 Reading time: 10 min.

Unable to give the strenna to his pupils on the last day of the year, having returned from Borgo Cornalense on the 4th, Sunday, Don Bosco had promised to give it to them on the evening of the feast of Epiphany. It was 6 January 1863 and all the young people, artisans and students, gathered in the same parlour, anxiously awaited the strenna. After prayers, he mounted the platform and addressed them:

Tonight I should give you the *strenna*. Every year around Christmas, I regularly beg God to suggest a *strenna* that may benefit you all. In view of your increased number, I doubled my prayers this year.
The last day of the year [Wednesday] came and went, and so did Thursday and Friday, but nothing came to me. On Friday night [January 2] I went to bed exhausted, but could not fall asleep. The next morning I got up, worn out and almost half dead, but I did not feel upset over it. Rather, I was elated, knowing from past experience that a very bad night is usually a forewarning that Our Lord is about to reveal something to me. That day I went on with my work at Bargo Cornalese; the next day by [early] evening I arrived back here. After hearing confessions, I went to bed. Tired from my work at Bargo and from not sleeping the night before, I soon dozed off. Now began the dream which will give you your strenna.
My dear boys, I dreamed that it was a feast day afternoon and that you were all busy playing, while I was in my room with Professor [Thomas] Vallauri discussing literature and religion. Suddenly there was a knock at my door. I rose quickly and opened it. My mother – dead now for six years – was standing there. Breathlessly she gasped,
“Come and see! Come and see!”
“What happened?” I asked.
“Come! Come!” she replied.
I dashed to the balcony. Down in the playground, surrounded by a crowd of boys, stood an enormous elephant.
“How did this happen?” I exclaimed. “Let’s go down!” Tonight I should give you the *strenna*.
Professor Vallauri and I looked at each other in surprise and alarm and then raced downstairs.
As was only natural, many of you had run up to the elephant. It seemed meek and tame. Playfully it lumbered about, nuzzling the boys with its trunk and cleverly

obeying their orders, as though it had been born and raised at the Oratory. Very many of you kept following it about and petting it, but not all. In fact, most of you were scared and fled from it to safety. Finally, you hid in the church. I, too, tried to get in through the side door which which opens into the playground, but as I passed Our Lady's statue beside the drinking fountain and touched the hem of Her mantle for protection, She raised Her right arm.
Vallauri did likewise on the other side of the statue, and the Virgin raised Her left arm. I was amazed, not knowing what to think of such an extraordinary thing.
When the bell rang for church services, you all trooped in. I followed and saw the elephant standing at the rear by the main entrance.
After Vespers and the sermon, I went to the altar, assisted by Father Alasonatti and Father Savio, to give Benediction. At that solemn moment when you all deeply bowed to adore the Blessed Sacrament, the elephant-still standing at the end of the middle aisle-knelt down too, but with its back to the altar.
Once services were over, I tried to dash out to the playground and see what would happen, but I was detained by someone. A while later, I went out the side door which opens into the porticoes and saw you at your usual games. The elephant too had come out of the church and had idled over to the second playground where the new wing is under construction. Mark this well, because this is precisely the place where the grisly scene I am going to describe occurred.
At that moment, at the far end of the playground I saw a banner followed processionally by boys. It bore in huge letters the inscription *Sancta Maria, succurre miseris*! [Holy Mary, help Your forlorn children!] To everybody's surprise, that monstrous beast, once so tame, suddenly ran amuck. Trumpeting furiously, it lunged forward, seized the nearest boys with its trunk, hurled them into the air or flung them to the ground, and then trampled them underfoot. Though horribly mauled, the victims were still alive. Everybody ran for dear life. Screams and shouts and pleas for help rose from the wounded.
Worse – would you believe it? – some boys spared by the elephant, rather than aid their wounded companions, joined the monstrous brute to find new victims.
As all this was happening (I was standing by the second arch of the portico, near the drinking fountain) the little statue that you see there (and he pointed to the statue of the Blessed Virgin) became alive and grew to life-size. Then, as Our Lady raised Her arms, Her mantle spread open to display magnificently embroidered inscriptions. Unbelievably it stretched far and wide to shelter all those who gathered beneath it. The best boys were the first to run to it for safety. Seeing that many were in no hurry to run to Her, Our Lady called aloud, *Venite ad Me omnes!* [Come all to Me!] Her call was heeded, and as the crowd of boys under the mantle

increased, so did the mantle spread wider. However, a few youngsters kept running about and were wounded before they could reach safety. Flushed and breathless, the Blessed Virgin continued to plead, but fewer and fewer were the boys who ran to Her. The elephant, meanwhile, continued its slaughter, aided by several lads who dashed about, wielding one sword or two and preventing their companions from running to Mary. The elephant never even touched these helpers.

Meanwhile, prompted by the Blessed Virgin, some boys left the safety of Her mantle in quick sorties to rescue some victims. No sooner did the wounded get beneath Our Lady's mantle than they were instantly cured. Again and again several of those brave boys, armed with cudgels, went out and, risking their lives, shielded the victims from the elephant and its accomplices until nearly all were rescued.

The playground was now deserted, except for a few youngsters lying about almost dead. At one end by the portico, a crowd of boys stood safe under the Virgin's mantle. At the other stood the elephant with some ten or twelve lads who had helped it wreak such havoc and who still insolently brandished swords.

Suddenly rearing up on its hind legs, the elephant changed into a horrible, long-homed specter and cast a black net over its wretched accomplices. Then, as the beast roared, a thick cloud of smoke enveloped them, and the earth suddenly gaped beneath them and swallowed them up.

I looked for my mother and Professor Vallauri to speak to them but could not spot them anywhere. Then I turned to look at the inscriptions on Mary's mantle and noticed that several were actual quotations or adaptations of Scriptural texts. I read a few of them:

Qui elucidant Me vitarn aeternam habebunt. They that explain Me, shall have life everlasting. [Sir. 24, 31]

Qui Me invenerit, inveniet vitam. He who finds Me, finds life. [Prov. 8, 35]

Si quis est parvulus, veniat ad Me. Whoever is a little one, let him come to Me. [Prov. 9, 4]

Refugium peccatorum. Refuge of sinners.

Salus credentium. Salvation of believers.

Plena omnis pietatis, mansuetudinis et misericordiae. Full of piety, meekness and mercy.

Beati qui custodiunt vias Meas. Blessed are they that keep My ways. [Ps. 8, 32]

All was quiet now. After a brief silence, the Virgin, seemingly exhausted by so much pleading, soothingly comforted and heartened the boys and, quoting the inscription I had inscribed at the base of the niche, *Qui elucidant Me, vitam aeternam habebunt*, She went on: "ou heeded My call and were spared the slaughter wrought by the devil on your companions. Do you want to know what caused their ruin? *Sunt*

colloquia prava: Foul talk and foul deeds. You also saw your companions wielding swords. They are those who seek your eternal damnation by enticing you from Me, just as they did with many schoolmates of yours."
"But *quos [Deus] diutius exspectat durius damnat:* Those for whom God keeps waiting, He punishes more severely. The infernal demon enmeshed and dragged them to eternal perdition. Now, go in peace, but remember My words: 'Flee from companions who befriended Satan, avoid foul conversation, have boundless trust in Me. My mantle will always be your safe refuge.'"
Our Lady then vanished; only our beloved statuette remained. My deceased mother reappeared. Again the banner with the inscription *Sancta Maria, succurre miseris* was unfurled. Marching processionally behind, the boys sang *Lodate Maria, o lingue fedeli.* [Praise Mary, ye faithful tongues.] Shortly afterward, the singing waned and the whole scene faded away. I awoke in a sweat. Such was my dream.
My sons, now it's up to you to draw your own *strenna*. Examine your conscience. You'll know if you were safe under Mary's mantle, or if the elephant flung you into the air, or if you were wielding a sword. I can only repeat what the Virgin said: *Venite ad Me omnes*. Turn to Her; call on Her in any danger. I can assure you that your prayers will be heard. Those who were so badly mauled by the elephant are to learn to avoid foul talk and bad companions; those who strive to entice their companions from Mary must either change their ways or leave this house immediately. If anyone wants to know the role he played, let him come to my room and I'll tell him. But I repeat: Satan's accomplices must either mend their ways or go! Good night!

Don Bosco had spoken with such fervor and emotion that for a whole week afterward the boys kept discussing that dream and would not leave him in peace. Every morning they crowded his confessional; every afternoon they pestered him to find out what part they had played in that mysterious dream.
That this was no dream but a vision, Don Bosco had himself indirectly admitted when he had said: "I regularly beg God to suggest… A very bad night is usually a forewarning that Our Lord is about to reveal something to me." Furthermore, he forbade anyone to make light of what he had narrated.

But there is more. On this occasion he made a list of the wounded and of those who wielded one or two swords. He gave it to Celestine Durando, instructing him to watch them. The cleric handed this list over to us, and it is still in our possession. The wounded were thirteen-probably those who had not been rescued and sheltered beneath Our Lady's mantle. Seventeen lads wielded one sword; only three

had two. Scattered marginal notes next to a boy's name indicate an amendment of life. Also, we must bear in mind that the dream, as we shall see, referred also to the future.
That it mirrored the true state of things was admitted by the boys themselves. "I had no idea that Don Bosco knew me so well," one of them stated. "He revealed my spiritual condition and my temptations so exactly that I could find nothing to add." Two other boys were told that they were wielding swords.
"It's quite true," each admitted. "I knew it all along." They mended their ways.
One afternoon, while talking of this dream and remarking that some boys had already left the Oratory and others would soon follow lest they harm their companions, he came to mention his own "wizardry," as he called it. In this connection he told the following incident:

Some time ago, a boy wrote home and falsely accused priests and superiors of this house of grave wrongdoings. Fearing that Don Bosco might see his letter, he held on to it till he could secretly mail it. That same day, right after dinner, I sent for him. In my room I told him of his misdeed and asked why he had told such lies. Brazenly he denied everything. I let him talk and then, word for word, I repeated the contents of the letter to him. Embarrassed and frightened, he knelt at my feet in tears. "Was my letter intercepted?" he asked.
"No," I replied. "Your family has probably received it by now, and it's up to you to put matters right."

The boys around him asked how he had found that out. "Oh, it's my wizardry," he answered with a laugh. This wizardry and his dream, which revealed not only the boys' present spiritual condition but their future as well, must have been one and the same thing. Many years later, a boy who had been quite close to Father Rua wrote him a long letter, giving his full name and Turin address. We report it here:

Dear Father Rua:

Turin, February 25, 1891

… Among other things I recall a vision of Don Bosco in 1863, when I was at the Oratory. He saw the future of all the boarders. He himself told us about it after night prayers. It was the dream about the elephant. (After describing the dream, he went on:) At the end, Don Bosco told us, "If you want to know what part you played, come to my room and I will tell you.

I too went. “You,” he told me, “were one of those trailing after the elephant both before and after church services. Naturally you became a victim. The elephant flung you high into the air with its trunk. When you tumbled down, you were so badly hurt that you could not make it to safety, though you tried hard. A companion of yours, a priest, unrecognized by you, grabbed your arm and dragged you under the Madonna’s mantle.”

This was not a dream, as Don Bosco called it, but a genuine revelation of my future which Our Lord made to His servant during my second year at the Oratory, when I was a model of conduct and piety.
Yet Don Bosco saw me in that condition.

When the summer vacation of 1863 came around, I went home because of health and I did not return to the Oratory. I was then thirteen.
The following year, my father apprenticed me to a shoemaker, and two years later (1866) I went to France to complete my training. There I associated with anticlericals, gradually stopped going to church and the sacraments, began to read irreligious books, and even grew to loathe and hate the Catholic faith. Two years later I returned to Italy but kept reading impious books, drawing further and further away from the true Church.
Yet all this time I constantly prayed to God in the name of Jesus to enlighten me and lead me to the true faith. This struggle lasted thirteen years. I strove continually to raise myself up, but I was wounded.
I had fallen prey to the elephant and was powerless.
Toward the end of 1878, during a mission which drew great crowds, I went to hear those good preachers. I was delighted by the incontestable truths they expounded. The very last sermon was on the Blessed Sacrament, about which I still had grave doubts. (In fact I no longer believed in the real or even spiritual presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.) The preacher presented the truth so clearly and so convincingly that, touched by God’s grace, I decided to go to confession and place myself under the Blessed Virgin’s mantle. Since then I have never ceased to thank God and Our Blessed Mother for this grace.
Please note that, as Don Bosco had seen in his dream, I later found out that the missionary had been a schoolmate of mine at the Oratory.

Dominic N …

P.S. Should you see fit to publish this letter, I also authorize you to edit it, short of

substantial changes, because what I wrote is genuinely true. I kiss your hand respectfully, dear Father Rua, and by this act I intend to pay homage to our beloved Don Bosco.

Certainly, this dream must also have enlightened Don Bosco in appraising priestly and religious vocations and the applicants' inclinations to good so well displayed by those brave boys who had confronted the elephant and his accomplices, had wrested their wounded companions from their clutches, and had carried them to safety under the Madonna's mantle. He therefore continued to accept applicants to the Salesian Society and to admit to triennial vows those who had satisfactorily completed their probationary period. The mere fact that he accepted them will be their imperishable honor. Some did not take vows or left after their expiration, but nearly all, as diocesan priests or as public school teachers, persevered in their mission of saving and educating the young. Their names are recorded in the minutes of three chapter meetings of the Salesian Society.
(BMVII, 212-219)