were hurled into the air and carried easily to the inside of the chapel. Now and then one of these carousers would even appear at the window and shout in something less than edifying. Unable to make himself heard above the din, Don Bosco finally told his boys to remain where they were and putting off his stole and surplice, marched over to the tavern. He found as many as fifty people pressed inside, many of them roaring drunk.

At first Margaret and the boys were fearful for his safety, but to their surprise and relief the patrons of the tavern greeted him cheerfully enough even if somewhat raucously.

"*Viva Don Bosco*! Let's drink to the best priest in Turin! Best priest in the whole world!"

"Thanks for the compliments, my friends." Don Bosco addressed himself to one who seemed to be their leader. "But there's a little favor I'd like from you."

Don Bosco then explained that he was trying to preach to his boys but that he could not make himself heard because of the noise that was coming from the tavern.

Could they possibly keep more or less quiet for the next twenty minutes?

Assurances began to rise from all sides.

"Shut up!" roared the leader. "You heard what he said. For the next twenty minutes no talking, no singing, no noise. Got it?"

The nearness of the *Giardiniera* to the chapel was the occasion of still other kinds of disturbance. An army officer once got drunk and after bringing a woman into the chapel, sat down on a bench and placed the woman on his knee. The whole affair was a source of great scandal to the boys who were beginning to fill the chapel.

As soon as he saw what had happened, Don Bosco, boiling with anger, went straight up to the pair, seized the woman and pushed her outside. Enraged by this affront to his companion, the officer was about to draw his sword when Don Bosco placed his hand over the hand of the officer and held it in a grip of steel. Although the pain drew tears to his eyes, there was nothing the officer could do to free himself.

"Now what?" he said at last.

"I'll tell you what," said Don Bosco coldly. "If I wanted I could have those epaulets plucked from your shoulders since by your conduct you have disgraced your uniform in public."

Well aware that if Don Bosco cared to press the matter with his superiors, he could be in serious trouble, the officer finally gave in.

"I apologize," he said.

"Then go!"

The officer went.

Not long after her arrival Margaret ventured forth for her first visit to the markets which lay at the northern end of the city. These had a variety and quantity of foods and goods that astonished her. She had never seen such a profusion, not even in the markets at Castelnuovo. The

balún, or second-hand furniture stalls also interested her for she hoped to pick up an odd article of furniture at bargain prices to furnish an otherwise empty house. Since she was no novice when it came to haggling she enjoyed the sharp give and take of bargaining. These trips also provided her with all the entertainment she needed, for the streets were filled not only with stalls and stores, but with letter-writers, fortune-tellers, street singers, musicians and acrobats.

One afternoon she returned from the market, scarcely burdened with the meager supplies she had purchased with what little money her son could afford. She was wet and cold and had walked many miles hunting out the best buys; she was alone and she was also very tired. Suddenly she heard a noise at the door of the building.

"Is that you, John?" she called out.

The only answer she received was the sound of a man's drunken voice and a woman's giggling as the pair stumbled their way upstairs. Followed the slamming of a room door and then all was silent.

If she was anything but enthusiastic about the kind of weather that prevailed, she was even less about the kind of life led by her neighbors. The muggings and the knifings, the cries in the night and the sounds of quarreling, even the occasional crack of a pistol—all these made Valdocco so dangerous that no one dared venture abroad after dark except those who were bent on evil. Nor did it take her long to discover the character of the women who occupied the other rooms of the boarding house. It had quickly become clear to her why her son had asked her to come and live with him. For most of the time they worked in the local taverns but at night when they returned they showed themselves to be anything but neighborly. All the same she kept wondering if she would ever be able to help these poor creatures the way she had helped so many others around Becchi.

She gazed out of the window again and slowly her

imagination lifted her above this scene of desolation, beyond the limits of the crowded city, away to the east where lay her beloved Becchi . . . and she was back to the happy days of the vintage, surrounded by her laughing grandchildren, nephews and nieces. To the south she could see the sunlit plains broken here and there by the softly rounded hills, and to the north the magic of the shining Alps. What a difference of time and place and people!

The contrast was too much. Her eyes dimmed, tears began to form, and for the first time since she had come to Valdocco doubt entered her mind . . . until she heard once again the sound of someone entering the building.

"That you, John?" she asked a little hesitantly.

"It's me all right, Mama!" called out John. "And I'm bringing home a guest!"

Seconds later John burst into the kitchen. "And here's our guest Tommy . . . Tommy, ah . . . just Tommy for now." He stepped aside to introduce a boy of about ten years old.

"I found him under a bridge, crying," explained her son. "He said he was cold and hungry and had no place to go so I invited him to come and eat with us. And he graciously consented." He turned to the boy. "Say hello to Mama, Tommy."

"Hello," said Tommy in a whisper.

"*Che sporcaccione*!" The words rushed out before Margaret could stop them. "What a filthy child!"

Her son glanced up at her sharply but said nothing. After a wash-up, the boy shared their simple meal with them and when it was over Don Bosco gave him a few cents and made him promise to show up next Sunday at the Oratory. As soon as Don Bosco came back to the house he went straight up to his mother.

"Mama," he said, "maybe I should take time out to discuss things with you."

"Very well, son," said his mother. "There's no time like the present."

Once they were seated opposite each other on the only two chairs in the room, Don Bosco began.

"I think that you have more right than anyone else," he said, "to know what I am doing and what with God's help I intend to do in the future. I don't expect you to understand it all at once for, to tell the truth, it's not too clear in my own mind. But as time goes on you—and I—should be able to see it more clearly."

John then pointed out to her that the boys he brought home were anything but golden-haired youths. They were boys whom he had found either sleeping in hallways or under bridges, begging in the streets . . . They were clothed in rags and their faces and hands had not seen soap and water for a long time. They were outcasts, rejects and doubly lost since they were also prey to every temptation. Nor were many of them, as Margaret herself would say, *stinchi di santi*, the stuff of saints. Some of them had already had a run-in with the police.

As Margaret listened, she began to see that the more hopeless their lot in the eyes of the world, the more attractive they appeared in the eyes of her son. She herself had been raised in the country where a strict moral code was the established way of life, where children were surrounded by so much care and affection and shown good example. What she was hearing about what was taking place in the city streets shocked her; what was happening to the young who were running wild with no one to guide them or assist them horrified her. If her initial reaction had been one of repugnance and even of revulsion, as she listened to her son the truth was gradually impressed on her that these youngsters were nothing more than the victims of circumstance.

Under the impact of a late industrial revolution, her son went on, Turin was going through a building boom which had attracted from the interior thousands of those who could not find work or whom the city lights had lured away from the drudgery of farm life. The popula-

tion, as a result, which was then around 136,000, was increasing so rapidly the city fathers could not cope with it. It was with the younger element that he had become involved and to whom he was giving his time and his talents. Finally, in a burst of confidence, he startled her with the statement that what he was eventually aiming at was nothing less than the renewal of society from the ground up, beginning with these lost children of the city slums.

Before he had finished, Margaret could already grasp much of what went through his mind when he looked in the face of any boy. He saw far beyond the dirty face to what lay beneath, namely a warm, pulsating human life, the priceless jewel of an immortal soul, a spark of divinity, the shining image of Christ. It was easier now to understand why so many of her son's friends and others had failed to see why he should take such an absorbing interest in these young derelicts. Some—may God forgive them!—had even dared to call them "human refuse!" Before their talk had ended she had gained a further insight into the kind of priest her son was, and she was proud of what she had seen.

A few days after that her son brought home another boy he had found wandering the streets. Although he was about the same age as the first, he had apparently not yet gone through as much as the previous one.

As the boy came toward her, Margaret rose to greet him and saw a shock of thick, chestnut curly hair which fell over the boy's forehead, a round face and two wide-open, appealing brown eyes. The sight of the boy brought such a rush of memories of John's own childhood that for a moment she stood speechless.

Her son noticed her hesitation. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

How could she explain to him that once again she found herself staring into the intense young face of a boy who had begged for a drink of water—the same brown eyes

with the same strange appeal in them? But unlike the first this one had no mother to give him even a cup of cold water.

"Not a thing," she answered slowly. Then, after a short pause, she added, "From now on everything is going to be all right."

This lonely boy had opened not only the floodgates of her memory but also the floodgates of her heart. His innocent presence had suddenly made everything clear to her. Never again would she doubt the worth of what she was doing. She would be doing it for the sake of this child who stood in front of her, she would be doing it for all the children who sat crying under the bridges of the world, lonely, cold, hungry, despised, forgotten. Let them all come! From this moment on she'd welcome every one of them!

Practical woman that she was, however, she could guess how much self-sacrifice, patience, and plain hard work this would mean. First, they would have to convince each boy that he was a precious object in the sight of God. This meant washing the dirt off each young face and making each torn garment whole so that the inner person, the soul of the boy would shine through those eyes now filled with doubt and fear. With some it would be easy, with others it would be a heart-breaking task and with still others, even after she and John had done all they could, had exhausted their material and spiritual resources, they would have no assurance of success and, in some instances, a guarantee of failure.

But, she concluded optimistically, the rewards would be so great it would be well worth the trouble!

Margaret's day was now completely taken up with household duties. This meant using all her womanly expertise to make ends meet on whatever John could give her for the upkeep of the center, and the feeding and clothing of the countless youngsters he brought back

with him every time he returned from the city.

Because of her devotion to Our Lady, she soon fell into the habit on her shopping expeditions of dropping in at the church of the Consolata and in time this became her favorite church as it always had been the favorite church of the people of the city. It was to this church that Turin came to ask Our Lady's intercession in all public calamities. The pillar with her statue on top which stood at the entrance was a reminder of how she had come to their aid as recently as 1834 when the plague had struck their city. On her way to the markets Margaret had also to pass by the asylum and she smiled as she remembered how some misguided friends had tried to trap her son but he had turned the tables on them and they themselves had ended up inside its grim walls! On her way home she had to pass by the ruins of the fortifications built by the Romans for the defense of the city, reminders in their turn, of its ancient and heroic past.

Although it was the Romans who had left on Turin their imperial mark—the fortified square and a harmonious development—the city had a history which reached back to pre-Roman times. In post-Roman times kings had added to the severe Roman architecture a flavor of regal extravagance in splendid palaces, ornate buildings and wide thoroughfares, with which the demands of the industrial revolution were now playing havoc. Since the eleventh century it had been the traditional home of the House of Savoy but it had seen the flags of many countries and had felt the heels of more than one oppressor. The proudest boast of its citizens was that their thoroughfares were both the most beautiful and the cleanest in Europe and filled with the statues of a hundred heroes. All of this made walking through the city pleasant for her.

Whatever money Father Vola's watch had brought was soon spent and whatever supplies she had taken with her were soon used up. To make matters worse her son had not one cent of fixed income. Yet the calls continued to

come in from many quarters for money to buy food and clothing for the boys, to rent more rooms, to repair old walls and build new ones . . . Not even the charitable offerings and gifts her son received from those who saw the value of his work could meet the demands made on them. But where could they turn for help?

Margaret now discovered that once she had put herself in contact with the poor, unless she was willing to compromise, she would find herself irresistibly brought to the point where she would give them all—her time, her substance, even her life. She already knew that poverty in the abstract could be as beautiful and as inspiring as her beloved Alps in the distance. But if one got too close to them, she also knew, their poetry could quickly disappear, leaving in its stead nothing but the biting, numbing cold. Poverty with faith was bad enough, she thought as she looked around her, but poverty without it was the saddest of all misfortunes. To accept poverty willingly one had to see in it something spiritually valuable, one had to accept it for the same reasons that Christ did.

After thinking for some time along these lines, she and John concluded that the only way out was to take a drastic step. They decided to sell the few parcels of land and the small vineyard they had inherited at Becchi. When the money from that, too, was spent Margaret went a step further to make what was an extraordinary sacrifice for a woman. Sending for her wedding souvenirs and keepsakes, she sold them.

"When I looked at those things I was holding in my hands for the last time," she confessed, "at first I felt a little upset . . . But after I had sold them I felt so happy that if I'd had a hundred souvenirs I'd have given them all up without the least regret for such a cause!"

13

Inner city outcasts

Since the Royal City of Turin had been laid out according to a definite plan, it was not scarred by slums nor did any "Inner City" exist within its walls. What did exist, however, were what might be called, instead, "Outer Cities."

The original plan called only for the palaces of royalty, the halls of government, churches, public and private, the homes of the wealthy and the important, and those establishments which catered to their needs. Those who were neither important nor wealthy, those who were of little or no account, huddled together on the outskirts of the city. This applied also to those who were coming to the city in search of work and the quarter to which most of them were flocking was Valdocco. Because works of charity were an outstanding characteristic of the city and because they were most needed there, to there went such giants of charity as Cottolengo and Barolo to found what came to be known as the "city of charity."

Joseph Benedict Cottolengo (1786-1842, canonized 1934), was the founder of the huge charitable institution called *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza* (Little House of Divine Providence). It takes care of more than 7,000 patients. He and Don Bosco had entirely different ways of seeking the help of Divine Providence: while it was Cottolengo's way never to ask for anything, it was Don

Bosco's way always to ask for everything.

Marchioness Juliette Galletti di Barolo née Colbert (La Barolo) a direct descendant of the French statesman Colbert, had lost several of her relatives to the guillotine. She had fled with her father and sisters to the protection of Napoleon at Coblentz. When she was thirty-four a visit to the prisons had changed her way of life. For the first time she had come in direct contact with the horrors of poverty, vice and corruption. Left a widow and childless at the age of fifty and possessed of a large fortune, she now devoted both her life and her fortune to the poor and the unfortunate. A strong woman, not in the habit of being denied or contradicted, on more than one occasion she found herself in conflict with two equally strong characters—Cottolengo and Don Bosco. "They are both the same," she complained. "They refuse to accept my help!"

It was here, at Valdocco, that Don Bosco had started his own little work of charity which he called simply, the Oratory, where the poor and abandoned youth of the city could come to play and to pray.

Every Sunday evening, however, when he closed the Oratory he found himself forced to send the boys away. Although most of them went home there were others, he knew, who had no home to go to. Sending these out into the night, he confessed to Margaret, upset him for when they left the Oratory they had to sleep in the streets, parks, hallways, anywhere. Although to think of housing them at the Oratory even for a night sounded foolhardy, he felt he had to do something for them and she agreed.

With an eye to using the boarding house for that purpose, he asked how much the owner wanted for it.

"Eighty thousand."

Since the price was exorbitant, he decided to forget the boarding house and use whatever means he had at his disposal. In the year following Margaret's arrival at the Oratory, mother and son cleared out the loft, making

space for about a dozen beds. With her usual initiative, Margaret met the shortage of beds by stuffing a few old sacks with straw, throwing a sheet over them and adding some army blankets. All she had to do now was wait for their first guests.

"Here's the twelve apostles, Mama!" her son called out late one evening. "We've come to stay the night. Could you whip up something for us to eat?"

"Tonight," he confessed to his mother, "I feel I have accomplished something important."

"I'm glad for your sake, John," replied Margaret, "but where did you pick up such an odd collection?"

Coming home late from a sick call—he told her—he ran into one of the *Cocche*, or youthful street gangs—a common sight in those days. Mostly they went to war against one another. Although the arms they generally used were rocks, often these fights were so vicious that not even the police dared to intervene.

Suspecting that they were bent on making trouble for him, he decided to put up a cheerful front.

"Good evening, my friends," he greeted them. "How's things?"

"Not so hot," said the leader.

"How come?"

"We're thirsty but haven't a cent to buy a drink. Maybe you'd like to buy one for us?"

"You buy us a drink and you won't have no trouble."

Despite the threatening tones, Don Bosco responded easily. "All right. I'll buy you a drink, but on condition . . . "

"Condition?"

" . . . that I have one with you!"

"Fine!" they cried. "Any more conditions like that?"

"Maybe, but let's drink first."

"To the Alpine Tavern!" chorused the gang.

He accompanied them to the tavern, not so much as to avoid trouble as to try out a plan that was slowly

forming in his mind.

"Fill'em up, bartender!" shouted the leader, once they were inside. When the glasses were filled he called for silence. "Let's toast," he said, "to the best priest in Turin—Don Bosco!"

"Thank you, boys!" said Don Bosco. Then he, too, called for silence. "Are you all happy?"

"You bet!"

"Very well," he said. "Now I want to ask you for a little favor."

"You want us to smash windows?" said the leader. "You want us to rough up somebody? Just say the word!"

"No, my friends. I want you to stop blaspheming."

"Sounds odd," was the leader's reaction, "but we'll give it a try. Eh, gang?"

"Sure thing!"

"And I want you to come this Sunday to the Oratory. You'll enjoy yourselves." He finished his wine. "And now, boys, let's go home."

"Home?" they echoed. "We've no home to go to."

"Where do you sleep?"

"Sometimes we pay for a shakedown."

"Sometimes we sneak into a stable."

"Or break into an empty house."

"In any case it's time to go," insisted Don Bosco. "You fellows who have homes to go to—Good night and God bless you!—You others want to come along with me?"

"What can we lose?" was the answer, and although surprised at the invitation, six of them started out with him. Along the way he picked up six more stragglers.—

"And thus," he concluded with a flourish, "begins the great experiment!"

Although Margaret was aware that by now she should have become accustomed to surprises from her son, she found herself hard pushed to scrape up food enough for

twelve hungry youths. But she was nothing if not resourceful. Somehow she managed and when they had eaten John brought them to the new dormitory, prayed with them, and after telling them not to disturb the neighbors, bade them goodnight.

While he was away Margaret thought to herself that this was not the first time that John on a sudden impulse had done something she considered foolish, nor the first time when he had been led not by his head but by his heart. Tonight's gesture, for instance, if not exactly foolish, was certainly foolhardy. What he should have done, what common sense would have dictated, would have been to begin with one or two boys easy to handle and then have worked his way up to larger numbers. But no, he had to begin with twelve boys of the kind by no means easy to handle. And why twelve? she asked herself. Simply because she had prepared twelve beds? But what if she had prepared twenty?

Early next morning Margaret followed her son to the loft to waken his "twelve apostles." They did not hear a sound. "They certainly sleep well!" he whispered to her. "Maybe I've come too early."

Quietly opening the door of the loft, he looked in: he had come not too early but too late. The "apostles" had gone and with them had gone the sheets, pillowcases and blankets! For a moment, he could not believe his eyes. Slowly the tears made their way down his cheeks as, with his head bowed, he closed the door behind him.

"What will you do now, John?"

"I'm . . . I'm not so sure," he said in a choked voice. "Maybe I'll try again and hope for better luck next time."

In that moment Margaret could easily have said to her son, "I told you so!" had not the sight of those tears of disappointment kept her from uttering anything but words of consolation.

One evening in May, not long after this first experiment, John and she were sitting by the fire listening to the

rain drumming against the window when they heard a knock at the door. On opening it Margaret discovered a boy standing in the pouring rain.

She brought him inside at once, stood him by the fire, and since he looked as if he had not eaten for days, started preparing something for him. When he had eaten she sat him down by the fireside, almost smothering him in a great army cape and placing his feet in a pair of warm slippers.

"Now, tell us all about yourself," she said.

He was a poor boy from Valsesia, a village near the Alps, he told her, who had come to the city to look for work, had found none, and having spent all his money had been forced to walk the streets.

Before asking the next question, both mother and son looked up at each other. They were thinking back to a day long ago when another little boy had found himself without a home and had sought shelter among strangers. It was a moment, perhaps, which each would have liked to bury forever, but that was not possible for every single detail of that incident had been imbedded in their memory.

"Where will you sleep tonight?" asked Margaret.

"I don't know. In a corner somewhere . . ." Here the boy broke down.

"There, there!" soothed Margaret, herself on the point of tears.

"If we thought we could trust you," said John, "we could put you up for the night. But the last boys we put up ran off with the bedclothes."

"I've never stolen a thing in my life!" protested the boy.

"Let's put him up for the night," suggested Margaret, "and let providence take care of tomorrow."

"Where will you put him?"

"Here in the kitchen."

"He'll steal your pots and pans," whispered John, half in jest.

"I'll make sure he doesn't."

Once that was decided, they collected a few bricks across which Margaret laid some planks and on top of that a straw mattress, sheets and a blanket. In this way was prepared the first bed ever made in the Oratory.

"Into bed with you!" ordered Margaret. "But first you must say your prayers."

"I don't know any," said the boy.

"Then you can join us."

Both Margaret and John knelt down and recited their evening prayers, the boy joining in where he could. Before leaving the boy to his dreams, Margaret gave him a pious little thought. This was the first *Good-night* ever given at the Oratory, a simple thought taken from the events of the day to reflect on while preparing for bed. She also took the precaution of locking the kitchen door.

She might have saved herself the trouble, for next morning they found the boy still asleep and everything as it should be in the kitchen. After breakfast, John brought him into the city, found work for him and he stayed at the Oratory until winter had passed when he went back to his people.*

The second boy followed soon after. John was returning from the city when he ran into this one leaning his head against a tree and crying.

"What's all the crying for?" he asked.

"My mother died yesterday and they've taken her away to bury her. She loved me very much . . . " At this the boy again burst into tears.

"You've no one else to take care of you?"

"Nobody. My father died before I knew him."

"Where did you sleep last night?"

"In our lodgings. But the landlord took away all our

*It is a sad coincidence that of Bart Garelli, the first boy ever to attend the Oratory, and of the little orphan who became its first boarder nothing more is known. Once they left the Oratory they were never heard of again.

furniture to pay for the rent, then locked me out. I'm all alone, I'm hungry and I need a place to sleep. What will happen to me?" All this was said between sobs.

"Come along with me," said Don Bosco.

"Who are you?"

"For the moment let's just say I'm your friend."

The boy then followed him to the Oratory.

"Here's another one the Lord sends us, Mama!" John greeted Margaret. "Take care of him the way you took care of the other."

"John," protested Margaret, "what's the Lord going to give them for supper?"

"We'll give them bread, we'll give them beans, we'll give them anything, but we'll feed them."

As the number of boys finding a home at the Oratory increased, Margaret began to wish that there were more than twenty-four hours to each day, so many and so varied became the calls on her time. Moreover, with the boys who had come one day and gone the next her influence had, of course, been slight. But with those who came to stay at the Oratory, her contact grew more constant and her influence more effective. As she looked back on the first impressions she had had on arriving at Valdocco, she was forced to conclude that it was not going to be such an easy life, after all.

Finding enough food was always a matter of concern to her. Breakfast was no trouble for John simply gave the boys who were going out to work a few cents with which they could buy something to eat along the way. It was dinner and supper that caused problems. Nevertheless, when the boys came home for the midday meal they would find her standing beside a steaming pot ladling out a soup made from either rice, potatoes, pasta, beans, chestnuts, cornflour . . . whatever she had been able to find to put in it. On special occasions she would add to it cheese, codfish or sausage. For supper the main dish would again be a bowl of soup. Cooking at the Oratory in

those early days was such a haphazard affair that as often as not volunteers were called for to prepare the supper. As for the boys, they still considered themselves fortunate. They were far better off than they had been before meeting Don Bosco. They no longer had to walk the streets, lonely and abandoned; they were no longer haunted by the fearsome specter of hunger.

As far as feeding John was concerned, he gave her little trouble. At the beginning of the week she prepared for him a dish of vegetables mixed with pieces of meat or egg and she served this up to him for several days in a row. If it threatened to turn sour he himself would touch it up with a drop of oil or vinegar. She was not very happy with this arrangement, of course, and more than once had raised her voice against his refusal to take proper care of his health. There were days when he completely forgot to eat.

Once he came home complaining that his head was spinning. "I wonder why that should be?" he asked her.

Knowing his poor eating habits, she asked the obvious question. "Have you eaten yet?"

He gave a little start of surprise. "So that's it!" he exclaimed. "I forgot to eat my lunch!"

He became so unconcerned about food that once in a parish, after having heard confessions until late, he returned to find that everyone had gone to bed. He went to the kitchen and by the light of a little lamp looked around to see if they had left him anything to eat. Seeing a small pot sitting on the stove, he tasted the contents and ate what he thought was some kind of gruel. Next morning he discovered that what he had eaten had not been gruel but a bowl of starch the housekeeper had prepared for the day's ironing!

To be so careless about eating she considered bad enough, but when he began to deprive himself of his much-needed rest! . . .

Since he had already written several successful books and was even then writing another, to find time to do this

he would either hide in a friend's house or else stay up long after the others had gone to bed. When this was not enough, he went a step further and made a habit of staying up all night once each week to write. As was to be expected, the following day would find him so overcome with fatigue and sleep he would doze off in someone's house, a store, a church, or even at table. For Margaret it was no longer a question of *if* her son would suffer another breakdown but *when.*

After supper the boys joined the others who had come for the evening classes and the rooms would be lit up and humming with the sounds of different groups busy at their lessons. Classes over, it was Margaret who, with the help of a few boys, cleaned up and put all in readiness for the next evening.

Since John did not want any outside help to come in who might upset the family atmosphere he was trying to establish, Margaret had also to look after the kitchen, the laundry and the linen; oversee the cleanliness of the boys, help make the beds, comb the hair of the youngest, sweep out the rooms and little chapel, draw water from the well, shell beans and peel potatoes. Even then, however, her day was not finished for at night she went around the beds picking up clothes that needed mending to have them ready for the following day.

During the period of the hostel at the Oratory the average age of the boys was between eighteen and twenty, but when the boarding school system was adopted the age dropped to between twelve and fifteen. The group lived family-style in an almost rustic fashion. Everybody tried to make-do with what they had since they knew how much they owed to the efforts of both Margaret who slaved for them and of Don Bosco who begged for them. Despite all these efforts, however, those times still remained heroic. Conditions might not be too bad in spring and summer, but when winter came they turned harsh and difficult. The boys froze in church and in classroom

since only a few rooms were heated with wood-burning stoves. Indeed, it was so cold and the boys were so poor that Don Bosco applied for and got from the army their cast-off military capes.

In this make-do atmosphere, Margaret even tried to cut hair.

"In all the years that I stayed at the Oratory," says one boy, "Mama Margaret used to cut my hair but always left some steps in it. When I'd complain, she'd say, 'Those steps will help you get to heaven.' I guess she was trying to tell me that if we put up with the little setbacks of life it will help us save our souls."

"She was a housekeeper, a devout woman and a loving mother to all of us," relates another. "Everyone loved her and we thought the world of her. Her saintly life was an inspiration to those who knew her."

14

Queen among mothers

"Conveniences are easy to get used to."

Like everyone raised in the country, Margaret possessed a store of proverbs, the accumulated wisdom of the people. While she was engaged in the never-ending task of repairing the boys' clothing, invariably some youngster could be found standing, head down, close by her chair.

"You were once such a good boy," she told this one. "What's gotten into you? Don't you say your prayers any more?" She drove home the point with a proverb. "Let those who want, go down; let those who can, go up."

He was followed by one who had committed a serious fault. With the brashness of youth, in the same breath he was also asking a favor.

"I'll do what you ask," said Margaret, hoping to prevent a recurrence. "But before that you'll have to tell me when you last went to the sacraments?"

"Yesterday I didn't have time."

"And Saturday?"

"I wasn't ready."

"Sure! Sure!" concluded Margaret. "An unwilling workman never finds the right tools."

A third boy came along wiping tears from his eyes. He had been hurt by something a companion had said to him. Margaret handed him a bunch of grapes to munch on while she consoled him with another proverb. "There's no place,

neither on this nor the other side of the river, that's free of trouble."

Not all the boys she tried to correct took it meekly. One she had just finished scolding had kept his head bowed demurely through it all. But once her head was turned he stuck out his tongue at her.

By the merest chance Don Bosco happened to witness all this from a nearby window but gave no sign of having seen it. Margaret came up to him, convinced that she had made another conquest. "They are really good at heart," she told her son. "All they need is a little motherly advice."

Aware that such things happen in every family, Don Bosco said nothing but smiled at her as if in full agreement.

Never one to raise her voice, she still exercised enormous influence over the boys, relying on the two elements on which her son himself relied—reason and religion. If she showed any preference it was for those boys of a difficult nature, for those who were stubborn or inclined to be troublesome. To a boy who took little interest in study she would say, "Don Bosco sweats blood to offer you a chance in life and you throw it away!" To another whose hot temper often led him into fights, "Only animals act the way you do! Can't you see that your companions are your brothers?" To one who at first refused to work, she pointed to the *Rondo*, where they hanged criminals. "That's where boys like you end up," she warned. When the boy began to cry, however, she at once changed her approach, consoling him and pointing out how much happier he would be if he shouldered some of the burden of running the Oratory.

Once she met a boy who, too ashamed to go and eat with the others because of something he had done, had holed up in a corner. "So this is how you thank Don Bosco," she scolded, "for the way he helps you!" But that was the limit of the scolding. "Come with me." She brought the boy to the kitchen, prepared a snack for him,

meanwhile warning him not to tell the others. "They might think I'm easily fooled. And I wouldn't like them to believe that I'm taking sides against Don Bosco."

Sometimes a boy having to work late could not be back in time for supper. But no matter how late he would be, Margaret would wait up for him and would not retire until she was certain that he had been fed.

Sometimes, too, despite all her astuteness, her kindness would cause her to fall into little traps the boys would lay for her.

"What do you want?" Margaret asked one boy who came into her kitchen.

"Could I please have one of your tasty little rolls?" The request was put in such a way that it was hard to refuse.

"Didn't you have yours at supper?"

"Sure. But I still feel—oh!—so hungry!"

"Poor child!" she sympathized. "Take this." She handed him a roll. "Make sure you don't tell anyone," she cautioned. "I don't want everybody running in here asking for more rolls!"

"I won't tell a soul," the boy assured her.

He had no sooner reached the playground, however, than his companions wanted to know where he got the roll.

"Mama Margaret."

The others immediately made a beeline for the kitchen and Margaret was soon relieved of a number of her rolls.

The following Sunday when the same boy came to the kitchen with the same request, Margaret turned on him. "Last Sunday when I gave you the roll you promised you wouldn't tell a soul," she scolded. "But you'd hardly reached the playground when everybody knew about it, and my kitchen was filled with boys begging for rolls. Just for that you're not going to get anything more from me."

"But, Mama Margaret," pleaded the boy, "they asked me where I got the roll and I had to tell them the truth.

Would you, of all people, want me to tell a lie?"

"No, I suppose not," Margaret reluctantly agreed. "We must always tell the truth." With that she gave the boy what he had come for.

With the older boys she adopted a different approach. While she accorded them the respect she thought was their due, at the same time she reminded them that more was expected from them. Once any of them donned the soutane, however, her attitude toward him changed completely. From that moment on she refrained from giving him reprimands, orders or even advice. To act otherwise, she felt, would be to interfere with her son's special plans—something she would never do.

Life was never dull for Margaret. Besides attending to her regular chores she had to contend with her son's habit of bringing home still another "special" boy he had found wandering the streets. John did not seem to be overly concerned that there just might not be enough room for them, or even enough food. Although she often felt like protesting, once she herself had heard the boy's story of abandonment or ill-treatment at the hands of others, she would relent and start to take care of him as if he had been her own.

She was particularly attentive to those boys who for one reason or another became either sick or sad. With those who were sad she tried every means to restore to them their good humor; with the sick she was all concern. A headache or a toothache received her best attention, and the boys felt free to turn to her at any time of the day or night. If she heard a boy was in pain she would hurry to him and for those who had to be confined to bed she was always in attendance, providing them with the best medicines and food that her limited means could supply. When it was called for she would even stay up by the bedside during the night. Once a boy became so sick that the doctor ordered his removal to hospital. As the infirmarians carried the stretcher down the stairs Margaret

watched in silence. But when they bore it out of the house, she burst into tears.

When success of John's work began to gain recognition among the city fathers, a friend presented to them a petition for a subsidy for the Oratory. To judge the merits of the appeal, they appointed three senators to visit the Oratory and report their findings.

After showing them the various parts of the Oratory and having demonstrated to them his system in action, Don Bosco led them to the kitchen where they found Margaret, ladle in hand, preparing the evening meal. Count Frederick Sclopis opened the conversation by enquiring who the cook was.

"This is my mother," said Don Bosco," and the mother of my boys."

"You double up as both cook and mother?" the Count asked Margaret.

"To earn our place in heaven," responded Margaret, "we have to do a little of everything."

"How many courses do you serve the boys?"

"Courses? Our circumstances allow us to serve only bread and soup."

"Then how many courses do you serve Don Bosco?"

"Only one."

"Only one? But that's too little! Perhaps you make it a good one?"

"I make it so good he takes it morning and night from Sunday to Thursday!"

When the laughter had died down, the Count went on, "But why not from Sunday to Sunday?"

"Because Fridays and Saturdays for him are days of abstinence."

"Days of abstinence?" echoed the others. "But . . . "

"Your method of cooking," interrupted the Count, "even if it is a little behind the times, is certainly economical."

"Have you anyone to help you with your work?"

asked a second senator.

"I have. But he's busy right now."

"And who is he, might I ask?"

"There he is," said Margaret, pointing a dripping ladle at her son. She began to laugh at the oddity of the situation and the others could not help joining in.

"Congratulations, Don Bosco!" Count Sclopis exclaimed. "I've always known you as an educator and an author, but this is the first time I've heard of you as a master of the art of cooking!"

At that moment one of the boys came to deliver a message to Don Bosco.

Sclopis called him over, asked him his name, where he came from, and what he did.

"Are your parents alive?" he continued.

"My father is dead."

"And your mother?"

The boy blushed, lowered his head.

"Is she dead, too?"

"She's in prison!" he blurted out, then began to weep. For a moment no one felt like speaking.

"I'm sorry, son," said Sclopis. "But tell me, where will you sleep tonight?"

"Up to now I slept at the house of my boss, but Don Bosco gave me a place here and this is where I'll sleep tonight."

Sclopis turned in surprise to Don Bosco. "Do you mean to tell me that besides running these oratories you have also opened a place for homeless boys?"

"That's what was needed. At the moment thirty boys stay with me. They go to work during the day and come back at night."

"In my own name and in the name of my colleagues," said Sclopis, "I must tell you that we leave here highly satisfied . . . As citizens and as senators we applaud your work and your efforts, and we wish you every success!"

The outcome of the visit was a generous subsidy for the Oratory.

The life Margaret had been leading at the Oratory for the last two years was very different from the life she had been leading at Becchi for the last five decades. Although by temperament she was admirably suited to handling the kind of boy who came to the Oratory—she was sharp, quick-witted, down-to-earth and used to rough ways—they could more than once try her patience. The boys her son accepted, whatever they might have developed into, when they arrived at the Oratory were anything but well-mannered or attractive. Indeed, such was their appearance that some employers not only would not employ them, they would not even let them into their worships! Others were told that they would do better ridding their hair of lice than dressing it up! Their manners and speech, naturally, were those of the slums. Despite their thoughtlessness, their slips of the tongue, even their lack of respect in certain moments of exuberance, Margaret loved them.

But there was one particular occasion when even for her they went a little too far.

When King Charles Albert in 1848 declared war against Austria the whole of Piedmont rose with him and Turin became the center of the war effort. Despite Don Bosco's attempts to insulate the boys against it, they inevitably became infected with the warlike spirit. He then looked around for some means to offset its ill effects and discovered that it lay in staging mock battles in the Oratory. He could do this because among his helpers was Joseph Brosio, an old campaigner of the Wars of Independence. Brosio formed the boys into companies and trained the best among them as officers. From the local authorities he obtained dummy rifles, added wooden swords and lent his bugle to a boy to learn the calls.

From there on his soldiers provided spectacles of mock battles so exciting they helped to take everybody's mind off the more serious events happening outside the walls.

Very close to the playground where the boys fought their battles Margaret, after spending much time and care in the process, had succeeded in planting a small kitchen-garden in which she grew broccoli, sprouts, leeks, parsley, carrots, sage, mint and a host of other herbs. This kitchen-garden was her pride and joy and to protect it she had encircled it with a hedge.

On one occasion the boys fought with unusual vigor and enthusiasm. Under the expert eye of the old campaigner, however, his troops kept pushing the enemy back, back to the edge of the playground through the kitchen-garden and even well beyond it. Here they halted. "Victory is ours!" they cried. It was only when the cries of the conquerors had died down that anyone understood what had happened. Not a single herb or vegetable had escaped the mad rush of the boys and Margaret's kitchen-garden—the result of several months of loving care—lay in ruins! Only when their enthusiasm had dissipated could the boys grasp the enormity of their offense. After so many months of toil and trouble Margaret had not so much left as a leaf to feed one of her rabbits!

When Margaret saw what the boys had done to her garden she could not utter a word. No one ever knew what she thought or what she wanted to say in that moment, but her jaws tightened and her eyes grew moist. There were times when her son did not seem to have any control over his boys, times when he did not seem to be aware of, or even to care about, what she had to put up with, times when . . .

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of her son who came hurrying to her side. She did not have to tell him how she felt for he could read the signs on her face and knew that she was laboring under a severe strain.

"Poor Mama," he consoled her. "I'm really sorry for you. But I'm sure the boys did not mean to harm your garden. After all, they are only boys."

Margaret, however, could not trust herself to speak. Instead, she turned away to hide her tears.

15

Good times and bad

Every year John was accustomed to spending a few days at Becchi where, to say Mass, he had to travel on foot either to Capriglio or to Morialdo, until one day he had an inspiration. "Why not build a little chapel at Becchi?" After obtaining the necessary permissions, he persuaded Joseph to turn a room on the ground floor of his house into a chapel and to cut a doorway to the rear. When it was finished it became his first permanent monument to Our Lady and he dedicated it to her under the title of *Our Lady of the Rosary.* To render the occasion as solemn as possible, he organized an outing to Becchi for some sixteen of his most deserving boys.

Margaret decided to go with them and although she did not show it she was as eager as any of the boys. If for them it meant an outing that would offer them a little inspiration and entertainment, for her it meant a trip that would bring her back to her beloved Becchi where, after an absence of two years, she would meet her other two sons, their wives and her eleven grandchildren. Although she was now sixty the fifteen-mile hike did not cost her a second thought.

On the morning they set off, Margaret, with her basket under her arm, was as happy and as carefree as any of the boys. If there was one thing she missed during her stay at Valdocco it was a good long walk in the country for

walking among the hills had been one of her favorite pastimes. Once they cleared the city limits she took her place at the head of the group and invited the boys to join her in the rosary.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance Margaret gave to these two simple practices—the Angelus and the rosary. The *Angelus* was the prayer by which her son was told he would recognize the Lady in the dream. To discover the strength of the attachment to the rosary which Margaret had instilled in him, one need only recall a visit of Marquis Robert d'Azeglio to the Oratory during that same year. The Marquis, a powerful figure in the politics of the time, was anxious to help Don Bosco and the successful institution founded by him. One day he called at the Oratory and Don Bosco showed him around, explaining to him his plans for the future. The Marquis was impressed, made several helpful suggestions, and concluded by confessing that he approved of everything with one exception. This was the time being wasted, as he put it, on the repetition of lengthy prayers, and in particular, the recitation of the rosary. He tried to convince Don Bosco that it was out-of-date and should be dropped.

"That practice," said Don Bosco, "means a lot to me. I'd go as far as to say that my whole undertaking is based on it. I might not object to giving up many other important practices, but not this. In fact, if it ever came to a choice, I would sacrifice even your valuable friendship rather than give up the recitation of the rosary."

This reaction so displeased the Marquis that he never again had any dealings with Don Bosco.

Once the rosary had been said, Margaret and John took turns in lightening the journey with songs and hymns, some of which John himself had composed, and on went the group, singing and laughing and finding infinite amusement in the simplest of incidents they met along the road.

Soon the sights, sounds, and, above all, the smells of the city disappeared. Under a cloudless sky, usual for that

time of the year, they saw farmers gathering in a late harvest, heard the sounds of sheep, cattle and poultry, so new to their ears; and breathed in the crisp, clear October air that carried with it the sweet odors of hay, of apples and even of grapes that had accompanied a late vintage. Margaret drew back her head and inhaled as if she would store in her lungs forever that fresh air.

They halted once by the side of the road to rest and eat and another time at Chieri where one of John's many friends offered them hospitality. Chieri was a place which stirred up memories. How could Margaret help recalling the days when she had trudged week after week to the seminary with a load of flour, nuts or other foodstuffs to keep John alive? It had been hard for her but it had brought the kind of satisfaction that only a mother could have when she remembered that if her son was a success so much of it was due to her. She saw now that it had all been well worth while, that all she had ever done for him, all she could ever do for him would be too little!

On leaving Chieri and heading east, they had both sun and wind at their backs, and the thought that they were covering the last leg of the journey made everything easier. But there was little talking and less singing for the distance they had walked, the climbing of innumerable hills was taking its toll, and it needed the encouragement of both Margaret and John to keep them moving until at last they came to a sight that made Margaret's pulse beat faster: Becchi! The boys in the lead broke into a run and were met half-way up the hill by a boy and girl in their teens—Francis, Joseph's eldest son, and Philomena, Anthony's eldest daughter. The two immediately rushed to embrace Margaret, took her basket and offered to help her up the rest of the hill. She shook them off good-naturedly.

"Do you take me for an old woman?" she said.

At the top of the hill she met the families of Joseph and Anthony, the wives with babes in their arms and the other nine in a row. Of all the greetings, however, the one

which most affected her was the one from Anthony. Their embrace was both prolonged and moving. Next came enquiries about the children. Was their health good? Were they obedient? Did they perform their religious duties? That done, a happy Margaret, followed by a train of grandchildren, was conducted to the house where she had lived for so long.

Joseph, meanwhile, had arranged for the housing and feeding of the group. Since by himself he was not able to satisfy the hunger of so many over the two-week stay, he was not above going to the neighbors, this time not on behalf of his brother, but on behalf of his brother's boys.

This was the first of many trips John organized each year to celebrate the feast of the Rosary, and each year they grew in size, scope and solemnity. They gave him the chance to inject a spirit of joy into the religion of the people still laboring under the numbing influence of Jansenism, and, what was even more important to his work, of gathering around him many of the best boys of the parishes he visited. It was during these outings that he met boys like Dominic Savio (canonized 1954) and John (later Cardinal) Cagliero. Margaret was perhaps one of the first to see the extraordinary qualities of young Savio, and brought these to the attention of her son. On the other hand, she once threatened to bend her broom over young Cagliero's back if he did not stop practicing on the spinet Don Bosco had bought him! Cagliero later became, among other things, a well-known musician.

To Margaret these trips gave her the opportunity of renewing her association with her two sons, their wives and children, the neighbors she loved, and with the place she still called home.

It was a good thing that she did visit Becchi that year for the following year, 1849, her mother's heart was torn with grief by the sudden and unexpected death from what had seemed a minor ailment of her son Anthony. He died

at the age of forty-one and left behind him a wife and six children.

As she looked back on Anthony's life she remembered how unhappy had been his earlier years. When only three he had lost his mother and for too long had been left without a mother's care. When she had moved into the home he had lost his place of privilege, and when the other two had been born, he had lost, as he saw it, two-thirds of his patrimony. Finally, with the deaths of his father and his grandmother he had lost the only remaining members of his family.

She had often wondered about his insistence that John should continue "to swing a hoe like the rest of us." He had been anything but a dull boy and had learned to read and write—something Joseph never had. Had he felt that John was getting something which he himself desperately wanted but had been afraid to ask for?—or that in the land lay the only security for people like them? Whatever the reason, as he had grown older he had changed for the better and they had come closer to each other. He had developed into a man worthy of respect, much sought after not only for his advice but also for his cheerful company.

What most consoled her in that sad moment, however, was the thought that her patience, her understanding, her perseverance, but most of all her love had finally won him over. When she had moved to the Oratory he had often come to visit her and had spent long hours discussing his problems with her. If she needed any proof other than these visits, she had it in the fact that when he spoke to her he no longer used the word "stepmother," but addressed her, instead, by the beautiful title of "mother."

Although everyone at the Oratory was poor, no one loved poverty more than Margaret and it was on the touchstone of poverty that her "vocation" almost foundered. It happened at a time when everything was not as

orderly as it might have been.

This was a moment in her son's life when he was being pulled in many directions. He was continually being called on to preach and he had forever to go knocking on doors for money to support the Oratory at Valdocco and the other two oratories he had since opened in the poorer quarters of the city. He was also trying to finish another book and in order to meet a deadline would occasionally slip off to the home of Joseph Brosio or to the Ecclesiastical Institute, leaving Margaret in charge. Things became so disorganized that when a certain Father Zoia came to offer his services to Don Bosco, after seeing what was happening, quickly decided that he could not put up with so much disorder and left.

All this meant that, besides having to take care of more than fifty boarders, Margaret had also to share the burden of looking after several hundred oratorians, none of whom were noted for their love of discipline. On top of all this, she, whose whole life had been enveloped in poverty, who knew, moreover, what it cost her son to go out begging in order to provide for so many homeless boys, could see everywhere their lack of cooperation—bread scattered about the playground, clothes torn, carelessly left behind or thrown away . . . She had to witness thefts, deceptions, and acts of vandalism carried out to avenge an imagined insult, or even to undermine her son's work.

Part of the trouble was that despite all this her son did not seem to be overly concerned. When, for instance, she had discovered that a boy was keeping back his wages and she had naturally told her son about it, what had he done? Nothing.

"Let him alone," he had said. "If he knows that I have found him out in a lie, he will never again approach me."

It was still an unsettling experience for one who had come from a home where everything was in order and disorder was not tolerated. Moreover, on this particular day everything seemed to crowd in on her to the point

where she could not take any more. Matters reached such a pass that she felt she had to open up her heart to her son.

"I can't put up with it any longer," she declared. "These boys are just impossible! You keep telling me to be patient, that they're only boys. But how can I when they simply won't cooperate? When they don't appreciate what I do for them? When they even go against me? They have already ruined my garden, and yesterday they trampled all over the clothes I'd put out to dry. They come home with their clothes in rags, or else without the ties, socks, or handkerchiefs I saved up to buy for them. They carry off my pots and pans to play with then leave them lying around so that it takes me hours to find them . . . I can't hide it from you any longer, John, I've had enough. I can't take any more. Let me go home where I can end my days in a little peace and among people who'll at least appreciate what I do for them."

When she had finished, she climaxed her words by taking off her apron, and in sign of her rejection of it all threw it on the table.

To say that John was shocked is to understate. He was seeing something he could never have imagined. His own mother calling it quits! Was this the woman who had trained him as a child to put up with every opposition?—with every setback?—with every hardship?—every disappointment?—who in the face of extreme adversity had shown him how to carry on? At first it did not seem possible, but a moment's reflection showed him that he should not have been so surprised.

There was more than one good reason for his mother's reaction. To start with she was physically spent. Her day began early in the morning taking care of the boys who had to go to work, next followed the household chores that are the lot of every mother—only here not one or two but scores of boys needed looking after. Then came the preparation of the midday meal, then more cleaning . . .

This went on until she ended the day exhausted. The end of the day, however, did not mean for her the end of her work. While the boys were sleeping she would go around the beds examining their clothes to find out which needed repairing, and in the dim light of an old oil lamp would stitch and sew at them far into the night.

Although this was not the first time the boys had severely tried her patience, and she was a notoriously patient woman, nevertheless, on each of those other occasions John had succeeded in soothing her ruffled feelings. But this time they had evidently gone too far. This time they had overstepped the bounds.

For a long while he said not a word. What could he say? Every one of his mother's complaints was well founded. The boys could expect too much from those who toiled for them day and night; they could be callous to every act of kindness. Yes, they could even be cruel to their benefactors.

"You're so right, Mama," he said. "They shouldn't expect so much when they give so little in return. Out of simple decency they should respond to your kindness and they should feel ashamed to act in such a cruel way to you who have done so much for them. They should . . . they should . . . " For a moment he hesitated, wondering how his mother would react. " . . . they should all be angels but they're not! For if they were all angels," he added quietly, "what need would they have of the Oratory, of me, or even of you? Despite all that has happened what really matters is what people like you and me can do to help them save their souls? Don't you agree?"

Margaret did not say a word. Her face retained its stony expression as she stared at the table.

It was some time before John again broke the silence and this time all he said was, "Mama." Without another word he raised his eyes until they rested on the figure nailed to the cross hanging on the wall.

Margaret, in turn, raised her eyes until they, too, rested

on the figure of Christ. A moment of silent communication followed. This was enough to remind her of so many things. Of how, for instance, her son sacrificed so much for these boys—for all of them, for the good and the bad without distinction; of how much he put up with from them in the way of set-backs, disappointments, and even downright insults. She remembered how in the early days she had at first been repulsed by their appearance, their speech, their manners . . . but she also remembered how so many of them had developed into young men filled with new hope, into fine, upright and even saintly youths. As for the ones for whom there seemed to be no hope . . . John was right. If her son, herself and people like them did not take care of these unfortunate young people, who would?

Within the space of those few moments she resolved that never again would she let herself be discouraged by their lack of understanding, lack of cooperation, even their callousness, because never again would she let herself forget that these were not ordinary boys but boys who needed more than ordinary care. Never again would she forget that if, on the one hand, they did need more than ordinary care, on the other, working for them would merit more than an ordinary reward.

Nor would she ever again let herself think of how easy it would be to pack up and return to Becchi where a warm welcome and a comfortable life awaited her. Nor would she ever again compare her vision of ice-capped mountains glistening in the sun, or fields laden with the fruits of the earth, or the hills she loved to walk on, with Valdocco where all she could see were broken-down buildings, piles of rubbish and empty bottles strewn over the pathways, with here and there the hunched-up figure of a sleeping drunk; nor ever again compare the cries of children at play and the ringing of church bells calling people to prayer, with the screams of men and women quarreling. She would try to forget how the air at Becchi was filled

with the sweet scent of new-mown hay, and was so pure it felt as if she were inhaling some kind of life-giving energy; while the air of Valdocco was charged with the odor of decay and of death which, like the damp and the fog, penetrated the very walls of the Oratory.

How fortunate her son was when he looked at the people who surrounded them at Valdocco and saw only souls! No wonder he could approach everyone with warmth and openness! She could only pray that God would grant her the same insight and the same outlook.

Slowly she reached across the table, picked up her apron again and tied it firmly about her waist.

In time her understanding of the kind of boy her son kept on accepting increased to such an extent that one day she overheard her sister Marianne, who had come to help her when Father Lacqua died, scold a boy because he was having fun chasing her hens. On seeing how agitated her sister was, Margaret quickly intervened.

"Marianne," she called out, "don't get so upset! Can't you see he's only a boy?"

To understand the importance of this reaction, one must first understand the close relationship that existed between Margaret and her hens. Even though she lived in the city she was still a country-woman, and hens were an important element in her life. They were so important to her, in fact, that she gave them the run of the place, allowing them into the kitchen when the boys had gone to peck at the remains of the meals. "They were more important to her than the members of parliament," was the comment. They, in turn, were so attached to her that they would come to her when she called them by name, and she had trained some of them to jump up and perch on her outstretched arm.

Having been to Castelnuovo for a couple of weeks on business, she returned late in the evening when the hens were cooped up for the night and the boys were busy at their lessons. No sooner had the boys heard the sound of

her voice, however, than they dropped their books and ran to greet her, while she kept telling them to be quiet. Eventually the boys did calm down but no sooner had they done so than another kind of uproar began, this time on the part of the hens. Bursting out of their coops they half ran, half flew to her, while the boys, laughing at the scene, opened up to make way for them.

Later the boys put on one of John's plays in which a lawyer talked about a fox that was trying to get at some hens but was kept at bay by a watchful farmer. In his talk to the boys John was citing this play when Margaret happened to pass by.

"What did you think of the play, Mama?" he called out, while the boys waited for her answer.

"I liked it very much," she answered. "But I still can't forgive that fox for trying to get at the hens!"

If every family has to have a mother, for the family of the Oratory Margaret filled this role to perfection. To many of the boys she was the only mother they ever knew. While she supervised the kitchen, the laundry, and almost everything else, her greatest pride lay in seeing them leave the Oratory fed, brushed and cleaned. She knew that these simple acts, as much as anything else, instilled in them a sense of their own dignity, of their own worth. Not the least of her rewards was the fact that all these things slowly impressed on her a great truth: that these were her boys and that this place was her home.

When she had left Becchi she had thought that never again would she be surrounded by so many young people who needed her, who loved her. At Valdocco she discovered how wrong she was. Here she found herself surrounded not by a dozen, but first by scores, then by hundreds of young people who desperately needed her help, who loved her so much that they began to honor her with that dearest of all titles, *Mama.* From this moment on she would be known to them as *Mama Margaret.*

16

Poverty preached, poverty practiced

"Mama Margaret, may we come in?"

Margaret treated everyone, high and low, with the same cordiality and courtesy. Duchess and dairymaid, banker and baker to her were all children of God and as such deserving of respect. In return, many of the distinguished visitors who called on her son made a point of calling on her, too. If John was late coming home or engaged for the moment, the visitors, since there was still no waiting-room at the Oratory, would knock on Margaret's door.

"Don Bosco's time" by now had come to mean her son would arrive in his own time. He could be several hours late for an appointment. The more famous he became the later he arrived for his appointments, simply because he was never allowed to leave any place he visited on time, so many were the calls made on him for prayers, favors and blessings. Margaret would keep the visitors entertained until he arrived.

She was well aware, nevertheless, that however charitable their intentions might be, their visits to poor quarters like Valdocco were visits and nothing more. They came infrequently, some of them very condescending, spent an hour or so and left a little of their substance before returning to their comfortable homes. Not so her son. He did not spend a little time with the poor and needy; he

spent all his life with them. Nor did he limit his generosity to a tiny portion of his substance; he gave them all he had. It never occurred to her to equate her own sacrifices with those of her son. In her mind what she was doing at Valdocco was what she had always done, what every woman should be doing, when it lay in her power to work for God's poor and abandoned.

Apart from all this, when these visitors did come to the Oratory, she accorded them the most cordial of welcomes.

"By all means come in," she would answer. "And may God bless you!"

On entering, they found her sitting on a chair surrounded by other chairs on which were piled articles of clothing to be repaired. Although many of her visitors belonged to the cream of Turin society, Margaret, completely at ease, would simply sweep the clothing off the chairs to accommodate them.

A lively conversation would start up during which the visitors delighted in prodding her into making some original observation or drawing a sample from her store of proverbs. Piedmontese proverbs, more than most, are particularly witty and pointed. They would even put to her questions on politics, history or religion, knowing if she could not answer the question, she would ease herself out of a difficult situation with either a proverb, a piece of homely wisdom, or, in the last resort, with a witticism that would set them laughing. But if they kept talking for what she thought was too long she had her own way of handling them. She started praying under her breath! When this happened the visitor usually took the hint.

When benefactors of her son's work visited, Margaret showed them special consideration, offering them a cup of coffee, or, if the visitor happened to be a priest, inviting him to share the noonday meal with her son. If they stayed to eat with her son she refused to share the food prepared for them, contenting herself with what she

served to the boys.

One day Father Stellardi, chaplain to the King, dropped by to see Don Bosco. When he accepted her invitation to dinner, Margaret begged for time to prepare "something special" for such an honored guest.

Father Stellardi would not hear of it. "I want to eat just what you yourselves eat," he insisted.

On hearing his protestations, Margaret shrugged her shoulders and went about preparing the meal.

What she did not know and what Father Stellardi was careful to keep from her was the fact that a few days previously he had been to dinner at Count Lorenzo d'Agliano's home. Some of the guests had accused Don Bosco of starving his boys while providing himself and his friends with a sumptuous table; others had defended him as eating like the poor. To settle the matter, Father Stellardi had offered to go to the Oratory and find out the truth.

When he sat down to dinner the first course served to him consisted of a piece of codfish moistened with olive oil. The smell alone of the oil was enough to force him to decline. The next course was a dish of cardoons boiled and salted, followed by a slice of cheese. Much to the secret amusement of the clerics who ate with Don Bosco, Father Stellardi excused himself on every count.

After a rather hurried good-bye, he rushed to the home of his friend the Count.

"Something to eat, quick!" he gasped. "Before I drop dead of hunger!"

Another guest who accepted a similar invitation was Canon Caesar Ronzoni of the Archdiocese. All he had to eat was boiled beef and cabbage. However, he did accept Margaret's offer of "something special," which turned out to be nothing more than a few slices of salami. The Canon, who had also heard rumors of Don Bosco's sumptuous table, was so moved by the experience that he had tears in his eyes as he said good-bye to Don Bosco and Margaret.

Up to the time when the clerics began to eat with her son Margaret had often sat with him at table. But when these came she refused to do so any longer, feeling that she was out of place. She also consistently refused to partake of these "specials" which she prepared for her son's guests, contenting herself with polenta, peppers, onions, or radishes seasoned with salt. "The poor don't always have food to eat," she would say. "Here I am never without it."

February 2, 1851, was a big day for Don Bosco and for the Oratory. He was to confer the clerical habit on four of his sons. Margaret had been told to prepare a special dinner for the occasion. The dinner was, indeed, special, for her son knew when to make sure that the meal met the moment. Only two things did not seem right. One was the meat course and the other was the coffee. Some of the guests avoided the meat, others avoided the coffee, still others found excuses for avoiding both. Too late the reason for all this abstinence was discovered. Marianne, Margaret's sister, by mistake had used a certain pot to boil the meat in. Unfortunately, it was the same pot which Margaret had used in which to boil the coffee! When someone remarked that if the meat tasted like coffee, in compensation the coffee tasted like meat, that turned the mishap into a cause for general laughter.

When offered the customary pinch of snuff Margaret always declined. "Since I have to save my money to buy things for the boys," she would explain, "I can't afford such an expensive habit." On the other hand when a visiting bishop offered her a snuff box of some value she accepted it. "It will buy socks for our boys," she told the surprised donor.

In some instances, where she felt that it was only common courtesy to return certain visits to the houses of the well-to-do, she did so dressed in her peasant clothes and speaking her peasant dialect.

"They know me well, and they know who I am," she

would say. "They know I'm a poor woman so why pretend to be otherwise?" She was too strong a character to be awed by the rich or the powerful.

Once in the house, she would draw out of her basket a hare or a pheasant which Joseph had sent her, or a bunch of grapes or fresh fruit in season and offer these in sign of gratitude. But when one benefactor in return presented her with a large silk mantle to make a dress to replace the old one she was wearing Margaret would have none of it. Instead, appalled at the thought of wearing such an expensive item, she cut it up and used it to make waistcoats for the boys. She would never agree to wear or use for herself material of any value.

Despite her poverty, however, she was scrupulously honest. After having bought some sewing material, on the way home she began to count her change. To her surprise, she discovered that the store clerk had given her too much.

"Go back to the store," she told her companion, "and find out if there's been a mistake. Be sure to talk privately to the clerk so that the owner won't find out."

The girl returned to the store and the clerk, after checking, acknowledged the error.

"Who sent you back with the money?" he asked.

The girl told him who it was.

"Tell her I'm very grateful to her," he said, "not only for returning the money but even more for not telling my boss. If he'd found out I'd sure be in trouble! Tell her that the next time she comes she'll get the best of service!"

While she was at the store she might have thought of buying some material with which to make a new dress since the one she was wearing had grown so old and so threadbare that John tried to persuade her to change it.

"For heaven's sake, Mama," he protested one day, "you've been wearing that thing for years. Change it."

"You think it's time to get another?"

"Of course. That one's no longer decent. Even the street cleaners dress better than you do. When Count

Giriodi or the Marchioness Fassati come do you think you should receive them in that dress?" He had dropped the names hoping they might influence her.

"But how can I buy a new dress if I have no money?"

"Rather than see you run around in that thing we'll go without wine at table or whatever."

"If that's how it is, I suppose we'll have to spend the money."

"How much will a dress cost?"

"Twenty *lire.*"

Margaret took the money her son gave her and went back to her work. One day passed, followed by many more days and they all found her still wearing the same old dress.

John decided to approach her once again. "What happened to the new dress we had agreed on?"

"How can I buy a new dress if I have no money?"

"What do you mean, 'no money'? What about the money I gave you?"

"Oh that?" said Margaret. "Well you see . . . one of the boys had no shoes and I simply had to buy him a pair. What was left I spent buying a tie for one, socks for another. You know how it is." As always, in Margaret's eyes, a mother's concern should first be for her children.

"Very well, Mama," said John patiently. "Let's forget what happened to that money. But I must insist that you change that dress. People keep blaming me for letting you go around like that."

"If that's the case," Margaret agreed, "we'll have to do something about it."

"Here's another twenty *lire.* But this time no nonsense. I insist that you buy yourself another dress."

"Have no fear."

What Margaret meant, John finally learned, was that he need have no fear that she would spend a cent on herself while a single boy went in need. If he wanted her to have anything, he decided, not only would he have to buy it

for her, he would also have to make sure that she used it on herself.

When her son had his first two workshops going, even though in a very rudimentary way, he thought of starting a third, namely, a bookbinding shop. Actually, he was already in the process of putting up a separate building in which to house his printing presses but he was not one to wait too long for anything. Half in jest, as was his way at such times, he said to a boy named Governo, "You're going to be a bookbinder."

"You're kidding!" said the boy. "I never bound a book in my life!"

"You will have by the time I'm finished with you," said John. "See these sheets? You can start by folding them." He handed the boy the sheets of his new book entitled *Our Guardian Angels.*

When Margaret saw this she knew at once that she was about to witness the birth of a new enterprise. That was how he had started the shoemaking shop, that was how he had started the tailors shop and that was how he would start his bookbinding shop. Why wait for conditions to be better? If necessity was the mother of invention, then poverty was its godmother, she quoted to herself. To avoid further argument on the part of the boy she herself sat down beside him, helping to fold the sheets. Soon they had them ready for sewing. With some of her flour they made a thick paste and stuck the covers to the book. The pages had now to be trimmed.

Meanwhile the rest of the boys, seeing that something new and interesting was taking place, had crowded around the trio, offering suggestions. The big problem was how to trim the edges, so after listening to the suggestions of the boys about taking a knife, John shook his head, left them to go to the kitchen and returned seconds later brandishing a meat cleaver shaped like a half-moon which Margaret used for cutting her vegetables. The boys backed

away in mock terror, but John ignored them and went about the business of trimming the edges of the book.

"You can laugh your heads off," he told them. "But we need a bookbinding shop and we're going to get one."

"What about gilding the edges?" shouted someone.

"Good!" said John. "Any ideas, Mama?"

"You'll need gold leaf for that," she said.

"Since we haven't any gold leaf," said John, "let's tint them yellow, instead." He got hold of a little burnt umber but for a moment did not know how to apply it.

"Mix it with water," said one boy.

"No, it'll spread and ruin the pages," said another.

"How about a little cooking oil?" said Margaret.

"I know what I'll use," said John. He sent out for some varnish, mixed the umber with it and applied the result to the edges. It worked.

At this the boys sent up a cheer and John and Margaret joined in with the boys, laughing heartily at the success of their experiment.

17

A time to wonder

Ever since the neighbors had asked her, "What will become of such a child?", Margaret had felt that John was destined for something out of the ordinary and had always hoped to see the day when his gifts would receive recognition. He had developed into a priest dedicated to the young and the poor, and for that she was grateful. But there was still much about him that she could not fathom. While in one way he was as close to her as any son could be to his mother, in another he remained as distant and unknown to her as any stranger.

Although not inclined to listen to gossip, even when it centered around her son, she could not help overhearing remarks people passed about the powers he possessed. The most astonishing of these remarks came to her attention in, of all places, the fishmarket where she occasionally bought fish for the Oratory. She had scarcely begun to bargain when a woman approached her.

"Aren't you Margaret Bosco, the mother of that priest who runs the center?"

"I am."

"Then surely *you* can tell us what happened?"

"What happened when?"

Several other women, scenting something unusual, gathered around Margaret.

"When he went to see young Charles, of course."

"Where did it happen?"
"At his home at the White Mulberry Restaurant."
"Corner of Via del Carmine. Number 11."
"Where's that?"
"You don't know?"
Margaret shook her head.

Convinced that she must know all about it but did not want to talk, the women gave up on her and started to discuss the episode among themselves.

After that, if Margaret merely listened, she listened attentively enough to be able to piece together the full story.

When a fifteen-year-old boy named Charles who frequented the Oratory, it ran, fell sick the doctor told his mother to call a priest.

"Call Don Bosco," pleaded the boy.

But Don Bosco was out of town so the mother called the pastor who came and heard the boy's confession.

When Don Bosco returned to Turin and learnt what had happened, he at once set out for the boy's home.

"My little Charles kept asking for you before he went to heaven," said the mother in tears.

"Bring me to him."

The mother led him to the sickroom where he found the bed surrounded by relatives and friends, also in tears. The boy was dressed for burial, with the body sown into a sheet and the face covered with a white cloth.

"Leave us alone for a moment," Don Bosco appealed to the people in the room. "His mother and aunt may stay if they wish."

When the mourners had left, he closed the door and silence fell on the mourners as they wondered what was taking place inside the room.

When the door opened later, they poured in and what met their eyes dumbfounded them. Charles, who had been dead, was now so very much alive he was in the process of telling his mother and aunt how in his dream he had heard the voice of Don Bosco and had awakened to find

himself dressed for burial. Expressions of astonishment now broke out all over the room.

Don Bosco raised his hand for silence. "My good people," he said, "God has been kind to all of us today by showing us the importance of a good confession." He turned to the boy. "Charles, now that the gates of heaven are wide open for you would you rather go there or stay here on earth?"

The boy looked away for a moment and his eyes grew moist. An expectant hush fell on the room.

"I'd rather go to heaven," he said at last.

When he had said this, to the amazement of the onlookers, he leaned back, closed his eyes and settled once more into the stillness of death.

On returning to the Oratory, Margaret waited until late that evening for her son to come home from the city. As soon as he appeared she confronted him with the story.

"What's it all about, John?" she wanted to know.

John brushed aside the question. "Old wives tales," he said, as he made his way up the stairs. Halfway up, he turned. "Besides," he added, "who said the boy was dead? He may have only been asleep."*

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*This is one of the most discussed incidents in the life of Don Bosco. The discussion arose, however, only when historians wished to set down the details and that was long after the death of Don Bosco and of anyone who could have had direct knowledge of it. It seems they could find no solid evidence of the incident.

This could have been the result of several factors. Since it was a matter of confession, Don Bosco would have been obliged to change the names of the places and of the people concerned. Also, he was not anxious at that particular period of his life to draw to himself the attention of either the ecclesiastical or the civil authorities.

It was Don Bosco who provided what is perhaps the most convincing proof. When speaking of himself he was in the habit of using the third person. Then one day in 1882, he slipped into the first person, describing how he had gone to the boy's house, had called out his name, had heard his confession . . . Those who knew Don Bosco needed no further proof.

In that same year, 1849, John took all the boys—both boarders and dayboys, totalling close to six hundred—on the customary visit to the cemetery on the Sunday after All Saints Day, to pray for the Holy Souls. He told Margaret he had promised them that on their return he would give them something they loved, namely, a capful of cooked chestnuts. Margaret bought three sackfuls for this and other occasions, but thinking that her son needed only a portion of them for this time, cooked only one sackful.

When the visit to the cemetery was over and the boy came to collect them for distribution, he noticed the small quantity. "Is that all?" he asked.

"That's more than enough," said Margaret. "And don't forget the ladle."

With that the boy took away the chestnuts and Margaret could hear the commotion the others made when they saw them, since the distribution was taking place at the door of the church.

Suddenly she heard the boy who had come for the chestnuts cry out, "What are you doing, Don Bosco? There won't be nearly enough if you give them out like that!"

"Of course there will. My mother cooked three sackfuls."

"No, she didn't. She cooked only one."

Thinking that his mother had put aside the rest of the boiled chestnuts, John went upstairs to fetch them, only to discover that the boy was right.

"I promised the boys I'd give all of them chestnuts," he decided, "and I have to keep my word." With that he hurried downstairs again.

"Let's give everyone his share for as long as they last," he said. Taking up the ladle, he began distributing the chestnuts in the same generous measure as before. Although by now only three or four handfuls lay in the basket, so far not more than one third of the boys had

received their share. When these saw the almost empty basket their earlier cries of anticipation gave way to anxious silence.

At that moment they began to see something else. Each time John dipped the ladle into the basket he brought it up again so full that the chestnuts spilled over. Yet the quantity of chestnuts in the basket stayed the same until every one of the hundreds of boys who remained had received his share.

Once the boys understood what had taken place before their eyes, they could no longer withhold their applause. "Don Bosco is a saint!" they cried. "Don Bosco is a saint!"

Everyone at the Oratory, and that included Margaret, was slowly becoming convinced that some of the dreams of Don Bosco were revelations, for the simple reason that proofs of what he foretold were always present. One evening, she heard him describe to the boys the following dream:—

I was with you in the playground, delighted to see you so lively and happy, jumping, shouting and generally raising the roof. Suddenly one of you came out of the building wearing a top hat. This hat was transparent and lit from the inside and revealed the picture of a moon with the number 22 in its center. I was about to tell the boy to stop the nonsense when you lined up as usual as if the bell had rung. While everyone looked frightened, several of you went deathly pale. I passed in front of the pale ones for a closer look and among them I saw the boy with the top hat. He was even paler than the rest and a black cape like the ones they use at funerals hung from his shoulders. I was about to ask him what his strange dress meant when a dignified-looking stranger appeared.

"Know that this boy has only twenty-two moons to live," he announced. "Before these have passed, he will die. See that he is prepared!"

I wanted some explanation both of the stranger's sudden appearance and of his message, but he vanished.

I know who that boy is. He is right here among you.—

Since this was the first time he had ever so solemnly and so openly foretold the death of anyone in the Oratory, the boys grew frightened. Even Margaret grew concerned.

"Don't be afraid," he told them. "After all, this is only a dream. But one thing is certain—we must all hold ourselves ready, as Our Lord has warned us. Leave the boy in the dream to me. I'll see that he's taken care of."

As the days went by most of the boys forgot the dream, although John helped to remind them of it by asking some of them, "How many moons to go?" A few would guess the right number and others would try to draw from him the name of the boy in the dream.

One day in October of 1855 he called Cagliero to him. "You have charge of three small dormitories," he said. "In which one do you sleep?"

"I sleep in the last one from where I can keep an eye on the other two."

"You'd better move into the middle one."

"It's very damp," protested Cagliero. "And with winter coming on I could easily catch a cold. Besides, I can watch the other two rooms from where I am."

"I still think you'd better move into the middle room."

In mid-December a boy named Gurgo suffered such a severe attack of abdominal pains the doctor had to be called in, and after a week or so of treatment declared that Gurgo had had a close call. When Gurgo's father came to take him home Gurgo told him that he felt a strange craving for some meat and his father, thinking that it would help build up his strength, at once went out to buy some. Gurgo greedily ate the meat and drank the broth and then went to bed. Later that night, however, he awoke, crying from the pain. Cagliero ran to his bedside. "What's up, Gurgo?"

"Cagliero," gasped Gurgo, "I'm through teaching you the piano."

"Calm down," urged Cagliero and began to recite some prayers for him. In the meantime Cagliero fell asleep and was awakened to see the infirmarian pointing to Gurgo who, moments later, was dead.

Next day the boys gathered around Don Bosco and one of them asked him point-blank, "Was Gurgo the one you saw in the dream of the twenty-two moons?"

"He was," said Don Bosco. Then he turned to Cagliero. "And next time I ask you do to something, I hope you'll do it!" His voice softened somewhat as he went on. "If Gurgo were alive today he could tell you how often I spoke to him and in an indirect way prepared him for death."

"How do you know when someone is going to die?" Margaret asked him.

"Sometimes in a dream I see many paths in front of me and a boy running along each path. A ditch may cut across a path either near me, at half-way, or at a third of the way. This means that the boy will die at that period of his life. Other times I see on the path a series of numbers which tell me the year, the month, and even the day on which that boy will die."

That her son was a dreamer in more ways than one had been impressed on Margaret from the days when he had dreamt of the Lady who had promised to guide him. Other dreams had followed, many of which he had told to his boys in the *Good-nights*, either to hold their interest or to point up a moral. If she had received accounts of the consequences of many of these dreams only in a second-hand way, she was, instead, a witness to another series of no less remarkable events which were related to several dreams her son described in detail to the boys in one *Good-night* after another. He had also discussed them openly and at length with the members of his community. This, and the fact that they not only directly concerned

the Royal Family, but also presented a threat to her son's life, were reason enough why Margaret should have followed their unfolding with the closest attention. The background of the dreams, John had pointed out to her, lay in the political situation of the kingdom of Piedmont. Her son had warned everyone in the Oratory that powerful anticlerical forces were trying to pass a law to close the monasteries and convents and turn their possessions over to the state. This was of the greatest concern not only to the bishops and religious of Italy, but also to the Royal Family since they had always been devoted to the Church.

In the first of these dreams, she heard him tell the boys, he found himself walking under the portico of the Oratory when suddenly into the playground marched a page of the court dressed in a red uniform.

"An important announcement!" he cried.

When John asked him what the announcement was, he replied, "A state funeral at Court! A state funeral at Court!"

John then attempted to get some more information out of him but he disappeared.

"I wrote three letters this morning," he remarked at breakfast. "One to the Pope, one to the King and one to the hangman." She felt they already knew why he had written to the King. Still, no one had heard of any member of the Royal Family being ill.

A second dream took place five days later.

"This time I was sitting at my desk," he told the Oratory, "when all of a sudden I heard a clatter of horse's hoofs, the door of the room flung open and the same page entered carrying a large red book.

" 'An announcement!' he cried. 'Not a state funeral at Court, but state *funerals* at Court! State *funerals* at Court!' With that he disappeared."

The following morning John sent a second letter to the King in which he pointed out that if, despite his power of veto, he allowed the law to pass he was in great personal

danger and both he and his household would suffer. Nevertheless, the King made no attempt to stop the law from being passed. This was how things stood when tragedy interrupted parliamentary debate on the question. The Queen-mother suddenly fell ill and a few days later passed away.

As she was being placed in her coffin yet another letter was delivered to the King. "A person inspired from on high has warned you," it read. "Open your eyes! One is already dead. If the bill is passed other tragic events will take place in your family and this will be but a prelude to even greater sorrow. If you do not withdraw the bill, one misfortune after another will befall your family . . . "

The King was on a hunting expedition when he received the letter. "*Contacc!*" he exclaimed in Piedmontese, and decided to pay a visit to the home of this troublesome priest. A few days later, dressed in civilian clothes and in company with his aide, he rode up to the Oratory where the first one he met was the cleric Cagliero. On learning from him that Don Bosco was in chapel but would be tired from hearing confessions and preaching to his boys, he decided to come back another time. It so happened, however, that when he did so, Don Bosco just then was trying to meet a writing deadline, and, determined to get some privacy while he finished the work, had told the doorkeeper, "Even if the King himself were to come looking for me, you're to say I'm not at home!" When the King did come looking for him, the doorkeeper, obeying instructions, told him that Don Bosco was not at home!

The court had scarcely returned from paying its last respects to the Queen-mother, when it was immediately summoned to accompany Viaticum to her daughter-in-law. Queen Maria Adelaide had given birth to a son four days previously, but since she dearly loved her mother-in-law, she was stricken with such grief that her own life was in danger. Although crowds poured into the churches to pray for her recovery, a few days later, she, too, after receiving

the Last Rites, passed away.

Even so, the troubles of the King were not yet over. That very night, Viaticum was given also to Duke Ferdinand of Genoa, the King's only brother, before he died.

Margaret was stunned by the speed with which her son's prophecies had been fulfilled. "Your dreams have all come true," she said to him on their return from the cemetery. "I hope that's the end of it."

"The ways of God are difficult to understand," he answered. "And we don't know yet if divine justice has been satisfied."

Divine justice was not. The last of the funerals at Court was that of the child the Queen had borne.

18

And a time to fear

Everyone was in church that Sunday evening when the two men crept along the wall and crouched opposite the church window. Raising himself up on the shoulders of the other, one of them peered inside until he fixed his gaze on the figure clearly outlined in the window. Sliding out from under his cloak a long and slender object, he raised it to eye level, took aim and fired. The explosion echoed like a clap of thunder and rocked the building. That done, he quickly dropped to the ground, hid the weapon under his cloak and he and his companion scurried out of the Oratory and disappeared.

At the time, Don Bosco had been teaching catechism to the boys in the little room behind the altar, while in the body of the chapel the other classes were sending up the usual hum of noise.

After the shot, panic and confusion. No one knew what had happened. Although the boys near Don Bosco saw plaster spurt from the wall, at first they did not realize it had been caused by a bullet. When they did, they rushed up and surrounded him, anxious to find out if he was safe. Calmly raising his left arm, he pointed to two tiny holes in his soutane.

"It's merely somebody's idea of a joke," he remarked. "But they certainly made holes in my only soutane and damaged the wall!—Now that we've seen everything, let's

get back to our catechism!"

Although Margaret's life, for the most part, was confined to the Oratory, she saw and heard enough of what went on outside to know that her son was moving about in a world far different from her own. Turin was the gathering place of many forces which met in secret and were bent on changing the course of her country's history. Often these showed their hand in assassinations or uprisings, for this was one of the most violent periods in the history of Italy, when the people were about to take the final steps on the long and bloody road to independence.

There were times when John returned from the city a little too calm, a little too smiling. This meant that something was troubling him but he did not wish to show it. Whenever this happened she refrained from telling him of anything unpleasant which had occurred at the Oratory in his absence.

Little acquainted though she was with the details of her son's work outside the Oratory, or the interest certain powerful groups showed in that work, she soon learnt that it was becoming dangerous for him to walk the streets alone. When they made the above attempt on his life she was shocked to discover that he was not safe even within the walls of the Oratory!

Had she waited for him to tell her what had happened, she might never have found out. But when she wanted to know how the two holes had been bored in his soutane he was forced to tell her the truth. Only after he had finished did she fully grasp the enormity of it: the bullet had passed to within an inch of her son's heart! Unable to move for the moment, she put down the garment and the blood drained from her face when she realized how close he had been to death.

Besides the physical burdens laid on her by the growth of the Oratory, this other kind of burden was becoming increasingly difficult to bear. When her son had come to Valdocco, the authorities had considered him little more

than a bumbling country curate possessing a nimble pen and a talent for attracting youth, usually of the wrong kind. His influence had continued to grow, however, and with it, unfortunately, had grown the attention given him by those who for one reason or another, disagreed with what he wrote or did not like what he was doing. She had already seen copies of newspapers which delighted in attacking him, and scurrilous sheets which figured him in their cartoons and made him the butt of their jokes. People often reported to her the derogatory remarks bandied in the city cafés about him and the accusations made against him to the effect that he was an enemy of the Italian people and a friend of their oppressors.

During these times she had often to wait up for him until late, wondering if anything might have happened to him, or sit with him through the long hours, listening with her heart in her mouth and starting like a frightened rabbit at the least sound. How often, too, had she not wept at the insults thrown at him by his enemies and at times even by those who should have been his friends! Worried sick to see him over-tax himself and fearing that he might suffer another breakdown, how often had she not pleaded with him to slow down, even to rest, only to hear him repeat a favorite phrase, "I'll rest when the devil does!"

Such reckless disregard for his health often had her asking herself where one drew the line between dedication and foolhardiness. More than once since that Sunday when they had shot at him he had come home from the city visibly shaken. But all she could get out of him was that he had been waylaid. His growing reputation was costing him dear.

She was in the dormitories one afternoon cleaning up when she heard a commotion in the playground. Looking out the window she saw a man in his shirtsleeves brandishing a large kitchen knife and running wildly up and down the playground. She immediately recognized him as

Andreis, a half-wit whom her son had once befriended when he had lived at the Pinardi House. He now lived at the Bellezza boarding-house. Suddenly his attention was drawn to a group of boys who were standing near the gate talking to her son.

"Where's Don Bosco?" he cried. "Where is he? I'll kill him!"

The man's cries sent the boys scattering in all directions. Among them was a cleric wearing a soutane whom the madman mistook for her son and at once ran after him. This gave John time enough to rush up the stairs and close the iron gate leading to his rooms. Since the Oratory stood isolated in the midst of orchards and fields without the protection of any wall or fence, Margaret had taken the precaution of erecting this gate at the foot of the stairs. Moments later Andreis, having discovered his mistake, ran after him and stood clamoring at the gate.

In the meantime the boys had joined forces, armed themselves with whatever weapons they could find and were preparing to march on the intruder.

Fearing bloodshed, John called out to them, "Put down those weapons, boys! I don't want you to help me that way."

Wondering for a moment whether they should obey or not, the boys finally gave up their intention to attack the madman.

Margaret at once sent for the police. Because of the prevailing anticlerical mood, however, it was a full hour before two of them showed up. At the sight of them Andreis quickly calmed down, surrendered his knife and let himself be led out of the Oratory.

August 14, 1850, was another day she would long remember. John had just told her to prepare his supper as usual.

"What made you think I wouldn't?" she asked.

"I just wanted you to know that whatever happens I'll be here."

The next hour was one of the tensest Margaret had ever spent.

The affair had its origin in an incident involving a government minister named Santarossi. Because he had voted in favor of the law dispossessing religious of their property, he had incurred excommunication. When he fell ill and came to die he requested Extreme Unction. The priest, before giving him the Last Rites, asked him to recant. Santarossi refused; so did the priest. This gave the anticlericals the opening they were looking for. They attacked the Servite monastery to which the priest belonged and chased out the religious. Next it was the turn of the Archbishop for having defended the priest, and he was eventually taken to the fortress-prison of Fenestrelle, whose grim, gray walls merge so well with the rocks of the mountainside.

John also came under fire because he had written in defense of religious orders. The anticlericals planned to get rid of him and wreck the Oratory. Friends warned him that they would reach the Oratory that afternoon and that was why both he and Margaret sat waiting for their arrival. They never came and later Margaret found out why.

After having finished with the Servites they had set out for the Oratory.

Among the demonstrators, however, was a man whom her son had once befriended. This man now had second thoughts about attacking his former benefactor. On a sudden impulse, he jumped up on a cart.

"Listen to me, my friends!" he cried. "You want justice and you want to punish Don Bosco along with the others. But if you hear me out you won't go to the Oratory at all for you'll find nobody there but Don Bosco and his mother taking care of a few poor boys. Instead of shouting *against* Don Bosco, we should be shouting *for* him. He takes care of the sons of the people!"

Another stood up. "Don Bosco never was a friend

of our enemies," this one shouted above the din. "He's a man of the people. Let's go find our real enemies!"

These appeals were enough to steer the mob away from the Oratory. But it was a long time before Margaret could compose herself enough that night to fall asleep.

On another occasion two men came to plead with her son to visit their dying friend. Since Margaret neither liked their appearance nor the idea of her son's going out so late, she persuaded him at least to let some of the bigger boys accompany him.

"We'll be with you," the men objected. "Too many people in the sickroom isn't good."

When John, too, insisted they gave in and, followed by half-a-dozen stalwart apprentices, left for their destination.

Margaret learnt later that they had gone not to a house but to a tavern where John had made the boys wait outside while he took care of the sick man. According to the boys, something must have happened in that tavern for John had suddenly dashed out through the door with four husky individuals at his heels bent on making trouble.

Not long after the first sick call came a second, this one supposedly involving a man's wife who was dying and calling for the priest. Like the others, this man also objected to anyone accompanying her son. But Margaret again insisted that several of the bigger boys go along with him.

He was gone for about an hour when he returned with his head bloodied and his left thumb bound with a handkerchief.

"What on earth happened?" Margaret wanted to know.

"A little misunderstanding," was all he would say.

"He goes out in the dead of night," said Margaret, raising her eyes to heaven, "comes home covered with blood and he calls it a little misunderstanding!"

"Just another false alarm."

"And you slipped, fell on your head and stepped on your thumb."

To take her mind off such disturbing matters, two other events occurred at the Oratory betweentimes which, while they lasted, occupied all her attention and used up all her resources.

On the evening of December 1, 1852, she was about to retire when she was startled by a crash somewhere in the new dormitory. This shook the entire structure and was followed by a series of low, rumbling noises. Since as recently as November, part of the third floor of the same building had already crumbled, she concluded that another cave-in had occurred.

She ran toward the new wing and saw that what had actually happened was even worse than what she had imagined. Part of the southern wall had collapsed and the crash had shaken the old section to its foundations. Immediately she raised the alarm, warning the boys to leave the building. Since John slept in that section, he, too, was in serious danger.

Because of the urgent need of new dormitories and classrooms, John had ordered the building completed as soon as possible. When only the roof remained to be finished, for several days the rain had poured down softening the mortar between the bricks and in some places even washing it away. The bricks were thus left standing on top of one another with nothing holding them together but their weight. The boys who attended evening classes had, as usual, stayed behind to play, and unaware of the danger, had amused themselves by running up and down the ladders and across the scaffolding. During the night, the still further weakened wall had collapsed. Margaret did not like to dwell on what might have been the consequences had the wall collapsed while the boys were still at play.

She and John now set about calming the fears of the boys and restoring some kind of order. Soon they had everyone laughing at the odd way that each of them was

dressed, since, on hearing the noise, they had jumped out of bed and seized whatever clothing lay to hand. The boys spent the rest of the night in the sacristy, the dining room or wherever they could find a place to sleep.

All during the crisis Margaret showed great courage and concern for everyone but herself, moving fearlessly from one section of the building to another to guide them out of the danger zone. Since part of the old building might still collapse with the rest of the supporting wall, like a mother hen watching over her brood, she stayed on guard until everyone, even her son, had gone to bed.

When her son's life was in danger, Margaret, like any other mother, tried to stop him from taking unnecessary risks. There was one occasion, however, when she not only did not try to stop him, but even urged him on despite the danger. This was when the dreaded cholera struck the city. Of all the events in the life of the Oratory, this was one of the most dramatic.

Medical science was helpless; ignorance multiplied fears. People were convinced that the plague was being spread by the poisoned water doctors were giving those patients they considered beyond help or else it was being used by the *becchini*, or gravediggers, who were making money carting away the corpses. So terrified were people of the ravages of the plague they abandoned even those dear to them once these had been stricken, mothers even leaving their children by the roadside to die. Health officials had to break down doors to reach corpses left to rot inside houses and infect the neighborhood. Streets became deserted and the only sounds heard were the rumble of the death-carts or the barking of scavenging dogs. Huge lazarettos were hurriedly thown up where the stricken could at least be brought in off the streets.

When John was appointed chaplain to one of these lazarettos, Margaret took the precautions necessary to keep the plague from entering the Oratory. She cleaned the

house from top to bottom, reduced the number of beds to create more space in the dormitories, and saw to it that the boys got better food.

During all this time, John was content to leave the running of the household affairs to her for he was completely taken up with the care of the sick and the dying. In the parish alone where he worked whole families were wiped out and no less than eight hundred were stricken, five hundred dying within a single month!

Margaret, meanwhile, was continually being asked for sheets and blankets or articles of clothing, either to be torn up for bandages or to keep warm the bodies of the sick, since to allow them to grow cold meant certain death. Given the demand, however, it was not long before she was handing out whatever she could find in and around her kitchen, and that included even the tablecloths! When it seemed that there was nothing more to give, a call came in for a covering of some sort to save the life of a victim. For a moment she was at a loss. What else was left? Rushing to the church she seized all the articles of linen she could find, including albs and amices. When she came to the long white altarcloth, however, she hesitated, but only for an instant. This, too, she swept off the altar into the arms of the startled boy!

When Margaret heard the boys talk about a dog that had protected her son from some hoodlums, for the moment she had not connected it with these frequent attacks on her son's life. She had thought, instead, that the dog was some stray mongrel wandering about the streets. But when she came face to face with this dog for the first time it frightened her. Standing three feet high, it had long gray hair, a huge head and straight, pointed ears.

"What a fierce-looking beast!" was her reaction.

Nevertheless, *Grigio*, or Gray, as the boys named him, on at least two occasions, according to John's own account, did save her son's life.

One dark winter night he was coming home through the center of the city for greater safety, when he noticed two men following him. When he stopped, they stopped; when he walked faster, they lost no distance. He looked around for a house to escape into, but, guessing his intention, the men quickly closed in on him, threw a cloak over his head and stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth.

Don Bosco struggled fiercely, but, unable to free himself from the cloak, was thrown to the ground. When that happened, he later confessed, he gave himself up for lost.

Just then he heard a familiar growl, as out of the darkness his defender flung himself at the two men, knocking them off their feet and giving him time to free himself. The first of his attackers tried to rise with him, but before he could move, Grigio was standing over him, holding his dripping fangs close to his throat. An instant later Grigio was standing over the other man and he, too, stayed where he was, stiff with terror. Grigio backed away a few paces but his intentions were clear: one move from either of them and he would tear them to pieces.

"Call him off!" they pleaded. "Call him off before he kills us!"

"Down, Grigio! Down!" commanded Don Bosco.

Not only did Grigio escort her son on some of his most dangerous trips, he also prevented him from setting out on one. Don Bosco had forgotten to do something of importance in the city and, although it was very late, was preparing to go back. Margaret did all she could to stop him, but it was useless. Insisting that he simply had to go, he called for volunteers to accompany him.

At the gate of the Oratory, however, lay Grigio. This time, instead of rising and trotting by John's side, Grigio stiffened, his lips curled ominously and he let out a deep-throated growl.

"Don't you know me any more, Grigio?" John

touched the dog lightly with the toe of his boot and Grigio growled a second time. He tried to climb over him but the dog retreated and kept on growling, and when John tried to go around him, Grigio rose and blocked his path.

"That dog has more sense than you, John!" scolded Margaret. "I'd stay home if I were you."

Finally persuaded, John returned to his room. He had no sooner reached there than a man came running into the Oratory. "Don't let Don Bosco go out tonight!" he cried. "Three or four hoodlums are hiding in the old house at the end of the road and they've sworn to kill him as soon as he leaves the Oratory!"

"John," said Margaret one evening when for a moment they found themselves alone. "I want to know what's going on."

"What do you mean, Mama?"

"You know very well what I mean. You go out, don't tell anybody where you're going and you come home looking like you've been in the wars. They shoot at you; they attack you on the streets; they blacken your good name. There seems nothing they won't do to destroy you. I'm your mother, John, and I have a right to know who's doing all this to you and why. How do you think I feel when I see all these things happening to you but don't know the reasons for them?"

John rubbed his chin for a moment or two. "Very well, Mama," he said. "If you can sit still for ten minutes I'll tell you."

"I can sit still all right. Just start telling me what I want to know."

John held up three fingers. "The problem has three sides. The first is political, the second is religious and the third is social, that is, it concerns the living conditions of the people. Let's start with the political:—For years now the movement to unite all the states under one government with one capital and to get rid of these foreign armies

has been building so much pressure that it's ready to blow up. Behind the movement are many different groups and the leader of each group thinks he knows the best way to bring this about. They still have to drive out the foreigners, however, and to do that they're going to have to spill a lot of blood."

"But where do you come in? You're not a politician, you're not a soldier, you're a priest!"

"Be a little patient, Mama," pleaded John. "We'll come to that later.—To get the picture of the religious side you must remember that the Holy Father, besides being Pope, is also the ruler of the Papal States in the same way that King Victor Emmanuel is ruler of Piedmont. Since he feels it his duty to protect the Papal States for the Church, he's keeping out of the United Italy plan until the rights of the Church can be guaranteed. This means that while acting as the spiritual father of his people, at the same time he must act against those who would deprive the Church of its property and its rights."

"So if I wanted to unite the country I might have to go against the Pope?"

"Exactly. And I thought I was going to have it tough explaining all this to you!"

"John," protested Margaret, "your mother's not dumb!"

John laughed. "I didn't say that. But you have stated very clearly the problem many good Catholics face. They want a united Italy but they also want to stay with the Holy Father. On the other hand, there are some who under any circumstances would be against the Holy Father and these are doing all they can to confuse people. They exploit the situation by accusing the Pope of being against the people and for their oppressors.

"Lastly, the social part. Next time you go to Becchi if you look around you'll find that more and more people—especially young people—are moving out of the country into the cities. That's because more workshops

and more factories are being opened in the cities. They're making all the things you see every time you go to market. These factories need more and more workers and their employers pay them money for their work. That's what attracts people from the farms where the pay is too little, the hours too long and the work too hard."

"I've lived all my life on a farm," interrupted Margaret, "and I never thought the hours too long nor the work too hard. And neither did any of your brothers."

"People are different today," said John patiently. "Anyway, with all these flocking to the city, what happens? There aren't enough houses. That means they have to crowd together in rooms, boarding houses and hovels. Or else they sleep in hallways, empty buildings, park benches, on the streets or under bridges.—I think that explains everything." Once again he held up three fingers and ticked off the items. "The political side, the religious side and the social side." He was about to rise when Margaret placed her hand on his and stopped him.

"John," she said, "you may be very smart but you can't fool your mother."

"What do you mean?"

"So far you've been telling me all about what's going on around us but you haven't said a single word about where you come in. Yet that's the part I most want to hear."

"Very well. By now I'm almost certain that I know what God wants of me—to dedicate myself to souls but in a special way to the souls of poor and abandoned children. That's to be my life's work. To carry on this work I need everybody's help, but mostly the help of those in power. In the meantime, there's the question of the Holy Father and the truth. To do this I have to speak and write in their defense."

"But why all these attacks?"

"The first come from those in power who think that I'm working with the Holy See against a united Italy: the

second come from those who want me to stop speaking and writing in defense of the truth."

Margaret took both his hands in hers and pressed them. "Poor John!" she consoled him. "I'll pray that the Mother of God will always protect you. But how long can you keep this up?"

"The people in government are already half-convinced that I'm not planning a revolution, and the people who are trying to destroy the Church will soon find out that they're knocking their heads against the wall. When that happens they'll stop, too. That'll leave me free to do my real work." When he had said this John cupped his chin in his hands and stared past Margaret into space.

19

"We two must always be together"

Ten years ago, almost to the day, and blessed with the strong constitution enjoyed by the rest of her people, Margaret had come to the Oratory. She was now sixty-eight and had she stayed at home to pass the rest of her life in the healthy surroundings of the hills she loved she would have found the food solid and nourishing, the country air bracing and the moral atmosphere one in which she could enjoy peace of mind. Her only worries would have been those which are the lot of every grandmother who is idolized by her grandchildren. As a consequence of all this, she would have lived like many other members of her family to a ripe old age.

Then her son had put before her the challenge of working for the hundreds of poor boys he had taken under his wing. He had asked her to give up all this and go with him to the center he had opened for the poorest and the most abandoned victims of the city slums. She had accepted the challenge and had dedicated herself to them, hoping to lessen their misery, to offer them a better way of life, and in this way help them save their souls.

But in coming to the Oratory she had also had to accept many things that would work against her. The food would be neither regular nor substantial, but uncertain and poor in quality; the ground she would walk on would not be the soft earth covered with plants and flowers,

but a broken landscape littered with refuse and strewn with filth. The air she would breath would not be the pure air of the hills but would, instead, be city smog filled with the fetid odors of the slums and the moral atmosphere would be as unwholesome as the air. On the top of all this she would suffer with her son all his trials, setbacks and disappointments, and be pushed to the verge of being crushed by opposition and adversity, when everything they had done would seem to have been in vain and ready to come tumbling about their ears.

All this her great spirit had borne with an equanimity not found in the ordinary woman. But Margaret was not an ordinary woman.

The spirit and the flesh work according to different laws, however. With Margaret, if adversity had further strengthened her strong spirit, at the same time unfavorable conditions had worked against her peasant constitution and had weakened her to such an extent that she presented an easy prey to the sicknesses which during winter lurk in the foul corners of the slums. Around the middle of November, 1856, when the climate of Turin is at its worst, damp, cold and unhealthy, Margaret fell ill. Years of hard work and a life of extreme poverty had exhausted her to the point where a sudden attack of pneumonia drove her to her bed. This attack was so sudden and so severe that she had to drop the work she was then doing, namely, knitting a pair of cotton socks for the boys.*

Dr. Celso Bellingeri, the Oratory doctor, was called in and after he had examined her he came away looking worried.

"How is she?" asked John.

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*How appropriate that the last effort of Margaret should have been on behalf of the boys! These unfinished socks and her knitting needles can still be seen in the Don Bosco Museum at the Oratory. No more fitting souvenir could have been preserved in her memory.

"I'm afraid it's serious. Such a violent attack at her age . . . " He shook his head. "But let's not give up hope so quickly."

"I'm sure you'll do all you can for her."

This the doctor undoubtedly did, since, after Don Bosco, she was the Oratory's most beloved person. Nevertheless, despite his care and after offering some hope of recovery for a day or two, Margaret rapidly declined until her illness finally reached the stage where both John and he decided that they would have to face the inevitable. When Father Borel, her confessor, was called in and Viaticum brought to her room, everyone knew the end was near.

The appearance at her bedside of Joseph, two of Margaret's grown grandsons, her sister Marianne, and her friend Joan Mary Rua, who also helped her at the Oratory, convinced Margaret, too, that she had not long to live. Seeing this, she called John to her side, for she wished to speak to him in private.

"What I am about to say to you now," she told him, "I would say in the confessional. Have great confidence in those who work with you but only in those things that you know are for the greater glory of God. So many work solely for their own profit! I have to go and leave my work at the Oratory in the hands of others. It's a big change but the Madonna will not fail you. Look for neither elegance nor show, but only for the glory of God. Let poverty be the foundation of everything you do. Too many say they love poverty but leave others to practice it. The best of lessons is doing first what you ask of others."

She told him many other things of which he was unaware, surprising him by her knowledge of what went on inside the Oratory.

She now turned to Joseph. Her relations with Joseph had always been warm. From the time when John had left to study, she had stayed with Joseph, either at Sussam-

brino where he had worked a share-cropping contract, or at Becchi when he had built himself a new and larger house. Unlike the once-truculent Anthony and the stubborn John, Joseph, even as a child, had always been of a pleasant, amenable disposition. He had always remained greatly attached to her and like his two brothers could be considered a triumph of what one might call her "system" of education. While John was studying at Chieri, how often had not Joseph gone from door to door to beg for him so that he could carry on his studies! When John had opened his Oratory, Joseph, aware that his brother lived in great straits, had done what he could to help him. He had made a practice of coming to the Oratory every fall, bringing with him a cartload of nuts, grapes, wheat or potatoes to feed the boys.

"I must leave you and your family," she told him. "I've always done what I could for you and everyone has tried to work with me. Take good care of your children. I hope they follow the state to which God has called them—unless they want to enter the priesthood or the religious life. They may be only farmers but they'll earn their living honestly. If they look for more they may spend recklessly what they have earned by the sweat of their brow. Think well on what I have told you and it will guide you in other things I'm too weak to discuss. Do all you can for the Oratory. May God bless you and make you happy for the rest of your days."

Commending her soul to God and asking for everyone's prayers, she turned once again to John. "There was a time when I helped you receive the Sacraments," she reminded him. "Now it's your turn to help me. Let's recite together the prayers for the dying."

As Margaret lay dying, in spite of the pain her breathing caused her, her thoughts drifted slowly back through the years until she saw a young girl standing on the Hill of the Goats, looking out across the valley at the glorious panorama autumn had spread before her. How she loved

those hills and those valleys! . . . She saw a platoon of soldiers and a picture of herself standing alone and defiant in front of them and even now marvelled at her own courage. How dearly they could have made her pay for her audacity! . . . Now she was singing along with the other girls as they plucked the bunches off the vines . . . Papa and his short pants! How he had insisted on taking care of the wine all by himself! She had never imagined that the vintage and all those happy days could ever end . . . Suddenly she was married . . . Francis calm and smiling. Good and gentle and strong and kind. His death so uncalled for and so swift she had wanted to die with him. Now she could see in that as in so many other things the finger of God . . . Had Francis lived John would have become a successful farmer and nothing more. With all those gifts and talents? . . . She remembered the hard times, the hungry times . . .

Another seizure made her gasp for breath which increased the pain.

John had been not only her pride and joy but her greatest cause for anxiety. What an extraordinary child! . . . They had always been so close yet there was much about him that not even she could understand. Such complete dedication to the children of the poor . . . "Mama, but this one is special." Once they had been so full they had put one child up in the bell-tower. For him they were all special because they all had souls to save . . . How he had transformed these waifs and orphans into one big family. . . And the plans he had! How could he carry out even one tenth of them? On the other hand, what could he not accomplish? . . . Then there was that other side of him. Miracles, seeing into the future, dreaming about people and events . . . How could a son of hers do all those wonderful things? . . .

When she was gone who would take care of him? He was so careless about his health. And who would take care of the boys? . . . But why should she worry? He would be

the first to tell her that God would provide. God always had; God always would.

"All my sons," she murmured, and despite the pain, the thought drew a smile to her lips. They had not been easy to raise. But now she saw—oh, so clearly!—how everything she had suffered for them had been well worth while. With that thought to console her she would die happy . . .

As the evening of the twenty-fourth wore on, Margaret, assisted by her two sons, awaited the end. Joseph had more control over his emotions for John could not hold back his tears. At one particular moment she turned to John, and her eyes filled with affection.

"God alone knows how much I have loved you," she told him. "I hope to love you even more in the life to come. My conscience is clear for I did my duty in the best way I could. At times I may have seemed too severe, but that was because my duty left me no other way. Tell my children that I have loved them with a mother's love. Tell them to pray for me and to receive Communion for me."

At this point she and John became so moved that neither could speak. It now became obvious to her that John was suffering intensely. This she could not bear.

"Leave me, son!" she pleaded. "You're in great pain on my account. That only makes it harder. Go to your room. Pray for me."

When he hesitated, she insisted. "You suffer. You make me suffer. Leave me. We'll see each other in heaven."

Still in tears, he left her and went to his room. But he could neither sleep nor rest. Three times he tried to light the lamp in his room and three times it went out.

When he did succeed in lighting it, to his astonishment he saw that the picture of his mother hanging beside his bed had its face turned to the wall. Certain that he had not done it, and unable to imagine anyone else doing it, he concluded that it could only mean that his mother would

soon be called to eternity. He returned at once to her room.

When Margaret became aware of his presence she again signaled him to leave but he would not.

"This will be too much for you," she warned.

"No son should leave his mother at a time like this," was his response.

"You won't be able to stand it." Her breath now came in painful gasps. "I'm asking you this one favor. It's the last I'll ever ask. Leave me. When you suffer you double my pain. Leave me. Pray for me. That's all I ask. Good-bye, John."

When John left, the pains tightened around her chest making her close her eyes. Outside sounds grew fainter and once again she began to hear other sounds and see other people in other times and places. But the images were disordered, wandering back and forth, and interrupted by sharp jabs in the chest so intense that they caused her to black out. Her attempts to breathe now shot excruciating pain into every corner of her body . . . Was this what Francis had suffered before he died? . . . The pains and the loss of air made her head spin so that she could no longer think . . . Was she going to faint? Or was she going to die? . . . She felt everything slipping away from her, forcing her to admit that this might be the end. She tried to pray but could not. She could only hope that God might not judge her too harshly for all the sins . . . that Mary might . . . come . . . to . . . her . . . aid . . . A final seizure pressed the life out of her body and she gave one last, painfilled gasp.

John wept and prayed in his room until at three o'clock in the morning he heard his brother's footsteps and went to the door. The two men looked in silence at each other for a moment, then broke down and embraced. After that he hurried out in that raw, cold morning to the Consolata, the church his mother loved, to say Mass for the repose of her soul. Mass over, he remained a long time in prayer

before the statue of Our Lady of Consolation.

If Margaret had insisted on the practice of poverty for her son and for the people who worked with him, those who took care of the funeral arrangements found proof that she had practiced what she had preached. When her friends asked John for some article of her clothing to keep as mementos, he could find nothing to give them. She had only one dress and they needed that to clothe her body for burial. In the pocket of this dress he found still intact the money he had given her to buy a decent bonnet.

The funeral held on November 27, 1856, was that of a poor woman. That was how she had wanted it. "I was born poor," she had said. "I have lived poor and I wish to die poor." John, too, did not want to offer any grounds for criticism by giving his mother special treatment. Besides, that was the way in which his own Salesians were buried. Poverty had always been the keynote of their lives. They had been born poor, they had lived poor, they had worked for and with the poor; they were surrounded by the poor and they labored in the poorest quarters of the city. The funeral expenses were paid for by one Dominic Groppi, a friend of the Oratory. Solemn Mass was celebrated at the Oratory and the boys, as she had requested, offered Holy Communion for the repose of her soul. After Mass, to the music of the Oratory band, they escorted the coffin to the parish church, and from there the cortege made its way to *Cimitero Generale*, the city cemetery, where the remains were laid among the lowly, in grave number 117, row 31.

After the funeral John felt so broken in spirit that to recover he had to spend some time at the home of a friend.

His love for his mother lasted long after her death. He often spoke of her, was fond of telling stories of her life and of her piety and encouraged Father Lemoyne, his own biographer, to write her life so that her example might encourage other women. He also told Father Lemoyne that he had seen her several times in his dreams, one of which occurred in August, 1860. In this dream he

was on his way to the Oratory when he met his mother near the Consolata.

"Is it really you?" he asked. "But aren't you dead?

"I died yet I am alive."

"Are you happy?"

"Very happy."

He asked her if she had gone straight to heaven when she had died. She told him, "No." He gave the names of several boys and asked her if they had gone to heaven. She told him, "Yes."

"What is it you enjoy in heaven?"

"That I can't explain."

"At least you can give me some idea of the happiness you enjoy."

At this his mother's whole person grew radiant and she appeared to be dressed in a magnificent robe. With the sound of a choir in the background, she sang with such sweetness it moved him so intensely he could not ask her anything more.

When she had finished singing, before she disappeared she said to him, "I shall wait for you. You and I must always be together."

John-Baptist Lemoyne, the biographer of Don Bosco, arrived at the Oratory eight years after the death of Margaret. Nevertheless, he found her still very much in the minds of all those with whom she had come in contact. They described her as "the queen of mothers." He began to collect material on her life at the same time that he was collecting material on the life of her son. On June 24, 1885, on the feast of Saint John Baptist, when the Oratory was accustomed to honor Don Bosco, they presented him with a portrait of his mother done by the artist Rollini. This portrait still hangs in his room at the Oratory. It was during this moment of high emotion that Lemoyne decided that on a similar occasion he would present his idol with another portrait of his mother, this one done in words.

He set to work at once, correlating the material he had already collected, the accounts he had gathered from those who had known Margaret intimately, from the records of the Oratory, and from the lips of Don Bosco himself during the long talks he had with him when sickness had confined him to his room. At the urging of friends of Margaret and at the insistence of Don Bosco that he drop whatever else he was doing, he finished the book on June 23, 1886, eve of the feast of Saint John Baptist.

When the moment came during the entertainment for Lemoyne to present it, Don Bosco's eyes brimmed with tears. For the rest of his life he kept the book on his desk and, when his eyesight would permit, read from its pages. He approved of what Lemoyne had written about her and sent a copy of her life to his best benefactors. His conclusion after having read and meditated on her life: "My mother was a saint."

Having sought no recognition in life it seemed unlikely that she would receive any after death, buried as she was among the poor and the forgotten. Her remains were not to be allowed to rest even in that humble spot. In 1876 they were taken up again and placed with the remains of hundreds of other poor in a common mound under the monumental cross at the entrance to the cemetery, overshadowed by the tombs of the great. These, however, have long since been forgotten, but unlike them the name of Mama Margaret has not. Instead, in nearly every corner of the globe can be found a guild or a group who, having been inspired by her example, have chosen her as patron.

For the seed which she had helped her son plant in Valdocco, the seed which she had so often watered by her tears and nourished by her labors during its most crucial years, in time grew into a mighty oak whose branches spread across the world offering shelter to countless thousands of poor and abandoned children and of those who stand in need. As a name carved on the bark of a

sapling grows with the growth of the tree, in like manner, with the growth of her son's fame grew the fame of his humble, self-sacrificing and self-effacing mother. As a result, today, wherever the name of Don Bosco is honored, honored with it is the name of Mama Margaret.*

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*A white marble plaque now marks the house where Margaret was born. It reads: *In this house on April 1, 1788, was born Margaret Occhiena, the most pious mother of Venerable Don Bosco.*

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