

VALENTINE
OR THE HINDERED VOCATION.
A CONTEMPORARY EPISODE.
Related by the Priest JOHN BOSCO.
TURIN, 1866.

The following narrative, that of a lamentable history which really happened, was written by Saint John Bosco in the form of a short novel, to serve as a caution to young people and their parents on the danger of the miserable pleasures, honours and riches of the present life, which easily lead to eternal ruin, and the wonder and joy of living in holiness fulfilling God's Will to assure eternal salvation for ourselves and for countless other souls.

CHAPTER I.

The mother of the family.

I have undertaken to write a true history but, as it refers in part to people living, I think it best to keep silence regarding the names of the individuals and places referred to. There were two parents of quite mature age who had just one son called Valentine, the sole heir to their considerable possessions. His mother, a good Christian, was determined to give her son a solid education. She herself taught him for many years. From his very early years she taught him prayers, the short catechism together with the first elements of reading and writing. Well educated by study and experience, one of her greatest concerns was to keep her son away from idleness and undesirables. "Dear Valentine, she used to tell him, never forget that idleness is the mother of all vices, and that bad companions cause their own ruin and that of those who join them: Woe to you if you let yourself be dominated by these two deadly enemies." The good mother had some difficulties in the person of her husband. Osnero, her husband's name, was a man full of courtesy and honesty, who did good to those he could, and harmed no one. But a key error dominated his mind. He imagined he could reduce his son to becoming a virtuous and honest citizen without first making a good Christian of him. "Dear Valentine – he sometimes told him – be good and you will always be loved and honoured by everyone. Honour, esteem, a good name must never be forgotten in this world."

At his tender age, Valentine did not pay much attention to his father's warnings. To correct and ennoble her husband's teachings, his virtuous mother often repeated to Valentine:

"My son, remember that God sees everything. He blesses virtuous youths in the present life and rewards them in eternity. On the contrary He curses the wicked, shortens their lives, and punishes them in the other world with eternal punishment." Every morning she took him by the hand, led him to church, gave him holy water, showed him how to make the sign of the cross well. She made him kneel next to her: she opened the devotionalary for him and marked the prayers used for accompanying Holy Mass. On holidays he always had her with him at Mass, at Catechism, at the instruction and at the blessing.

When it was necessary to take him to receive the Holy Sacraments she prepared him a few days beforehand, and accompanied him to the confessional. After Confession she helped him to give thanks, adding those warnings that a good and affectionate mother knows to be appropriate for her children. She felt very displeased if she saw him sit down to eat without making the sign of the Holy Cross before and after eating, with the short prayer that good Christians usually say on such occasions. One day Valentine forgot, and his mother scolded him harshly: "Dear Valentine – she told him – think that only irrational animals start to eat greedily without thinking of the One from whom they receive their food. We receive life and food from the Lord, therefore we must be grateful to Him at all times, but especially when we make use of these benefits of His: that is, when we use food to preserve life itself." Although Valentine sometimes appeared careless, he did not forget any of the loving warnings that his affectionate mother sought to sow in his tender heart. In order that her son might not become bored at times, she made sure to temper her piety with pleasant recreations at the right time: toys, walks, gifts, small objects for playing, sometimes even confetti and edibles were the things with which the good mother used to encourage and reward her son's diligent conduct. Thus his mother became master of her son's heart, while he experienced the sweetest pleasure in walking, talking, and spending time with her.

But a great blow struck Valentine at the loss of his mother when he began to need her most.

He was barely twelve years old when his beloved mother was struck by a serious illness that took her life in just a few days. She received the last comforts of religion with great haste. She then called Valentine to her bed, and addressed these last words to him: "Dear Valentine, I must depart when you are at the most dangerous age. Remember to avoid idleness and bad company. Whoever counsels you contrary to the good of your soul,

consider him an enemy, and flee from him as from a dangerous serpent. I will no longer be your mother on earth, I hope to help you from Heaven. For the future your mother will be the Most Holy Virgin Mary. Pray to Her often, She will not abandon you. May God bless you...”

The violence of the illness prevented her from speaking further, and a few minutes later she had already passed away.

Valentine was very bitter at her loss, and spent several months tormented by such melancholy that his own existence was in danger. He was only able to find consolation in offering up prayers, in almsgiving, penances, and hearing many Masses for the repose of his late mother’s soul. Neither did he forget her in the serious events through which he lived in the course of his life.

CHAPTER II.

First year of school.

Osnero also felt the loss of his wife seriously, especially for the education of their son, whom he was really unable to take care of. Administrative affairs, markets, fairs, sometimes trips to the café and tavern, did not allow him to take care of his son’s education.

Valentine had already completed his elementary schooling and, as there was no secondary teaching in his native town, it was necessary to send him to a boarding school to continue his schooling.

A very well-known school was chosen, where it was said that knowledge, civilization and morality were making wonderful progress.

The uniforms, the trimmed hats, the plumes, enchanted the students and their relatives.

Valentine agreed to the proposal, and began a new lifestyle in the university. At first he had some difficulty in getting used to it. Instead of the voice of a tender mother, he had a head mistress, affable, yes, but resolute in command, severe in her demands, rigorous in every branch of discipline. Nonetheless, Valentine was able to win the affection of his new superiors and applied himself with good spirit to the fulfilment of his duties.

Attentive to commands, punctual for school and study time, he lost not a moment of time. But he found a great void in the practices of piety.

Until then he used to listen to Holy Mass every morning; every evening he did some spiritual reading with his mother; he went to Confession regularly every fortnight, and went to Communion whenever his confessor allowed him.

The university was no longer like that. He did neither meditation nor spiritual reading; prayers were recited in common, but only once a day, standing and in great haste.

The students attended Mass only on public holydays, Confessions were only once a year, on Resurrection Sunday.

These things caused great anguish in Valentine’s heart. Furthermore, in the past his ears had never heard swearwords; but the new classmates made use of complete freedom of speech, every immodest joke was tolerated, in fact, things reached such a pitch that obscene books and newspapers passed freely from one pupil to another. Frightened at such dangers, Valentine wrote a letter to his father in which he informed him in detail of the dangers to his soul, pointing out how pernicious boarding school life was for him. But in this letter the discipline and performance of the school were criticized a lot, therefore the Head Master decided to retain it and not send it to him. Some time later Osnero went to see his son who was then able to explain his troubles to him freely. But his father took no notice and said that one should not give way to scruples, but should live without prejudices. “If you can’t pray, confess and go to Mass every day, he told him, you can then make up for everything during holidays. For now try to imitate your happier companions and make sure to imitate them in a happy life.” Valentine had a sweet character and a very flexible nature, so at his father’s words he calmed down and, without thinking of what would happen to him, began to read books and newspapers of all kinds. He associated himself indiscriminately with all sorts of companions, taking part in their conversations, sometimes indifferent, rarely good, very often bad. A few weeks passed by and not only did he no longer feel repugnance at that reprehensible way of life, but he anxiously sought out every kind of dissipation. It is worth noting that in that disorderly life he no longer thought about confessing or receiving Holy Communion. Despite that dissipated life, he could never put his mother’s admonitions out of mind, and he felt serious remorse for not putting them into practice. One evening, regretting the evil he had done and the good he had neglected, he was so moved that he cried profusely. Nonetheless he continued his disorderly life. The one thing he never forgot was a prayer for his mother’s soul that he recited every night before going to bed.

But what about his studies? Without good morals, studies do not go well.

As Valentine gradually gained a taste for a life without scruples, as his father had told him, he felt repugnance for study; so that the last five months of that year were completely lost. In his semester exam he

still got good grades, and his father showed his satisfaction by giving him a nice watch. But in the final exam there was an unfavourable result and he was not promoted to a higher class. At that news Osnero felt grave displeasure both for the money wasted in vain and for the year of study lost. This hurt him all the more, because his son Valentine had always won honours in the classes he attended, and he knew that mediocre diligence would have been enough for him to be promoted with honour.

CHAPTER III.

Holidays.

But Osnero's sorrows increased greatly when Valentine returned from school. He saw his son enter the house without even a greeting. Wanting to make some observation to him about the poor outcome of his studies, he had this response: "I did what I could, no one can expect more, and if I had known I would receive reproaches I would not even have come home." The same evening of his arrival he went to bed without reciting the usual prayers or making the sign of the holy cross. In the morning, instead of going to Mass and serving it with taste and pleasure as in the past, he slept until very late. After breakfast he immediately wanted to go and play with some classmates whose company had been strictly forbidden to him by his deceased mother. One day his father wanted to take him for a walk, but Valentine refused, saying he had an appointment with his companions, so he couldn't go with him. The legendary de'Santi, his favourite book for many years, he no longer even wanted to open. Instead, his favourite readings were some obscene novels that a friend had given him before leaving school.

Osnero was stunned by the change in his son, and though in the past he had not shown himself to be very fond of piety, nevertheless he wanted his son to keep on being pious in order that he stay good. It occurred to him to take him to his Parish Priest, of whom he had always been very fond before, but Valentine refused, saying that everyone must go to the Parish Priest at Easter to confess, and not cause disturbances throughout the year with inappropriate visits. One day while Valentine was staying with some companions the Parish Priest passed by, but turning his face away he pretended not to see him and wanted to go off without even saying goodbye. The Parish Priest observed everything, but pretending not to notice he approached. "My Valentine, he said to him, did you have a good trip, are you well, is your father in good health?" He then, confused, returned the greeting quickly, and asserting that he would then come to visit him, continued walking and talking with his friends.

In addition to this, Osnero noticed that Valentine had contracted some dangerous habits such as lying, betting and stealing at home.

Deeply pained, the distressed father said to Valentine one day:

— My dear son, what thing ever produced such a fatal change in you?

— You told me not to let my scruples dominate me, and to live unprejudiced; I believe I have obeyed you.

— I didn't mean that...

— But that's what I understood, and if you don't want me at home, I know where to go.

Osnero warned him, corrected him several times and also subjected him to some punishments, but to no avail, because once he responded with insolence, and on another occasion he escaped and stayed away from home for three days.

It seemed impossible to Osnero that in the space of just ten months his pious, obedient and affectionate son had changed to such a degree that he responded disrespectfully to his father, no longer wanted to know about religion, and was a burglar. He was by then about to take the desperate decision to have him sent to a borstal, but not wanting the name of a reformatory to stain the family's honour, he followed a milder course.

"Last year, he said to himself, I decided to choose a school that was too fashionable. I let myself be taken in by appearances, a place that inculcates neither knowledge nor morality. I want to find another school where religion is taught, recommended and practiced well. Sadly, it must be confessed that it is impossible to educate youth without religion. But, how will I be able to decide for Valentine to enter a school of this kind, now that he has already contracted so many bad habits?"

The end of October was approaching, and it was necessary to decide on the place for Valentine.

One day, in order to prepare his son's spirit to follow his plan, Osnero took him to play a game in the countryside; he ordered a lunch that he knew was to his liking, gave him some gifts, hugged him, made him various promises similar to the questions he had put to him. When they both arrived home in the evening, his father called him into his room and spoke to him like this:

— Dear Valentine, do you still remember your mother?

— Yes, I remember her and will always remember her, nor do I ever go to bed without saying some prayer for her soul.

— Do you still have any affection for her?

— Very much, and how can I forget such a good mother and so worthy of being loved?

— Would you do something that would please her and be of great advantage to you?

At those words Valentine felt his heart moved, and tears began to well up in his eyes. Then, crying profusely, he hugged Osnero's neck saying:

— Dear father, you know how much I am indebted to my mother, and how much I loved her in life. If she still lived, I would throw myself into fire and water to obey her; do you want to propose something dear to her? My father, speak, tell me; I am ready to make any sacrifice that may please her.

— Valentine, I would like to propose to you a school that your mother had mentioned to me before dying, a school where you can study and practice piety just as you did in the happy days of your late mother.

— Dear father, I am in your hands; everything that you know would please my mother will please me too, and I am ready to make any sacrifice to carry it out.

CHAPTER IV.

New School. Return to piety.

Osnero didn't think he would be able to change him for the better so soon, and he recognized it as a blessing from Heaven. So that delay might not bring on difficulties, he wanted to take him to the Head Master of the proposed school the following day to arrange his admission.

The Head Master was somewhat astonished at Valentine's first appearance. New and elegantly made clothes, a Calabrian hat, a cannon in his hand, a shiny chain on his chest, a smooth parting of his dapper hair were the things that revealed the spirit of vanity that already reigned in the heart of our Valentine. The father easily agreed on the conditions of acceptance, then assuming he had other things to do, he left his son alone to talk to the Head Master. At the sight of a young man with such an attitude, that Head Master did not deem it appropriate to talk to him about religion, but he only talked about walking, running, gymnastics, fencing, singing, and playing music. These things made the vain pupil's blood course through his veins just hearing about them. His father then returned, and as soon as he was able to talk freely with Valentine, "what do you think – he said to him – do you like this place, what do you think of the Head Master?"

— I like the place very much, the Head Master seems entirely to my liking, but he has something that is not at all to my liking.

— Tell me, we still have time to do something different.

— I like everything about him, but he is a Priest, and that makes me feel repugnance.

— You don't need to pay attention to his Priestly office: rather, pay attention to the merit and the virtues that adorn him.

— But coming to a Priest means praying, going to Confession, going to Communion. From some words he said to me it seems to me that he already knows my story.... Enough... I promised, I will keep my word, we'll see the rest.

A few days later Valentine entered the new school. His father decided to inform the new Head Master of what had happened to his son and how he still had great affection towards his deceased mother. Separated from his former classmates, and the distractions of bad reading, frequenting good fellow students, competition in class, music, recitations, some dramatic theatre performances, soon made him forget the year-long dissipated life he had been leading. The memory of his mother, and of avoiding idleness and bad companions, often came to him. In reality, he easily resumed his previous habits of pious practices. The difficulty was in resolving to make his confession. He had already spent two months at boarding school. Novenas had already been held, solemnities celebrated, in which the other students tried to receive the Holy Sacraments; but Valentine could never bring himself to confess. One evening the Head Master called him into his room and, mindful of the great impression that the memory of his mother had left in his heart, he began to speak to him like this: "My good Valentine, do you know what tomorrow will bring to your mind?"

— Yes I know. Tomorrow is the anniversary of my mother's death. O beloved mother, if only I could see you just once, or at least hear your voice once more!

— Would you do something tomorrow that would please her and be of great advantage to yourself?

— Oh I would! She is worth anything!

— Receive Holy Communion tomorrow for the repose of her soul, and you will bring her great relief if she is still in the painful flames of purgatory.

— Willingly will I do so; but to take Communion I need to go to Confession.... If my mother wants that, I will do it, and if you think it is appropriate, I'll confess to you right now.

The Head Master, who could not have hoped for more, praised the idea, let emotions calm down, then prepared him and with mutual consolation confessed him; and the following day Valentine received Holy Communion, saying many prayers for the soul of his late mother.

From that day on, his life brought true satisfaction to his Head Master who never lost sight of the spiritual son he had acquired.

Valentine had still kept certain books, some of which were forbidden, some of which were harmful to young people, and he brought them all to the Head Master so that he could consign them to the flames, saying:

“I hope that by burning they will no longer be the cause of my soul burning in hell.”

He had also kept some letters from his old companions in which they gave him a lot of bad advice; and he tore them into pieces.

He then resumed his studies, wrote down the memories of his mother on the dust jacket of a book, and fled from idleness and bad companions.

He then sent a New Year’s letter to his father who felt great consolation on seeing his son return to his previous way of thinking for so many years. He thus spent his time up to leaving school.

Recalling that there were many bad books and newspapers in his father’s home, Valentine wrote many letters to his father. He knew so well how to please him, especially during holidays, and made him so many promises, that Osnero resolved to get rid of everything. Furthermore, on frivolous pretexts the father ate meat on forbidden days. Valentine, by his behaviour, by his words, by recounting examples, and by making a humble request to his father, succeeded in having him desist, and induced him to observe the vigils commanded by the Church precisely as every good Christian should do.

CHAPTER V.

The vocation.

Valentine had spent five years at boarding school to the utmost satisfaction of his father and his superiors. At first he found difficulties in getting used to the new discipline, but reflecting that this was the way of life he had already practised with his mother, he was very happy with it and felt continuous joy. During holidays it was also of great comfort and pleasure to the father who, the older he got, the more he concentrated his affections and hopes on his dear son. Meanwhile Valentine was already going through his last year of high school with a conduct that left nothing to be desired, and in all those five years he had never spoken of a vocation. He had repeatedly asked the school Head Master for his advice on how to make good use of the Institute. “Be good – he replied – study, pray, and in his time God will let you know what is best for you.”

— What must I practise so that God may let me know my vocation?

— St. Peter says that by good works we can make ourselves certain of our vocation and election of our state.

At Easter in the fifth year of high school, when spiritual exercises were to begin, he said that on this occasion he wanted to discuss his vocation and although for some time he had felt great leanings to the ecclesiastical state, he nevertheless feared being prevented from doing so by his past bad conduct. He therefore presented himself to the Head Master in those days, and held a conversation with him, which we found written among his papers; here it is:

Valentine: What are the signs that indicate whether or not a young man is called to the ecclesiastical state?

Head Master: Moral integrity, learning, the ecclesiastical spirit.

— How do we know if there is moral integrity?

— Moral integrity is known especially by the victory over vices opposed to the sixth commandment, and in this one must rely on the opinion of the Confessor.

— The confessor already told me that because of this question I can continue in the ecclesiastical state with complete tranquillity. But what about learning?

— For learning you must submit to the judgment of your superiors who will give you the appropriate exams.

— What is meant by ecclesiastical spirit?

— By ecclesiastical spirit we mean the tendency and pleasure one feels for taking part in those church functions compatible with age and occupations.

— Anything else?

— There is a part of the ecclesiastical spirit which is more important than any other. It consists in a yearning for this state whereby one is eager to embrace it in preference to any other even more advantageous and glorious. And there must be a sincere desire to love and serve God and His Most Holy Mother, desire to offer them reparation for the offences they receive, and be zealous of Their honour and for the salvation of souls.

— All these things are found in me.

My mother was eager for me to become a priest, and I was more eager than she was. I was against it for two years, for those two years that you know: but at the moment I don't feel inclined towards anything else. I will encounter some difficulties from my father who would like me to have a civil career, but I hope that God will help me to overcome every obstacle.

The Head Master also pointed out to him that becoming a priest meant giving up earthly pleasures; renouncing the riches and honours of this world, not aspiring for lofty posts, being ready to bear any contempt from bad people, and ready for anything, to suffer anything to promote the glory of God, win souls for Him and first of all save your own. "Precisely these observations, Valentine continued, impel me to embrace the ecclesiastical state, for in other states there are hosts of dangers, and far fewer in the state we are speaking of." But it was his father who found the difficulties.

CHAPTER VI.

The difficulties.

In May of that year Valentine wrote to his father a letter in which he expressed his decision and asked for his consent.

"My father, he said, I have carefully examined my vocation, I asked my superiors and especially my confessor for advice; after which I decided to embrace the ecclesiastical state. I know that you love me, and desire my true good, therefore I hope that you will be as happy as I am.

When I was a child my mother led me to an altar of the Virgin in our church and, after repeated prayers, I heard her say several times: 'Mary, let this son of mine be always yours and, if not opposed to the good of his soul, make him a zealous priest.'

I hope my mother's wish will be yours too."

Upon reading this letter, Osnero was very saddened. He had a conspicuous fortune; Valentine was his only heir, and given his extraordinary ingenuity, his love for hard work, the liveliness of his character, his goodness and pliability of nature, a really brilliant civil career was open to him. Therefore the affectionate parent wished him to take up some career in the world and become, so to speak, the staff of his old age, the stay of his name and his family. He wrote a letter in which he showed himself angry and regretful for having put him in that school, he criticized those superiors for having educated him too much in religion, he commanded him to come home immediately with a prohibition on never speaking to him about his vocation again. But reflecting on the serious consequences that such a letter might produce, he did not send it, and wrote another milder one in the following terms:

"Dear son. From your letter I know that you intend to embrace the ecclesiastical state. This deliberation is immature, your age makes you incapable of knowing what you should decide to do. You must depend on me, and not on others. I am your father, I alone can and want to make you happy.

You will not lack means at home, a bright career is open for you, a happy future awaits you. But don't pay attention to anything but your father. Give me a prompt reply, and tell me honestly what you think and what you want to do."

Valentine read the letter, and calmly replied to his father as follows:

"Your letter confirms the great affection you have always had for me. You, oh father, want my happiness, and I see this happiness in the ecclesiastical state. No honour, no career, nor any other wealth will ever make me happy outside the ecclesiastical state. My Father, God of Heaven and earth is my and your Master. If He wants me to be his minister, would you want to oppose Him? Is not the dignity of the Priest superior to all the dignities of this earth? If we ensure the salvation of the soul, would we not have gained the greatest treasure that man can gain on earth? I also assure you that whatever I do I will never abandon you. As long as I live, I will spare nothing to comfort your age, love and respect you and provide you with a happy life."

Osnero understood that with opposition he would not gain anything on his son's soul, so he judged it better to conceal all his intentions and wait for holidays. Therefore he wrote to him that he was pleased to receive his letter, to cheer up and that once his exams were over he should come home immediately. After all, they could then talk together and would understand everything at the end of the school year. Valentine took his exams with very happy results, but could not bring himself to go home for fear that his father would continue to oppose his vocation. Osnero for his part, not seeing his son, went to pick him up himself to take him on holiday. Here there was a very touching scene. Valentine wanted his father to assure him of his long-awaited consent to become a Priest before leaving; he didn't want to promise anything, and the other didn't want to resolve anything. In the end, Osnero took this attitude, saying: "If your vocation comes to you from heaven, I do not want to oppose it and I give you my full and absolute consent. But as I fear that you do not know what you do, I want you to come home; and after a few days on vacations we will freely open our hearts to each other, so if you persevere

in the same desire I will leave you completely free, indeed I will spare nothing to favour you and support you in your noble plan.”

At those words, those promises, Valentine yielded. When taking leave of the school the Head Master addressed these words to him: “My good Valentine, a great battle awaits you. Beware of bad companions and bad reading. Always have Our Lady as your Mother and turn to Her often. Let me know any news soon.” Valentine, very moved, left with his father for home, promising him everything.

CHAPTER VII.

A fatal drive.

The saddest misfortune that can befall a young person is to be badly led. Unfortunately, our Valentine was also a victim of it. My pen trembles in my hand as I write, and I would not believe it myself if the truth of the story did not exclude all doubt. That misfortune may at least serve as a warning to others.

Once Valentine arrived at his father’s house he was left to fend for himself for a few days, without any word being said to him about his vocation. Meanwhile, his father, blinded by the desire that his son become the stay of his name and the legacy of the family, wanted at any cost to induce him to change his plan about his vocation; and to succeed he seized on the diabolical plan of entrusting him to a man of bad morals, who might teach his poor son evil. Unhappy father, for the hope of a miserable temporal advantage, ruins the house, the honour, the body, the soul of himself and of his son!

Osnero therefore entrusted Valentine to a certain Mario, so that he might take him out into the world, get him to know it well, and then decide on his vocation. This Mario was a rather elderly man, who had spent his life in pastimes and vices, which only his age had forced him to abandon. Osnero then said:

“My dear Mario, you have always been a sincere friend of my family; now I have something very important to recommend to you. My Valentine wants to become a Priest, I don’t want him to... You already understand me, take him with you, let him travel, see, enjoy everything there is in the world. What you spend is all on my account, just take care of his health.”

“Leave it to me, Mario replied smiling, I understand everything. You couldn’t have chosen a more able person for this undertaking. I will try to please your son and provide you with the service you desire.” They left, and in leaving Mario made sure that Valentine did not have any devotional books with him; so that, to help him overcome the boredom of the journey, he went along telling him a thousand stories about friars, priests and nuns; at first indifferent, then he progressed step by step into shameless things. Then he gave him books on obscene subjects which at first sight Valentine rejected with horror; but that little by little he began to read as a pastime, then out of curiosity, and not even a month had passed when poor Valentine had already become accustomed to every kind of reading and talking. Perhaps a single word from a friend at that moment would have brought him back from ruin, but he didn’t have that friend. Thus the perfidious Mario, after having made the unhappy Valentine pass through hotels, games, cafes, dancing, theatres, after having made him travel to various towns and cities, finally managed to seduce him and, to top it all, ensnare him in that vice that Saint Paul doesn’t even want to be mentioned among Christians. Valentine saw the abyss towards which he was making, and at first felt the most acute remorse. Several times he tried to go to confession; but his wicked guide always prevented this. One evening he wanted to go to a Capuchin convent at any cost and Mario made him take the wrong path and took him to a house of perversion. Valentine was sorry and felt such regret and reached such a point of desperation that he was about to throw himself out of a window on the third floor of the hotel, if Mario had not run up and held him back by his clothes. “At that moment – Valentine said later – I judged that death was a lesser evil than the pangs of conscience which were troubling me.” But this remorse did not last long. Almost insensibly Mario accustomed Valentine to bad conversations, to every perverse reading, and recalling the good times enjoyed in the first year of school he abandoned himself to every sort of vice, indeed after six months of disorderly life not only did he no longer oppose Mario, but willingly seconded him in all his evil wishes. Seeing things at this point, thus convinced that he had accomplished his diabolical mission, Mario brought Valentine back to his father.

— I believe I have served you, said Mario, greeting Osnero.

— I thank you, Mario, you have always been a friend of my family, and now you will have one more reason for my gratitude.

— Father, said Valentine, running to embrace him, father, I am all in favour of your indications.

— You won’t become a Priest anymore?

— Of course not, I will do anything else, but not a Priest.

— Heaven be blest. I am a lucky father. Tomorrow I want to invite all my friends to celebrate your return.

Osnero was like someone who walks calmly on a ground covered with flowers, unaware that beneath them there is a deep abyss, nor would he have ever imagined that Valentine's return would be a harbinger of immense evils for him.

CHAPTER VIII.

The bitterness of Osnero.

Osnero was greatly consoled by the news that his son no longer thought about the ecclesiastical state; but he did not reflect that the time spent with Mario had led him to abominable debauchery. Valentine no longer spoke of the sacraments, he devoted himself to bad reading, gambling, intemperance, and other detestable vices. But where to get money to satisfy so many passions? At first his father provided it, but when he denied it, Valentine began to pawn his watch, then to sell some clothes and several bags of wheat.

One day he also managed to open his father's chest and stole a bag full of gold pieces from him. The father then realized the bad situation his son had been brought to and in an attempt to distance him from his classmates and from Mario himself, decided to send him to a philosophy course in a city.

But there was no more time. Valentine gave himself up to a disorderly life. He used the money for his keep on billiard games; when he no longer had any money he took out one and then another mortgage which Osnero paid so as not to see his son brought before the courts of justice. The afflicted father, despite his advanced age, undertook the journey to that city several times, prayed, warned his son, recommended him to return to religion, to the happy life he once enjoyed.

— Father, Valentine replied, Mario's lessons produce their effect, it is impossible for me to go back. I know I am on the road to ruin, but we must go on ahead.

— Dear Valentine, said the father crying, listen to me. Come home, do what you want, as long as you abandon the bad path you are on. This life of yours leads you to dishonour, misery, infamy, and will not be long in leading me to the grave.

Valentine looked at him fixedly, and as if he wanted to say that the fault was his, he added: "Why did you hinder my vocation?" Having said this, he abandoned his father in the middle of a square, went to a broker to take out another loan larger than the first, and then returned to his miserable companions. This act was like a sword blow to Osnero's heart. He then knew the fatal consequence of a hindered vocation, he detested having known the perverse Mario, and deplored the moment at which he had entrusted his dear Valentine to him, but it was fruitless repentance. In an excess of pain he began to cry, and went through the streets of that city exclaiming: "If I could ever make my Valentine come home I would be happy if he became a priest, a friar, or anything else, as long as he turns back from way of dishonour! Unhappy father, unhappy son! What a sad future awaits you!"

Once he reached home he begged his Parish Priest to give him light and advice: the Parish Priest tried to write letters to Valentine, who replied nothing. He begged some friends who lived in the same city to try extreme means to recall his son from the path of licentiousness. But while these things were being discussed, news arrived that Valentine had joined forces with some criminals who had him take part in one of the most nefarious deeds. He was caught in the act of the crime and with his perverse companions taken to prison. Osnero could not sustain that fatal blow. His age, the sensitivity of his heart seemed to drive him out of his mind. He fell unconscious into the arms of some friends who had come to give him comfort. Having returned to his senses for a moment, "Accursed Mario, he exclaimed, unhappy I am, unhappy son! I am going to give an account to God... for a vocation I hindered."

Having said this, he fell into a swoon again and, overcome by a violent tremor, he expired.

CHAPTER IX.

Latest news from Valentine.

Once Osnero died, Valentine's creditors all wanted to be paid, so part of his father's assets had to be sold at public auction. The other part was donated to the tax authorities who, in order to proceed with the trials, pay the mortgages made, compensate some to whom Valentine had caused serious damage, used up all the assets. Nothing was known of Valentine except that he had been transferred from one prison to another, his case was considered very serious, his very life was in danger, and then several years passed without anyone having heard about him. Finally, a letter arrived by post for the Head Master of the school where he had done secondary studies, in which he gave an account of the sentence he had received with some information which I think is best to include here in full:

Ever beloved Head Master,

The person writing to you is an old pupil and once a dear student of yours, who is now a prisoner sentenced to hard labour. With horror, forgive me and read. When I left you to go on holiday with my poor father, you

were kind enough to give me some counsels that would have made my fortune, if I had put them into practice; but foolish as I was, I neglected them to my irreparable harm. You told me to write to you soon. But partly through my fault, partly being unable, I never did. Now it is in my power to send you a letter by good hands, and therefore I carry out my duty, and pour into your paternal heart the bitterness of my soul, as once I did every secret of my conscience. – What sad events happened after our separation! To prevent my vocation, my unhappy father entrusted me to a wicked man, who with cunning and seductive ways immersed me in every kind of vice.

Remorse and horror at evil have always accompanied me, but I could never bring myself to turn back. The last crime, I hate to say, was a murder. Oh heaven! What a fatal word! One of your students who won first prize for morality; who wanted to embrace the ecclesiastical state or pursue a brilliant career in the world, is now obliged to be covered with the blackest infamy and be called a murderer. Listen. After spending a few years in gambling and revelry, I found myself burdened by debt and pursued by creditors. In the hope of winning money I had spent a night gambling with some scoundrels. Then, finding ourselves all without money, one of them proposed to break into a house while the owner was asleep, and commit a theft. Everyone looked fixedly in the face of the ill-fated counsellor and trembled at that detestable proposal, since they all belonged to honest families, but no one dared to make observations. With false keys and breaking things open we had already entered a room, broken into an iron chest, already laid hands on a large sum of money, when the owner woke up. “Stop the thieves, stop the thieves” he started to shout. “Thieves,” shouted the servants, and immediately grabbed hold of poles, sticks, tridents or anything that fell into their hands. One of my companions, to silence the cries of fear and defend himself, inadvisably fired a pistol which hit the arm of the master’s wife who was still lying sick in bed. At the shouts that were coming from all sides we tried to escape, but we no longer had time. The police were guarding all the outside doors and five of us fell into the hands of the gendarmes. The poor sick woman, whether because of the wound she had, or because of the pain she already had, or because of the fright, had convulsions and the following day ceased to live. Meanwhile we were all taken first to one and then to another prison. Finally, after two years, one was sentenced to hard labour for life, myself and the other three to fifteen years of the same sentence. Now I’ve been here for three years; in view of my good behaviour I have been pardoned two years. Who knows whether some favourable event might bring me another reduction in my sentence!

O dear father of my soul, who would have ever imagined that one of your students, who welcomed your advice with such pleasure, and was so often reassured by your attentions, would one day become, horrifying to say!, a convict? Now listen to where all the wealth of my family ended up and in what condition I find myself. From morning to evening, condemned to hard and tiring work with no other compensation than constant hard work and often dreadful beatings.

My bed is a hard sack; a bowl of salty soup, a little bread and water are my daily ration. But this is nothing. There the hatred, the contempt, the curses, the obscenities, the blasphemies that continually ring in our ears make this place something similar to hell. The dishonour brought to the family, the infamy with which I have covered my name, my sad future, the early death of my beloved father are griefs that agitate me day and night. Perhaps you will say: How could you have become so wicked, when for five years with us you were so good? I have never been, nor even now am a scoundrel. I am an unhappy young man, an unfortunate one, but not perverse. My father’s opposition to my vocation and an infamous guide led me first to associate with perverse companions, then to the abyss in which I find myself. But religion was always with me and in every evil action I could never forget those words which you so kindly made ring in my ears several times: If you lose your soul all is lost, if you save your soul all is saved in eternity. Now I know the enormities of my crimes, I adore the hand of the Lord who struck me and I accept my evils in penance for my misdeeds. I don’t know what my future destiny is; but if one day I am able to leave the place of dishonour, I will immediately run to your feet; your advice will be the norm of my conduct throughout my life; indeed I have firm hope that in your great kindness you will be willing to give me any occupation, however vile, among you, as long as I can work, do penance and save my soul. In the meantime, please strongly recommend that parents of young students make sure that there is religion and morality where they send their children to be educated, and never oppose the choice of their vocation. But never cease to recommend two special things to my former companions or to other young men who still find themselves under your paternal discipline, that: 1. They should avoid bad companions as fatal enemies who lead body and soul to ruin; 2° In deciding on their vocation they should think about it seriously and after prayer should follow the advice of a pious, learned and prudent guide. If, however, they encounter difficulties on the part of their parents, they should not follow my example, but calm down, pray and

insist with their family in peace and tranquillity, until the obstacles are removed and they can do things in accord with the adorable Will of the Lord.

Pray to God to grant me the grace of being able to appear in your dear presence again, to be guided by your paternal advice, to repair my scandals with a Christian life until, through the great mercy of the Lord, I be allowed to abandon this exile and vale of tears, then to fly to the bosom of the Creator to praise Him and bless Him eternally.

CHAPTER X.

Mario's death.

Mario was also present at the death of Osnero who, when he cast that curse on him, stared at him with such a threatening and grim look that Mario was completely terrified. It seemed that this look wanted to say to him: Mario, you are the cause of my misfortunes and of my death. And though the real cause of the evil was Osnero himself, since he should never have entrusted his son to an immoral man, it is also true that Mario was the fatal instrument of that iniquity, who should never have agreed to the thoughtless proposal of a friend and use such wicked and nefarious means. Now you should note that Mario, who prided himself on being an unprejudiced man in matters of religion, had never given any sign of fear, neither of the living nor of the dead. However, after Osnero's death it seemed to him that his terrible gaze accompanied him day and night. He was sometimes seen starting up from his midday meal and running away frightened, as they said, by the grim appearance of Osnero who threatened him.

Not infrequently at night he woke up shouting and calling his servants to come and take away the spectre or shadow of Osnero. I believe this shadow, this spectre was nothing other than pangs of conscience which are felt even by the most wicked.

Mario himself, unable to persuade himself that this was not a transport of fantasy, thought he would find some relief in games, in dinner parties, in games with friends, but was unable to improve his lot, because as soon as he returned home, the ghosts, the shadows, imaginations terrified him more than ever. One of his old friends suggested that one day he go and ask the Parish Priest for some good advice. "Priests, he told him, have certain secrets or advice or blessings, as they say, which are often very effective in calming interior desolation." Mario was not familiar with either the Parish Priest or other priests, but he used to treat everyone with kindness and great courtesy; he had never shown any aversion towards his Parish Priest other than that which a worldly man is wont to have towards ministers of religion. He nevertheless delayed this for a few days until, seeing his pain and worries growing ever more, he decided to make the proposed visit to his Parish Priest. That man of God welcomed him with all goodness, and while they talked he listened to Mario's report of his anguish and evils. Finally the good shepherd tried to calm him down by pointing out that this was an effect of the profound impression caused by the loss of his friend Osnero. Then shaking Mario's hand affectionately, he said: "However, dear Mario, I believe I offer you a very effective remedy for your sufferings, which will bring you a significant benefit."

— Yes, speak, I will do and take the remedy you suggest to me, I have always held you in high esteem, and I have a lot of confidence in you.

— In the past you haven't paid much attention to religion. Your serious occupations may have distracted you from it. Now listen to the voice of your shepherd, prepare yourself, make a good Confession, and in this you will find a powerful relief for your ills.

At these unexpected words Mario's face changed colour, and gave the Parish Priest a severe look. Then taking his hat he stood up. "Father, I am your servant; these are not things to propose to Mario." This said, full of anger, he immediately left.

When he arrived home, to his great surprise he found a letter sent to him by Valentine who in it reproached him in the harshest and most resentful way for the perfidious insinuations with which he had set him on the path to dishonour and desolation. "Your perverse advice, the letter concluded, led my house to ruin, sent my dear father to his grave prematurely, and turned an honest young man into a convict."

These reproaches were a shocking blow to Mario's dejected soul, so that he increasingly seemed to be haunted by the spectre of Osnero, and by the remorse of having made Valentine unhappy. He then underwent hunger as he felt disgust at every kind of food, and soon found himself reduced to extreme weakness. Fever, inflammation of the intestines, and a kind of ulceration, were like the consequences of already existing evils.

In that lamentable state Mario began to think seriously about his case, and realizing that the ulceration of the stomach was reaching up to his throat, and a number of small pustules invaded the tongue which, by notably swelling, threatened to impede his speech, he could no longer delude himself about the gravity of the illness. "Poor Mario – he was heard exclaiming to himself – everything is about to end for you, you must abandon the

world, and where will you go? Your body in the cemetery, but what about your soul? Poor Mario! If you had thought about this moment in time, how you would be comforted now!” Afterwards he asked for a drink which he couldn’t swallow. He sent his servants and friends away to rest for a while; but as soon as he could enjoy a few moments of sleep he immediately woke up screaming and calling for help.

“My beloved, he said to his friends, at this moment the shadow of Osnero appeared terrible to me in dreams, which revealed to me that death was near and that I would soon have to appear before the Supreme Judge. Maybe I won’t have time anymore, but I want to do the last test; go quickly and beg the Parish Priest, tell him that I am close to death, and that I await him as soon as possible.”

The Parish Priest used to go every day for news of Mario, but was always forbidden to go near his bed. At that very moment he was at the door of the house asking to come in. He was instantly admitted to the sick man.

— Father, Mario told him, moved and amazed to see him so soon with him, forgive me the insults I have given you, I have insulted you...

— Don’t talk about forgiveness, I was never offended by you, I have always loved you and I love you more now that you give me the greatest pleasure of admitting me to your presence.

— Father, added Mario, breaking into tears, can I still have hope of saving myself?

— Yes, dear Mario, God’s mercy is infinite. He gave you time, He gave you the will and arranged for me to be here to help you. Take heart, you are in the hands of a friend.

— Will God forgive the multitude of my iniquities?

— Yes, Mario, I assure you on behalf of this Saviour, whose immense goodness you see represented in this crucifix. He said this, showing him a crucifix that he always carried with him when visiting the sick.

— What to do then?

— A good confession.

— I can’t do it anymore, I don’t have enough strength.

— Don’t worry, I am your Parish Priest, I will help you; just answer what I ask you.

Then with zeal and charity he began his confession. One questioned, the other answered, and where Mario remained confused, the Parish Priest with admirable ease played the part of confessor and penitent. But what? After a few minutes Mario appeared so exhausted and his tongue swelled so noticeably that he was almost unable to speak at all. Nonetheless, not without serious difficulties, he was able to finish his confession.

Once Mario had made his confession, he appeared much calmer, and in the midst of his ailments, he appeared with a cheerful air that no one had seen for many years. Having then called his relatives and friends, he made an effort and uttered these last words: “I have given scandal, forgive me, may my grief and my death be in penance for my sins. My God, I thank you, my God mercy.” He very much wanted to receive Viaticum, but the ulceration of his throat and the swelling of his tongue prevented it. He lived for two more days in that state of anguish and suffering, fully conscious, but with full resignation to the divine will, without being able to speak. His Parish Priest no longer abandoned him by day nor by night, and if he attempted to move away for a few moments Mario immediately took him by the hand, kissed it affectionately and with signs invited him to stay, showing him the warmth of his desire. He often kissed the crucifix, and repeated as best he could the frequent invocations that were suggested to him from time to time.

A few hours before he breathed his last, he appeared very agitated. He wanted to speak and couldn’t, he kissed the crucifix, then he looked at those present, and being unable to speak words, he started crying. Those present were dismayed because they couldn’t understand what he wanted, and they thought of bringing him a pen and a sheet of paper to see if he were able to reveal his thoughts in some way.

Mario showed complaisance, took the pen and, supported by his friends, with his hand on the Parish Priest’s arm, wrote these words: “Valentine, pardon me for the scandal given, live as a good Christian and you will be happy at the point of death. I die repentant; may divine mercy be for me and for you, I await you in eternity.” Afterwards he dropped the pen and, giving a kind of smile, that of one whose great desire has been satisfied, lay down again on the side of his bed, and almost immediately entered into agony, no longer giving any sign of consciousness. The Parish Priest who had administered Holy Oil to him shortly before, then gave him the Papal Blessing. Presently, while he was reading the prayers of the agonizing, Mario’s soul ceased to live in time, to begin his eternity, where we hope he will find mercy in the presence of the Lord.

Valentine’s life story, though sad, is the life of a single person. The same history is repeated on a universal scale in the XX century, when the corruption and apostasy of the roman church took place for abandoning its vocation to spread the Kingdom of God on earth and allowing itself to be seduced by television and other means of communication, which performed the role of the perverse Mario.