

XIII

The Shrine of St John Bosco

By Philip Tilden

At intervals, and with astonishment more keen than words can tell, I have been jolted back from the physical side of living to the spiritual; and never more than now, when memory brings back the figure of little Father Tozzi, the Father Provincial of the Salesian Order. With what understanding and quiet resignation has he sat by my elbow or walked in the great avenues at Shrigley, near Macclesfield, for many an hour, leading his own life, carrying his own convictions along with him, trying to give me 'faith'.

'But Father,' I would say, 'I already have faith.'

He would nod his head and smile quietly, digging his cold hands further into the black tumultuousness of his sleeves, saying, 'It is well'.

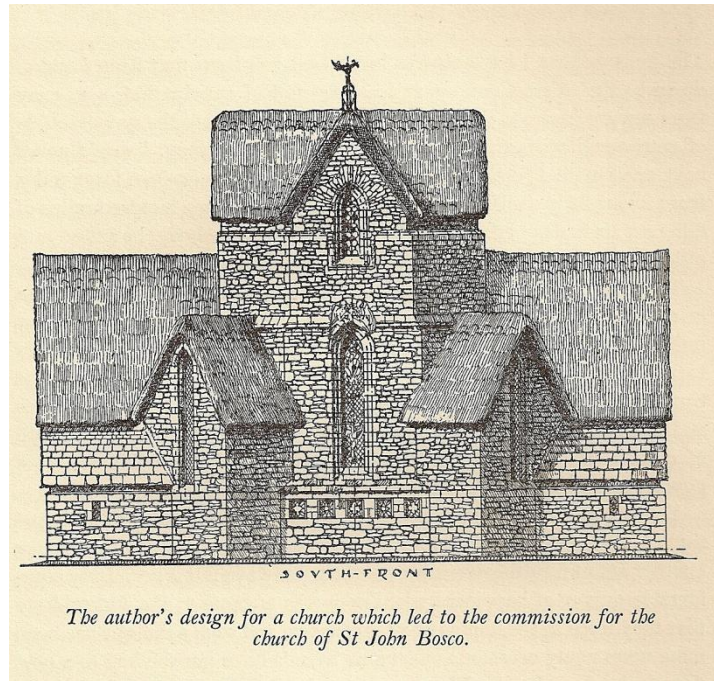
But it never was well, for my faith took me miles into skies uncharted, across worlds of beauty and glory to scenes of unimagined splendour. My faith never took me on my knees across cold marble floors to the bottom step of some altar. There are no possibilities of such physical abasement in me. I would it could have been so, for my journeys and pilgrimages were more irksome and tiring to body and soul than a million Stations of the Cross. Day after day we would start to go our unearthly journey together, but before we had left the shadow of the trees our ways had parted.

In my scientific home, where my austere father taught me to believe in what I could see, or touch, or test, or prove, there were no excursions into the infinite save when he followed the trail into higher mathematics, where I could not follow him; and consequently, when I loosened my small fingers from his great hand, I felt lost at first. I did not read the signposts, and did not realize that there was a world of infinity over the hill into which he never went. Indeed, had he realized the depth of my adventurous spirit, he would have warned me of the inadvisability of surmise without the possibility of factual proof.

I was seventeen years old when my fingers relinquished their hold on his grasp, and from that time, at the dawn of a new century, every journey of my mind has skipped over the realities of the scientific world, which, I had been taught, were the very rocks of existence, into a realm where men can go astray.

But now I have picked the flowers in that other realm; I have known the grandeur of its beauties and the depths of its chasms, and I have been through the phase of considering the everlasting flowers of religion further removed from the love of God than the wild ones that are apt to fade and die and shrivel up. Father Tozzi used to say to me that God must love me very much for me to have been given so much adversity, for trials and adversity both my wife and I have had in full measure: and yet we live, and I feel constrained to write and remember the lovelinesses rather than the sadnesses. There seems to be an incurable optimism in man, and even in architects, for I have always found that a designer in the still small hours, when he wishes to give rein to his fancy, or indulge in designing for his own sweet pleasure, will design a cathedral.

I never went far in that myself, but I made a little drawing of what I considered to be the perfect solution to the planning of a small church for some village or townlet. It became like a *'couveuse'* with her little chickens poking their heads out from under her warm wings. So did my little huddled church look like a sitting hen, with its chapels tucked around her, each separate in their lives yet attached to the living body by protective mother-love.



Father Tozzi whipped away the plan from me, and in a few weeks I was confronted with the task of designing the new Shrine dedicated to St John Bosco, for the Salesian Order, at Shrigley. This was to be placed on the top of a hill, amidst the verdure of immense trees, and to gaze across the flat plain towards Manchester, sixteen miles away.

There were many days that were auspicious on that wonderful site, before a sod was cut or a stone was laid, and when I first visualized its form and qualities.

There was the day when the Father Rector and a few boys with spades went out in the biting wind to cut the first gash in the sleeping hillside. There were weeks when boys were wheeling barrows of earth and tipping it in all directions - very difficult to supervise. There were weeks when the fathers, brothers and boys hacked and delved and wheeled, each feeling and knowing that he was helping to create something that might live for centuries. I have no doubt that had 'time' been of as little importance as most things, the fathers, brothers and boys would have built the church themselves. But that was not to be, and the professional touch was brought in to raise the walls and crown them high with roofs.

There was a drenching day of a great procession when the Bishop of Shrewsbury laid the foundation stone, all in the glory of vestments covered up by umbrellas and coats and mackintoshes. There was the day, when the old quarry was opened up, the loose stone removed for road metal, and new slices and blocks of hard, virgin rock sheered off and worked by the cunning hands of a few men, a few bars and a few chisels. From that time on, day in day out, one could hear the tap-tapping of metal against stone deep down in the gulf of that quarry, and bit by bit the stones changed from meaningless lumps into things of quality and shape. And bit by bit the walls rose from the flat raft that sat the hill amongst the gigantic rhododendrons and sinuous snake-skin beeches.

Never in my life have I experienced such warmth of spirit as at Shrigley, where I was welcomed with smiles and hospitality on every visit; but never in my life have I been colder in body, for the wind cuts clean across the Derbyshire Fells, and the Salesian life is a hard one. I was indeed favoured by being given a bedroom with a hot pipe running through it, and many a time when I had unfrozen one end of my body, I had to reverse myself to get warm at the other end, consoling myself all the time that not one other of the whole Order had such a thing as this lovely hot pipe.

The great block of a house, not much more than a hundred years old, yet possessing in some measure the traditionalism of the classical houses of earlier years, stands high on the hillside, looking out between its trees and smaller hills across at the teeming plain of industrialism. Below the house lies a lake, and behind the house, walled gardens, then stables, then fields with gaunt trees upon the skyline, ending in the interminability of imagined moorland.

Something of appreciation of the religious life of the Salesians grew gradually within me during these years, as I viewed, first from without, and then more from within, the great unselfishness of their lives; and as I watched these boys from Ireland, Scotland and the North of England, I, who expected possibly to see some shrinking from the future in the faces of young human beings, saw an even greater happiness, not of resignation but acceptance. The Reverend Father Hall became my friend and adviser in many problems; his wisdom became my mentor, his humour became my entertainment, and his faith became, in great measure, my faith.

As the walls grew higher and at length domed in with mighty vaults, enclosing the air of God's country within the voids of my imagination, so, in my own mind, I seemed to feel myself involved in some great miracle of rebirth. Never in the whole course of my life have I experienced a greater spiritual satisfaction than when I perceived that what I had created on paper was becoming, and had indeed by Divine Providence become, a shrine.

I had a stiff fight with the Italian element in the Order over the structure itself, for it has always been the habit of the Italians to slab their buildings with facade decoration, partly owing to their use of indigenous marble, and partly owing to their basilican planning that seems inherent in the Italian blood. One sees it everywhere in Italy - that long nave, in most cases showing obvious functionalistic design, built of mere brick or any material to hand, and then before it an absolutely unrelated facade of glorified portal and window, almost childishly naive in its application. But here in this stony country I had magnificent building stone, mouse-grey and tinged with soft blue and green, and in my Shrine I was able to leave the walls externally, and in great measure internally, sheer cliffs of hand-tooled rock. Thus can I leave them to the mercy of time, which decorates in our climate with a surer touch than any hand of man.

The great day of opening, Sunday, July 24, 1938, will ever remain clear in my mind, for it was the culmination of years of thought, and of hours of anxious preparation.

The evening before, farewell had been said to the old building that had been used as a chapel until that day. Its foundation stone had been laid by the Cardinal Archbishop of Poland years before; and thus history is made, for he was to bear the horrors of hell in his native country, and to stand as a pillar of faith amidst the fire and blast of war during the years of invasion and occupation by the Germans, and his name inscribed upon the stone will surely mean much to future generations.

Late in the evening light old Archbishop Guerra, who had spent much of his working life in Cuba, blessed the new church; he took such trouble to flick the holy water on to every corner, and into the most unexpected places. Such settled benignity I had never experienced before, and Shrigley became an oasis, as compared with the hubbub of the outside world.

Sunday broke calm and fine, presaging a day of gentle changes from cloud to fitful sun. From early morning on that day, the long drive that wound over the highland and dipped suddenly past the quarry entrance on to the hidden main road, was grouped with slow-moving people, young and old alike whilst now and again they made way for buses and motor cars crowded with folk from farther afield. There were meetings of old and new friends, and indeed of the great and little folk. But all barriers were broken down in the lives of these self-sacrificing souls, nearly every one of whom had given of his utmost to build the church,

which now seemed to stand as yet untenanted amongst its trees, very substantial, settled in its look, and awaiting the kindling of its awareness to spiritual life.

Thousands flocked into her open doors, at the head of the terraced steps that mounted to the west front, to witness the great pontifical High Mass. Here were the old words murmured that are common to all the corners of the earth, and the brilliance of scarlet, purple, gold, and white moved ever-changing against the cliff-like walls of stone.

As I sat there, I stared about me wondering. The shafts of light from the high windows fifty feet above shot down upon a vast multitude, and I seemed to feel the infiltration of spiritual power along the light beams. Hidden music and pageantry each have their part to play in the preparation of men's minds for the access of the infinite, and I know that architecture plays its part too in preparing the senses for that same access.

One picture seemed to follow another from early morning until late at night, and one that could have been perpetuated by some artist was the procession of relics through those dramatic parklands of hill and dale, verdure and lake, avenue and heath, accompanied by hundreds and hundreds of pilgrims to this Shrine of St John Bosco. I stood with Alf Byrne, the Lord Mayor of Dublin, upon the steps that fell from the west entry, and watched this slow-moving living leviathan of mankind pass behind the trees and emerge again, climbing along steep paths, dropping down to the water edge to disappear below the green terraces before the house, and to emerge suddenly and dramatically almost at our feet.

The ensuing days brought an anti-climax, but it was one of vigour, work, discussion and happiness, for the old Archbishop stayed on long after the others had gone, and he, I know, was entirely satisfied to do so, although, many of the boys had gone and left Shrigley very empty. 'I like very well the cage,' he said to me, whilst he was having his hair cut by a lay brother, 'but I like still more the cage when the birds are in it.'

I have said little of what I did myself at Shrigley, but I take the opportunity of correcting that now; for I spent many hours by night and by day painting the Stations of the Cross upon aluminium sheets which were framed and inset in the walls of the church. They were painted isochromatically in a sanguine red, and seemed in their final positions like reliefs in red stone against the greyness of the walls. I also painted, I fear unworthily, the picture of St John Bosco to be placed above his own altar. It had to be done. There was no one else to do it. May he forgive me for my weaknesses and shortcomings!

Father Hall rigged up a forge in the blacksmith's shop up above the walled gardens, and here we made the scrolled ironwork for the altar rails and the heavy hinges for the doors. I designed all the candlesticks and reliquaries, and the rhodian finish, like dull silver, showed on every altar.

I do not think that even the most meticulous of diarists cares to air his religious heritage, be his convictions never so strong, especially if he feels that he may wound the susceptibilities of his nearest and dearest. I have always taken these things seriously, for I know from experience how far men's religious convictions are part and parcel of their make-up. I remember years ago an all-night yarning with some of my Russian friends upon belief, agnosticism and religious faith, and, with the first streak of dawn, the youngest member of the group saying to the sleepy circle round him, 'Yes, I go a long way with you - I believe in hygiene, and all that'. But I do not think that I have ever been shocked by men's attitudes towards other men's beliefs, and in the early days I read *The Way of all Flesh* with undiluted delight until the book was torn from my hands by a very dear old lady and thrust upon the flames. It was a nuisance, for I had to buy another copy. But I have found that other men are profoundly shocked by many things which would have run off me like water off a duck's back. My home life in the early years brought me into touch with none who, even in that late Victorian era, might have been expected to blush with shame at a moulting hen, for it was a scientific and educational world, and the only shocks that my father, together with his friends, Sir William Ramsay, Sir William Crookes, Lord Kelvin, Professor Huxley and a hundred others, ever expected or received were the physical shocks from

experimenting. True, my father was once profoundly shocked by a French newspaper cartoon of Queen Victoria and President Loubet; nevertheless he kept it, for I have just found it tucked away in an album.

Now, in these years of the late 'twenties to the late 'thirties, I was introduced to this other religious world governed from Rome: firstly by my secretary, Alfonso Crivelli, who made my interests his own, in spite of feeling that he was serving the damned; and secondly by a very extraordinary man, Maundy Gregory, who, from interest, grew suddenly to notoriety.

Maundy Gregory must have suffered much, for he felt deeply. He was a strange man. I used to think that he could not exist without his mysterious surroundings, his silent secretary, his ticking taxis, his secret interviews, and his contacts with some of the best-known figures of our time; there were signed photographs of the Holy Father, unknown friendships, and almost subterranean ways. But I remember among much else the quietude of his St Johns Wood garden, and the brilliance of his luncheons, and I shall always be grateful for the vast sense of stimulation that he gave me, for jerking me out of the rut of pessimism at a most difficult and sad time, and for introducing me to a new world of which I had never dreamed.

He seems, even now, at this distance of time and space, almost to be within the room. I can hear his insinuating voice, his miraculous way of suddenly appearing from behind dark curtains, his brilliant, very dark, short-sighted, brown eyes; and I can still hear his arguments, be infinitely amused at his profession of snobbishness, and understand the waste by the loss of such a brain to the country. Had providence but given him a key to lock up one corner of himself and keep it eternally shut from use, he might have been a great man and done much. As it was, he imagined that he could move mountains by faith, for he certainly had not got the tools or labour to do so. He was not above amalgamating two countries, knocking down Presidents and putting up new ones to suit his whim, and the last thing that he tried to get me to do was to go and see Trotzky when he was living in a villa in the Rhone valley. I went to Shrigley instead, took my place at the long refectory table, and attended Mass.

I cannot reiterate the story of Maundy Gregory's troubles and difficulties. It would be unfair to him, and in a measure, unfair to myself; but I can state that I was with him constantly at the supreme crisis of his life. I was in a position to study his attitude and every look, and if I was convinced at times that he was unwise, yet I remain equally convinced that he was merely unwise. He had lost perspective, and in losing perspective a man may run his head against a wall, or even mistake his enemies for friends. Be all this as it may, he taught me much about the Roman Catholic world in the larger sense of religious or church politics, and his colourful personality fitted well at that time between the more sober habits of the fathers and brothers whom I met.

And then, after 1934, the world began to change; there was the distant rumbling of thunder, or was it guns? New names arose on every man's tongue, and old ones were shouted louder. At home, both my wife and I felt this, more particularly as we were bombarded by such a cataclysmal series of difficulties as seldom falls on men and women without entirely disintegrating their very souls and bodies. And so, like the poets, we shed our London skins and concentrated our efforts, our life, our possessions and our minds upon the great lonely stretch of Devon where we lived.

