

Miracles on Tap

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NEVER BEFORE IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH HAS A GROUP OF THE LAITY INFLUENCED THE SOCIETY OF MAN AS HAS THE LEGION OF MARY

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PART ONE

SANCTA MARIA
HOSTEL

THE
LEGION OF MARY
AND THE
RESCUE OF PROSTITUTES

1. Rescue Work Begins

I remember vividly my first experience in a house of prostitution, No. 25 Low Street.¹ It was years before the events which are related here. I was visiting in the street, and one evening I entered No. 25, simply because it came next to No. 24. For a moment I did not realize where I was. Then I saw, and I was so intimidated that I actually backed out without uttering a word. My retreat was typical of the attitude to the problem at the time. We were not without constant reminders of the existence of the problem and of the menace it afforded. Apart from its effect in the city at large, the injury done in the poor locality in which these girls resided, must have been great. While others were at work for small money, worse still, unemployed, these girls were flaunting themselves in elegant raiment.

But this aspect of things needs no embroidering. Effort at remedy of some description was a paramount necessity. Other than by the Magdalen Asylums, the problem was untouched in Dublin. Those Asylums did their work perfectly, but there was vital need for additional machinery which would pursue the girls into their haunts, canvass them and follow them up assiduously. However, we credited the girls with being much harder to approach – much more difficult to influence to good – than they were in reality. Hence we held back for the moment from a visitation system.

You probably know already that the Legion of Mary started on the 7th of September, 1921, and that it started with the simplest of all works, that is, visitation of the poor women in the Dublin Union Hospital under the care of the Mercy Nuns. But from the very first, the doing of all works was viewed as an eventual possibility. However, there were no particular plans for the second work to be undertaken. Indeed, such plans were almost out of order. The Union, with its thousands of patients, would provide scope for many times the membership then existing.

One idea which was seriously discussed at the time is of interest as showing how differently things worked out in actuality. The suggestion was that we would open a “low-down” lodging-house which might be expected to attract the class we were considering. The most important requirement in such a scheme would be a couple of ladies who would live there and act as staff, in a voluntary capacity, of course, and who would bring to the work a profound religious spirit.

The work would be based on the idea of establishing friendly relations with the girls, so that as time went on many of them would prove amenable to the influence of the ladies. The dispiritedness, following on too much drink or on a

¹ It will be remembered that many of the names and places are fictitious, though the events emphatically are not.

bad beating, might be expected to furnish fruitful opportunities for influencing them. It will be appreciated that such work, carried on among people who would actually be leading lives of sin, would be almost intolerable. Nothing but the spirit of heroism and a genuine hunger for souls could keep ladies going at such work. Yet, that was the way in which the baby organization was lipping in its cradle. Thus early was it thinking in terms of full-time, one-hundred-per-cent Legionary service, in no wise doubting that such would be forthcoming. Whether we would ever have made a move of this kind, if Providence had not intervened in the manner to be related, must now forever remain unknown.

Providence had its own plans, and for their execution it used these willing workers who were standing by. But first an essential preparation had to be made: the laying of the foundation-stones of the work. This happened in the following wonderful way.

In the month of May or June, 1922, that is, roughly eight months after the start of the Legion, I received a letter from Sister Conception of the Sisters of Charity, Baldoyle, telling of two ladies who were staying in the Holiday Home: Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton. They were anxious to take up Legion work; would I see them? I wrote making an appointment for the following Saturday in St. Vincent's Hospital, and we duly met. I then remembered the two ladies. I had met them once at a farewell given to Lady Moloney (now Mother Mark Patrick, the Mother General of the Sisters of St. Columban) on her departure to the Chinese Missions. I encouraged them to talk and set myself to listen.

Their passion was the Foreign Missions. They had offered themselves, but had been refused on the grounds of age. Unable to go themselves, they ardently aspired to help in every way they possibly could. They, too, had been dreaming dreams. One of the latter was to open a tea-shop near the center of the city – to be run in the financial interests of the Missions. They hoped to be able to get some others, similarly-minded, to join them. They would do all the incidental work themselves, from the cooking and waiting on table down to the scrubbing of the floors. The part of the house not required for the shop would be devoted to social works, classes and other expedients for helping the Missions. To tell the truth, I was both amazed and amused at first. It sounded somewhat fantastic; for remember that all this was prior to the days of big adventuring in the Legion. In later times, the moon would have had to talk to us to cause us any surprise.

Especially the ladies themselves held my attention. Miss Plunkett was unusually tall, so much so as to make her tall companion seem medium in height. Miss Plunkett was animated in manner and talked much in her enthusiasm. By contrast, Miss Scratton was forbidding. She spoke but little, but that little was all of a piece with Miss Plunkett's remarks. In fact, I summed her up as a regular iceberg. Now, having said this, I must stop my narrative to explain that there was really nothing cold about her. It was a mannerism pure and simple, and even this

was swept away by her subsequent service in the Legion, leaving all the gentleness and loveliness of her nature in evidence.

As I listened to them, understanding suddenly came to me. *It was all real!* Here were two people talking extravagances and they meant every word of it – two souls afire! I took many deep breaths. The tea-shop left me absolutely cold, but oh! what an asset these two perfectly heroic people would be to the Legion! Then I began to do my share of the talking. I spoke about the Legion, and of course they were already prepared to join. I suggested that a second branch was ripe for formation and that they could join it.

Then casually, and not at all as a matter of practical politics – but rather to offset the tea-shop proposal – I put before them the idea of the lodging-house to which I have referred above. They thought it would be a lovely idea. If we wanted to start such a thing, we could count them in, as they were looking for work that would give them something full-time to do.

That finished our interview. Following it, steps were taken to establish the new branch. The Praesidium of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (now changed in name to Sancta Maria) came into existence with Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton as two of its Officers. The work undertaken was the same as that of the mother branch, i.e., the visitation of the Union. Because this Praesidium was destined shortly to play so important a part in connection with the first Legion Hostel, there is a tendency to forget that even if it never had touched the Hostel, its formation was an event of first rate Legion significance. *For it was the Second Praesidium of the Legion of Mary.*

In the month of July a week's Retreat for the women of the Francis Street Parish was given by the well-known Passionist, Father Ignatius. In the early part of that week, Father Creedon brought him down to No. 25 Low Street, which he – Father Creedon – had already visited on a couple of occasions. This was the house I have already mentioned as the place where I once beat so hasty a retreat. At the time of the visit of the two priests there were 31 street girls living there, practically all of them young, many of them beautiful girls. The priests gathered the girls together into the largest room of the house, the kitchen, and in turn addressed them. The appeal was gentle, and none but religious motives put before the hearers.

The sequel was sensational. Many of the girls started to cry. As far as could be judged, all of them declared their sorrow at their present mode of life. They would love to be good, but what could they do? Nobody would employ them, so how could they live? The suggestion was made that they go into the Magdalen Asylum, but at this they balked.

The position was a heart-breaking one! Here was a crowd of girls, sunk in sin, but professing the desire to amend. The only apparent solution to this position is

one they are unwilling to accept. What *is* to be done? A way out must be discovered. The immediate problem was to provide for the girls' maintenance, and now Father Creedon did a very heroic thing. He interviewed the owner-manager of the house, and contracted to pay her £4 a day in lieu of payment by the girls. This arrangement secured that the girls would not be driven back to their old life by the necessity of food and shelter.

This, however, could not go on forever. £4 a day would be £28 a week; and for other reasons as well it was obvious that this was a mere expedient. A permanent solution must be sought. So reasoning, Father Creedon summoned a meeting of all those who had previously been discussing the theory of this very problem. That meeting was held in the front room in Myra House at 9:30 p.m. on 11th July, 1922.

It began at the conclusion of the meeting of the Praesidium of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, which took place in the next room. Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton were among those who came from that meeting to the emergency meeting. Another lady, Mrs. Davis, accompanied them. In addition, there were present Father Toher, Father Devane, of course Father Creedon and I think, Father Robinson. All sat around the immense and ornate oval oak table (which was the pride of the St. Vincent de Paul Society) and they debated with painful anxiety the problem of the 31 girls. It was unthinkable that they should be allowed to drift back again to dreadful things. But what was to be done? No solution was evident.

However, a suggestion was forthcoming. Father Devane had not long before this opened up the big Men's Retreat House in Rathfarnham Castle. Moreover he believed in his wares. He looked on the enclosed Retreat as the remedy for every ailment. So he proposed that it should be applied here. As drowning men are alleged to clutch at straws, so that worried group grasped at this idea. It was not, of course, a permanent solution, any more than was the £4 *per diem*. But it was something; it gained time; it meant action; and perhaps developments would come out of such a Retreat. Possibly some or many of the girls might accept the suggestion, already turned down by them, that they should enter a Good Shepherd Convent.

Therefore it was unanimously agreed that an enclosed Retreat was the thing for this emergency. But, first, would the girls agree? Secondly, where would such a Retreat be given? It was considered well to settle No. 2 before proceeding to tackle No. 1. Father Devane and Miss Plunkett were commissioned to make a tour of the city the following day, Wednesday, to find if harbourage were anywhere available. All were to meet again on Wednesday night in Myra House to hear the report of the two envoys.

The group assembled at the time arranged. The envoys – a weary pair – gave an account of their adventures. These had opened badly and had gone from bad

to worse during the day. Most places had no facilities for such a Retreat as that proposed, but in any case the proposal was received with incredulity not unmixed with horror. *The idea of thirty girls from the streets being launched in a body into a Retreat!*

A heart-breaking day rolled on to its conclusion. Suddenly Miss Plunkett had an inspiration, which, by the way, should have come to her much sooner. She thought about Baldoyle, where she knew intimately two nuns of exceptional calibre. One of these was Sister Conception Vavasour, who had actually sent Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton to the Legion. The other was the Rectress of the Convent, Mother Angela Walsh.

So out to Baldoyle went the footsore pair. There they saw Mother Angela and told her the whole story. Mother Angela listened breathlessly. She had never heard anything like it in her whole life. "Oh, how I would like to help you, but ...". She shared to the full all the fears that everyone else had, and in addition to those she had a few extra ones of her own. "I am afraid of my life, but I cannot bring myself to send you away."

Everyone must admit the reasonableness of her doubts. There were three or four special reasons, indeed overwhelming reasons, why she should not agree. She had some time before that inaugurated their Week-end Retreat House, and of course it would be a terrible thing if word went round that they had street girls making a Retreat in the Convent. It would be assumed that they were using the Retreat House. This could not fail to have disastrous consequences. In the second place, the Sisters had their Holiday House there. The same consideration applied to it as to the Retreat House.

"I must be mad, but I am not able to turn you down. Probably my Mother General will, however. But if she does not, here is what I propose to do. There is our National School. You can turn it into dormitories. The schoolyard will be your ground; the nuns' parlors your refectories. The cooking will be done in the nuns' kitchen. The nuns' oratory will be the Chapel. We will not touch Holiday House or Retreat House at any point. Could we not get along fine on that arrangement?"

So spoke one of the most heroic women who has ever lived. It is impossible now for anyone to measure the real greatness of her act, for most of the circumstances have changed, and many of the monumental fears and misconceptions which impeded approach to that particular work have now been shaken down. But that was July, 1922, and Mother Angela Walsh – though, as she said, her heart failed her absolutely – gave the consent which sent back our jubilant envoys to us.

2. The Unprecedented Retreat

As previously arranged, we all met that evening in Myra House, this time in the back room in which the Legion had been born. There the recital of the day's events, with their splendid climax, was listened to with breathless attention. When the story was told, quite an interval followed, in which we sat back and looked at each other, and said nothing. That pause, short though it was, contained a big transition. We were only allowed to savor the joy for a fleeting second or two. Then the future with its anxieties absorbed our attention. The Retreat premises were now provided, but would the girls drink this lovely medicine which was being prepared for them? Cold reason suggested that they hardly would. Yet there was a certain supernatural quality in the atmosphere which gave us hope.

Obviously the next step was to see the girls and place before them the idea of the Retreat, and five of us were required to proceed to Low Street at eleven o'clock the following morning for that purpose. This was all we could do in the direction of definite arrangement, but we sat there for a considerable time talking over the possibility of alternative courses – in the event of the morrow's mission proving a failure.

Thursday, the 13th July, dawned showing forth nature at her best. The five emissaries of the Legion met and directed their steps towards No. 25. The neighborhood had received many thrills in the preceding days, but it was far from being sensationsated so our coming set every one agog and drew a big crowd. What were we up to now? We entered the house, and after some preliminary greeting of the proprietors and staff, we set about our appointed work. We took the nearest bedroom and entered it.

Its normal occupants all assembled, and to them we detailed the proposition of the Retreat. In the morning atmosphere, and in the sordid surroundings, the idea seemed somehow fantastic even to us. At the outset, it so presented itself to the six young girls to whom we were appealing. *They would not hear of such a thing.* So we talked and talked. We had to explain in the first place what an enclosed Retreat was. We assured them that everything was as we were describing it. They would not be forced to remain against their will, or to do anything they did not wish to do. The Retreat was really and truly what we represented it to be – a couple of days which they would give to God and to the consideration of the all-important question of their future. Little by little they thawed, and after half an hour we had prevailed. The six of them gave what looked to be a firm consent. We drew breaths of relief. Our work was not done, but at least another milestone was passed.

We proceeded to the next room, and there addressed ourselves to its occupants, four in number. The same trying discussion followed; the same doubts and fears

expressed, the same explanations, assurances, appeals spoken by us. Then, at long last, a like success! We left the room *en route* for the third, but at this stage we faced disaster. We found that all the first six had “ratted.” It was not that they had been ill-inclined or insincere. But the very moment we had left their room the agents of evil were among them undoing our work, contradicting every word we had addressed to them.

The most effective argument against us was the rumor, which had spread like wildfire through the place, to the effect that the whole proceeding was a government plot to take them off and lock them up for life.

ALL OVER AGAIN

So back again we went to Room No. 1 and all over again the ordeal of persuasion was gone through. It was mercifully briefer. We succeeded in allaying the fears. But then we had to return to Room No. 2, where, the weeds, the same suspicions had meantime sprung up.

And so we made a veritable Way of the Cross through that big house, each room an agonizing Station. Five long hours it lasted, but at the end we had the consent of almost every one. We announced that at 11:30 the following morning we would have a large charabanc at Myra House to take the party to Baldoyle. Then, almost utterly exhausted, we left the house, pushed through the sympathetic (in fact, praying) throng outside, and then separated, having in the meantime arranged that Miss Plunkett, Miss Scratton and Mrs. Davis would make the Retreat with the girls and specially look after them.

Straight from No. 25, Father Creedon and I walked up to Gorevan’s big emporium in Camden Street, and we started to buy. It was our agreement with the nuns that they would give us the premises, but that we would equip ourselves. So, with a fine recklessness, we bought beds, etc., and for the moment we did not permit ourselves to consider where the money was to come from for fear that such a thought might, as the Handbook would now put it, exercise restraint on necessary action. “Men’s housekeeping” is a term of opprobrium commonly heard from feminine lips, but as I recall things, it seems to me that we did not forget anything very vital in that afternoon’s purchasing. That completed, we arranged that all was to be delivered at Baldoyle the following morning.

Now at last we could sit down! It was high time, too, to utter some words of prayer – impossible during the hectic happenings of the day. But no! We were not destined to be out of turmoil even for the short remainder of the day. No sooner were we in touch again with what we may call the world, than charges of recklessness, folly, madness, began to be levelled at us, some in regard to the details of the scheme, while others attacked the whole thing root and branch, from stem to stem. The metaphors are mixed, but something of the kind is

required to indicate the emphatic character of the criticism we encountered. No one could disregard such a storm, much of which proceeded from wise people full of goodness and of good will for ourselves personally. So an emergency meeting was summoned, and that evening at eight o'clock, in Father Toher's rooms in Francis Street, we had another mustering of the clans for the purpose of considering criticisms. This time the ladies were omitted. They could not be expected to have sympathy with the points of view which were to be discussed, and they would possibly tend to be scandalized by man-like bargainings about the amount of risk which it is proper to incur in order to save a soul.

For, broadly speaking, that was the question at stake. It was evident that we were facing a serious situation. Each step we took made that more plain. We were like people trying to cross a quicksand; each step forward made recovery more difficult. Or, if the whole enterprise broke down in disaster, as seemed almost certain, what obloquy and ridicule would have to be faced! Supposing our wild-birds brought drink into the convent with them and ended up breaking up the premises! Suppose other things which we thought of! Why, everybody concerned would henceforth bear a label certifying as to the indelible sin of folly that had failed! Everything they would take in hand would suffer condemnation in advance. The Legion itself, so full of promise, the very apple of our eye, would perish ignominiously. And, on the other hand, it was easy to recoil at this stage. We could even soothe ourselves with the reflection that it was positively wrong thus to throw the whole future of the Legion into the melting-pot.

"O, YE OF LITTLE FAITH!"

Today after a lapse of so many years, it is not easy to re-create the position and its atmosphere. The very minds, which would then have doubted fiercely, would now survey the past from the proverbial arm-chair, and gently rebuke our terrible hours of anxious debate and thought: "O, ye of little faith!" We almost find it hard ourselves to see why we should then have hesitated, even for a moment, in the face of the overwhelming fact that about thirty girls – sunk in sin, their whole lives a sin and the dragging of innumerable others into sin and the habit of it – had said to us: "We want to be good." But hesitate we did – for a time. And when at last that hesitation ended, it was in a spirit of martyrdom and not of confident faith that the unanimous decision was taken which committed us to the morrow's irrevocable plunge into a great unknown.

The end of the discussion still left us unprovided with a priest to give the Retreat, but someone had suggested a young Franciscan as being just the type for such a difficult enterprise. That was Father Philip, who had not long before been appointed to the Church of Adam and Eve, Merchant's Quay. What was said of him seemed promising. So one of our number was deputed to see him first thing the following morning. That was running things pretty tight, considering that our time-table marked the Retreat to begin early in the afternoon of the same day. But it was the best that we could think of.

The next day was Friday, the 14th July. It, too, was a beautiful day. At nine o'clock our representative interviewed Father Philip. Lo, he was St. Anthony to the very life! The strange events which had occurred were detailed, and the amazing proposition was advanced that he, Father Philip, whom none of us had known even by appearance, should take in hand the unprecedented Retreat. He uttered no word of surprise and little of comment. The narrative finished, the question was asked: "So will you help us out, Father?" The reply was unhesitating: "Indeed I'd love to," he said. "You have taken hold of my heart. But I must put it to my Superiors. Come back in about two hours and I will tell you the result." Whew! that would bring us just to eleven-thirty, the very time at which the girls were due to depart from Myra House in their charabanc. What if that verdict were to be "No"? But, again what else could be done but await it? *O Mary! sustain us in this unbearable suspense and make these big people say the words we want!*

3. Baldoyle at Last

Though our anxiety did not help on the hands of the clock, neither did it prevent them moving. Eleven o'clock saw our members converging on Myra House. The way of some of them passed near to Low Street. So they dropped down that street to see how things were shaping. I have said that we were doubtful as to the stability of the promises we had elicited from the girls on the previous day. More, we hardly ventured to promise ourselves that any of them would, to use the sporting phrase, face the starting pistol. So it was with a feeling of deadening apprehension that we made the turning which gave us a view of one stretch of the strange right-angled thoroughfare which was Low Street.

It was crowded with people, and this prevented one from judging what the position was. We had to make our way some distance through the throng – down near to No. 25 itself – before we could see what we wanted to see. Joy of joys! Some on the steps of the house, some scattered through the waiting crowd – there were the girls ready for their expedition. All of them were well clad, and here and there lying about were the suitcases that contained all their worldly possessions: provision for a journey which was to take their owners very far indeed. Those suitcases were symbolic not merely of movement, but in this case of *A Movement, a Great Movement!* One could not judge how many had thus made ready to come with us. But it was plain that there were many; a careful glance around suggested that not less than half of the total number of thirty-one had decided favorably.

We moved from one to another uttering a few words of pleasure and encouragement, then a few others of caution: "Better be moving now; it is near the time. Do not come along in a crowd; you will only attract still more attention. Walk in twos and threes. God bless you all." And indeed on every side this latter prayer was voiced. The demeanor of the crowd was wholly admirable. Not a word was spoken which should have been unsaid. The attitude was sympathetic, restrained, positively prayerful.

THE WONDROUS DRAUGHT OF BIG FISHES

Then we ourselves moved off first. We did not wish it to seem as if we were ushering them along. Behind us, all faces began to turn in the direction of Francis Street. A couple of the girls at once seized their suit-cases and set out, and others did likewise. But probably it would be more accurate to suppose that their luggage was carried for them by members of the kindly and numerous escort which moved with them. Those admonitions of ours as to proceeding to Myra House in inconspicuous fashion were impossible of fulfilment. Like a great serpent the crowd in Low Street began to uncoil and to thread itself along the way to Myra House, gaining additions as it went, until it finally merged in the

other crowd of those who had judged that Francis Street would be a place of even tenser interest, and who waited there expectantly.

When we, the forerunners of that strange cortege, reached Myra House and entered, we found the remainder of our colleagues there already. We were able to rejoice their hearts with the tidings that a large proportion of the girls had kept their promises and were actually on their way. Then we all went to the large entrance hall and there we waited to welcome those who would soon arrive. With us, too, stood one full of sympathy and amazement, whose name recalls important peaks of history – Dr. Frank O'Reilly, the Manager of the Catholic Truth Society, and later distinguished for his work as chief organizer of the Dublin Eucharistic Congress of 1932. The Society's premises in O'Connell Street and all its contents had recently perished in the cataclysm of fire and shot which had laid waste a large portion of the center of the City. Thereupon the St. Vincent de Paul Society had offered the hospitality of the back premises in Myra House, including the room in which the Legion had seen the light.

And as we wait, the ranks of the crowd are rudely divided; a great charabanc pushes its way along and draws up beside the curb of No. 100 – that is of Myra House. There it stands, its engines throbbing away as if to show that it, too, is one with us, and impatient to receive its cargo and be off.

Now the girls are arriving. One by one they enter the doorway. The first object to meet their eyes is the large statue of the Sacred Heart, which stands welcomingly in the hall, and before which it has always been the custom for each member of the House to kneel at entry and departure to say a short prayer. Once I used to boast that that statue was my own selection. "Its looks were once beautiful," as St. Alphonsus Liguori's prayers of the Stations run, but a repainting has since then somewhat disfigured it. However, it is the unrenovated statue with its singularly sweet appealing face that now meets the incoming prodigals: "Come unto Me"

It is now 11:30, the arranged time for departure, but the girls are still coming, pushing through the ever-thickening crowd. Then the steady stream fails, but we wait and are rewarded by the advent of a straggler or two. At last it seems obvious that the last one has come. We must be off. People are waiting for us at the other end. Besides we do not know if a vital link in the chain is welded in or not. Remember, we have not yet gotten our priest for the Retreat! "Get in, ladies, we're a bit late. We must be moving. The holy nuns will be ticking someone off for this. Room for two more in the third row. That's everyone now, except Miss Plunkett. Miss Plunkett, you're holding us up! You can talk to Matt Murray when we come back – in you go beside Mary Nelson!" Then everybody aboard, we proceed to count heads: twenty-three girls, together with Miss Plunkett, Miss Scratton and Mrs. Davis. That's great – 23 out of 31 – our net was truly filled with big fishes. Who could have imagined it? Such a wondrous draught!

OFF

Then I am promoted to a seat on the high front box beside the driver. We are ready for the road, but first we must look around and take in the scene. We have not had time or thought so far for such a luxury. Well, well, what a crowd! Did poor old Francis Street in all its ancient and varied history ever gaze on the like before? Surely it never did! Then the word is given to the driver, and the Chariot of Adventure begins cautiously to move. Father Creedon waves a parting benediction from the pavement; we are definitely off.

As our juggernaut presses on, the lane just widens to the extent of letting us pass through without causing casualties. Farewells, cries of good will, words of blessing are hurled at us from all sides. At last we reach the tram-tracks; we are out of Francis Street. We cross High Street and plunge down the precipitous descent of St. Augustine's Street and Bridge Street to the riverside. Then to the right down the Quays. We are heading for the Franciscan church which the people insist on calling "Adam and Eve's," a name which does not really belong to it. We have to call there to get that answer which about two hours before (Heavens! It feels like an age ago!) had been promised to us by Father Philip – the decision of his Superiors as to whether he was *or was not* to give the Retreat.

As we go, we are brushing by history. A little way on we stop at the opposite side of the street – the Friary. I bound creditably from my perch and run across the road to the door. I have only room for one idea in my head: "Have we got Father Philip?" If I had thought to look across the Liffey – as all those I left behind me were now doing, I would have witnessed a pitiful sight. Portions of the former proud walls of the Four Courts, the central law courts of Ireland, were being pulled down by great gangs of men with ropes. Civil War had just been raging, and these dangerously tottering walls were part of its grim heritage. And even during the short time I was away, our great adventure was in peril; the result of that striking scene playing upon super-charged nerves and galvanizing into life that old terror to which reference has already been made, that a government plot was in operation against them.

What were those soldiers stalking about with rifles for and looking – many of them – in the direction of the vivid-colored charabanc? Did they not look as if they were going to shoot at it? My departure confirmed these fears. Was that the real reason why I had left and run away so hurriedly, leaving them to their fate? How ridiculous the idea now sounds! What, moreover, of the three Legionaries whom the charabanc contained? Were they, too, to be immolated? Yet, contrary to all reason, panic set in and threatened ominously. A moment more and the consequences might have been serious, but just then I returned and this reassured the panic-stricken. But it was a near thing. If they had left the vehicle in that mood, could anything have brought them back again? It made us realize by what a precarious thread we held together those twenty-three. The

incident was a bad augury for the still more trying time which lay ahead, the days of Retreat.

But to return a moment to the Friary – how *can* I beat about the bush in such a way and delay in communicating the vital fact! Well, I knocked, or rather rang, at the Friary, and was speedily admitted, and just as quickly did the repository of our hopes, Father Philip appear. “Well, Father?” “All’s well!” was the laconic answer. I feel sure I must have breathed a word of thanks to heaven for this great favor granted; however, I do not remember well enough to assert that I did. I certainly spoke our gratitude to Father Philip. Then I brought him to the door, pointed out the charabanc which held his future Retreatants, ignorant that red panic now reigned among them. He eyed them intently. His next remark was typical of the man: “I would dearly like to go along with you in that fine machine of yours, but I suppose there is no use challenging public opinion too much. I will follow you out immediately by train.” So off I went to rejoin the party and bear to them the message of great joy. He stood on the steps and waved to us his temporary farewell. Then the driver stepped on the gas once more.

We left behind us the scene of havoc, and down the Quays we sped across O’Connell Bridge, past the Custom House, another landmark of war’s destruction, and out by the sea-road towards Baldoyle. Oh, I think we all enjoyed that run. Certainly, it was the first thing I had enjoyed for many a day. It had not been proving so sweet to work for the Lord! But now for a spell anxiety withdrew its chill cloak. We leaned back and we drew the fresh fragrant air into our lungs. By the way, I find that I have neglected to keep the weather-chart posted, so here let me interrupt to say that of the succession of beautiful days which provided the setting for these strange happenings, this day, the 14th July, 1922, was the most heavenly of all – at least it seemed that way to us in whose hearts a great happiness was being permitted to enjoy just a brief reign. We took pleasure out of everything above us and around us, the sea and the land, all nature and everybody. I am sure that we scandalized more than a few as our band was whirled along, alternately chatting loudly and chorusing bravely.

That all-too-short journey reached its final stages. The sign, “Baldoyle Road” showed us, as it yearly shows multitudes of racegoers, the point at which we were to turn off at right-angles from the sea-road up towards Baldoyle and its celebrated race-course. Half-a-mile more, and we were at our journey’s end. Our conveyance drew up outside the Convent of the Sisters of Charity.

Leaving the remainder of the party in the charabanc, some of us descended and entered the Convent. Soon Mother Angela came to us in the hall. She showed signs of the double stress to which she was subjected. Her face was drawn and white. Her first words indicated what her vision was of the gravity of the task ahead, to which nevertheless, she had so bravely set her hand. “Will we all be murdered in our beds?” Undoubtedly in this estimate of the possibilities she went further than did the rest of us, but indeed none knew what awkwardness we

might not encounter. It is to be remembered, however, that the measure of Mother Angela's achievement was the degree of risk which she thought she was facing.

"Look at them, Mother Angela, and I think you will take a less serious view." So she opened the door and looked out, and plainly she found the appearance of the twenty-three far different from what she had anticipated. "Oh," was her only comment. Then a pause: "Tell them to come inside." So from the high steps of the charabanc they came, jumping nimbly down. Somehow I cannot associate this necessary acrobatic performance with the three ladies, but it had to be done, and they managed it. In through the doorway all filed, looking so trim and neat and young. No sign of drink, no suggestion of the desperado! It looked as if murder at all events might be ruled out. Was Mother Angela disappointed at this apparent withdrawal of her prospects of a martyr's crown? Who can tell? Her face gave no sign as she watched the twenty-three march past, for many pressing items had now to engage her attention. For example, the allocation of the accommodation had to be gone through again. Things had to be altered wholesale. Each one of us had to be assigned his duties.

A RETREAT HOUSE IS CREATED

Soon we were hard at work, for a fully-equipped Retreat House had to be set up, which would not touch the regular Retreat House at any point. The two-storied schoolhouse was to provide the dormitories and common-room. Much moving of desks and forms had to be done. This was in progress when it was announced that Gorevan's van had now arrived bearing the beds. These had to be carried in. Then their frames had to be fitted together and put into position. This was reckoned a man's job, so Govevan's man and I performed it. Then we were dismissed to other tasks, for the work of dressing the beds was deemed "to be beyond us," and the ladies took over. In the meantime the nuns' parlors had been all of them earmarked and arranged for various purposes. Two of them were to be refectories, and a third became G.H.Q. for the Legionaries who had come out in the charabanc and those others who travelled out each day to assist in the Retreat. This room was destined to be a most important spot, the nerve-center of the Retreat, its legislative point, and the nucleus or cell of the future Sancta Maria and of all Sancta Marias! And a lively little flock these latter have already become!

In a surprisingly short time the emergency Retreat House came into being, well-ordered, complete. There had been one serious defect in the plan, however. I must say that our hearts rather failed us when we looked at the "grounds" in which for three long days our wild-birds were to wander between duties. Those grounds were to be only the schoolyard. Small, gravel-strewn, not a tree or even a bush, everyone would be in full view of everyone else. There was nothing to suggest the privacy of thought esteemed so needful for the time of Retreat. This misgiving of ours had simultaneously suggested itself to Mother Angela. "This

yard would soon get on everybody's nerves," she observed. "You must take over the nuns' garden." And so it was. The door of the latter was opened up, and what delightful Retreat-grounds that Convent garden proved to be! The memory of the hours spent walking in that wooded, flower-set enclosure persists down to this present day.

The finishing touches to our Retreat House were being applied when St. Anthony-to-the-life marched in. His train journey, plus a spell of walking at each end, had occupied him considerably longer than did our port to port flight, but here he was at last in nice time for the scheduled hour of opening of the Retreat. The "very look of him" was a tonic of cheerfulness. He moved around from girl to girl and soon was "friends" with everyone. As well, of course, he had to make the acquaintance of Mother Angela, and the nuns and our Legionaries. Not one of them but myself had ever before met the young Franciscan. But every moment suggested that Our Blessed Mother had given us just the right person for the formidable task ahead. The events of the succeeding days were to make this still more plain.

It was now about time for the Retreat to begin. As a preliminary, Father Philip gathered all around him out in the aforementioned schoolyard and then he told them what was expected of them while on Retreat. This finished, he touched on an important point: "Two of you, I understand, are not Catholics. I expect they would prefer to walk around while the others are at the lectures." There was a momentary pause. Then one of the two referred to, a tall, very fair, good-looking girl, spoke from the ranks before him: "I intend to go through this Retreat just the same as my pals." Immediately the other girl, dark, pleasant, and also tall, spoke out to like effect.

How good this was! The feared collapse had not come. Instead, we felt we had gained more ground. Quietly all filed into the Convent chapel and the epoch-making Retreat began.

4. Councils of War

That Retreat, which I have ventured to call epoch-making had begun. It was the first women's Retreat I ever attended. I sat at the back of the chapel during all the lectures. Fortune favored us, inasmuch as one of the visitors staying in the Holiday Home during those days was a blind girl from the Sisters of Charity Institution, Merrion, who possessed the voice of an angel. Each lecture was preceded and followed by a hymn, sung solo by her to the accompaniment of the organ, and the silver notes of that singing still ring in the ears of those who heard it.

Look, too, at the rows of the girls, as they sat facing the brown-clad figure who was talking to them. There was no sign of the restlessness which must have been seething in them. They gave an entire, even a tense attention. Difficulties presented themselves at other times during the Retreat, but none during the lectures. But let me guard against misapprehension. When I talk of problems and difficulties I do not mean anything ostentatious or approaching misconduct. The difficulties were all interior. The dispositions of the girls were manifestly excellent. Their whole-heartedness could not have been bettered. It impressed even the nuns who were used to the Weekly Retreat parties in the ordinary Retreat House. By the way, I must explain that only a few of the nuns were aware of the identity of those whom they were entertaining. The party was supposed to be a city Sacred Heart Sodality.

The first lecture finished, with its sequel of silver song, a meal was given to the girls. Fathers Creedon and Toher had meantime come upon the scene, and we availed of this meal-interval to hold a council of war. All so far had gone splendidly, far exceeding even our most extreme hopes. The atmosphere was unquestionably charged with the spiritual, and gave a note of assurance that all would continue as successfully. Still one never knew. That feeling of standing over a mine never left us for a single second. And what of the morrow, or rather of Monday morning, when the Retreat was due to terminate, and all were to return to the world which for the moment seemed remote? *Where were we going to bring those girls on Monday morning?* So far we had not time to give a thought to that. We had not dared to think beyond the point of getting them on Retreat. That objective now realized, the all-important consideration of shelter on Monday forced itself upon us. It was a frightening consideration. For all of us were only too well aware that living accommodations of any kind were at a premium in Dublin – in fact were unobtainable. Surely we could not find premises large enough to house twenty-five persons! Even more sure was it that we could not find those premises in two days – one of them the Saturday half-holiday and the other the Sunday! Further formidable contemplation: we had no money! We already owed quite a sum in respect of the equipment we had bought for our Retreat House! For awhile no solution was evident. But a way out must be found. The idea of letting those, whom we had struggled so hard to get

and keep, return to Low Street with all that such a step entailed in the way of atmosphere and incitement, was definitely unthinkable. But what alternative was there? Our sense of desperation was reflected in the suggestions advanced, all of them impracticable, some of them fantastic.

SOMEONE HAS A BRAIN-WAVE

Then just when we had come to the point of being unable to produce a new idea of any kind someone remarked: "This is a housing problem. Why not see the Minister for Local Government and ask his help towards a solution?" And why not? That, at the least, was a suggestion which carried us a stage further. It was most improbable, of course, that anything could be done for us, especially in view of the time-factor. But who could tell! In any case we had to do something, and no other door lay open to us. It was agreed that on the following day Father Creedon, Father Devane, and I should seek an interview with Mr. Cosgrave, who then held that Ministry, and unfold to him our plight.

That ended our council of war. It was well that a decision had been reached, for there would have been no further time for talk. The girls' dinner was over, and an interval for recreation followed. These free-time spells were the most trying parts of the Retreat. They were its weak links, where collapse might occur. It was necessary that the girls should not be left too much to themselves at these times with nothing to do but to think or to talk with one another. Therefore to that extent the customary routing of an enclosed Retreat was departed from. Silence was not insisted on during free times. The Legionaries used those intervals to move around among the girls and develop acquaintance. Moreover, at one interval each day, Father Philip organized games in which nearly all took part. Certainly Father Philip was heaven-sent! No aspect of this many-sided and utterly unorthodox Retreat found him at a loss.

I have referred to games. It exemplifies our growth in confidence that at an early stage Mother Angela had opened up the door onto the Racecourse, and it was on its broad acres that our sports were held. Incidentally, this meant that any girl, were she thus minded, had but to walk a little way to catch the train for Dublin.

So hour after hour passed away, and duty after duty was perfectly done. Exacting the Retreat was – indeed exhausting! But full of consolation. We could not guess as to the manner in which it would end, but in its course it was wonderful. I cannot conceive that any Retreat was ever so exciting, while at the same time so orderly and in a way matter-of-fact.

"Dark though the day and the way be long, still it cometh to joy of evensong." And even that chain of many links, which was the 14th July, 1922, came to an end – a happy end. After a final lecture, the girls retired to rest, and peace most complete terminated that supremely anxious day. Some of us stayed on in Baldoyle to a late hour to see that all remained calm.

IN SEARCH OF A HOME

At one o'clock the following day, the 15th July, the three of us who had been assigned to that mission arrived at Government Buildings in Upper Merrion Street, and sought an interview with the Minister. First we saw Mr. E.P. McCarron, the Secretary of the Department. We explained the purpose of our visit and forth-with he brought us to the Minister. Introductions effected, we broke at once into our tale. We described the events which had taken place, narrating them much as they have been set down in these pages. If one of us failed to bring out a point sufficiently, another took up the running. It was obvious that our listeners found the patchwork narration a gripping thing.

At the outset, we were all seated round the table. But as our story developed, Mr. Cosgrave forsook his chair, and after that paced up and down the room listening with intense interest. And, by the way, that room, with its fresh and tasteful decoration, its somber, stately furniture, provided a worthy setting for the vital act of our drama which was being enacted in it.

Our recital concluded and we made our petition, pleadingly. The Minister ceased his restless pacing and stood close to us, looking down at us. There was silence for a while. Mr. Cosgrave broke it: "I have never in my life listened to anything more strange and touching than the story you have told. I cannot for the moment see any solution to your difficulty. But one thing is certain, we cannot let you down. A way must be found." Then pushing paper before us, he asked that we should endeavor to set down a summary of the wonderful happenings which we had recounted. There was to be a meeting of the Government that night, and he would place our need before them and see what could be done.

So we sat for a moment before those sheets of paper. Within the compass of a couple of them had to be brought the whirlwind doings of a week. Then the pen began to scratch – it was a quill-pen, strange to say, which was presented to us. Our critics and the worldly-wise might say it stood for geese, but I prefer to think it symbolized the wings of anxious Guardian Angels!

The letter which we wrote lies now before me, and I set it down for you to read. To you it will be merely an historical document, or like a strip of celluloid film which you hold in your hand and which you see to be marked with photographic impressions. But to us it is like what the film projects when placed in its machine – a lightsome, living presentation, a vivid calling-back of long gone events. I wish you could read it with our eyes.

THE MOMENTOUS LETTER

A most unusual situation has arisen in this Parish and I think it well to bring it to your notice.

We have in and around this locality a number of lodging-houses devoted solely to the accommodation of women of ill-fame. As the result of special attention on the part of the Clergy to one of these houses, a great impression was made upon the girls – number 31, most of them quite young – and practically all professed themselves willing to abandon their evil life.

We, of course, see that it is quite useless to take away these girls' present livelihood unless we put something in its place. So, partly with the idea of consolidating their good resolutions, and partly to gain time so that we may endeavour to make provision for them, we suggested to the girls the possibility of a three-days' Retreat. This they agreed to as soon as they were assured that there was no intention of permanently immuring them.

A Religious Community was found which agreed to undertake the work, and now at this very moment the girls are on the second day of their Retreat.

The immediate necessity which drives us to approach you is this:

The girls have to leave the convent, where they are on Retreat, on Monday next, and we feel that it would be absolutely fatal if they have, even for a single night, to return to their old surrounding. But, as things stand in Dublin, there is no decent place for them to go. So failing some solution during the next few days, it is inevitable that they will return to their former lodgings.

We have abundant assistance from ladies who are prepared to make any sacrifice of time and labour in this work. There are three of them at present sleeping with the girls, and waiting on them in the convent. These, and others, are prepared to undertake anything that they may be called upon to do – cook and cater, and otherwise look after their charges. The chief necessity is a temporary shelter of some description, if possible in a quiet locality. Every effort will be made to make permanent and adequate provision for the girls. In many of the cases possibilities of settlement have already presented themselves, and it is felt that if the next week or so can be tided over, all can be suitably seen to.

Their behaviour on Retreat leaves no doubt about their present excellent dispositions. But if we are forced to allow them to drift back to old conditions, there is equally little doubt that necessity will drive them to their old life. This possibility, in view of what has already been achieved, fills us with dismay.

In these quite unique circumstances we appeal to you with every confidence.

BRAINSTORMS AT BALDOYLE

That letter written and Father Creedon's signature appended, we took our leave. We were to call back the following morning to learn the result. We had a quiet confidence that all would be well, and in great heart we journeyed to Baldoyle, where we found the Retreat proceeding according to plan.

It must not be imagined, however, that things went absolutely smoothly. Good intention and exact performance of the details of the Retreat were all there. But there was, nevertheless, an undercurrent of nervousness which came to the surface from time to time, awakening our terrors, and keeping us always in a state of tension. Every moment brought a problem, and somehow the fate of the whole Retreat seemed to hang on the solving of that problem. Even a gust of depression or of temper on the part of a girl was momentous. For it was brimful of contagion. It might explode into a stampede. We always feared that just as the girls had come in a body, so in a body they might suddenly leave us at any time. Constantly, mental difficulties of one kind or another were attacking individual girls. There would be a knock at the door of that parlor, which has already been referred to as our little G.H.Q., or an emissary would come to us in the garden or elsewhere, and tell us that Molly or Jennie So-and-so was upset about something. Our great standby in these frequent upsets was Father Creedon. So amazingly successful had he shown himself in dealing with the first few of them that had occurred, that by common consent the rest of us – used though we all were to the handling of people – passed to him the particular duty of arguing with the girls and clearing away each cloud as it arose. We clearly saw that the special grace for that task had descended on him, and that realization of ours was endorsed by the event. Of the many crises which presented themselves in those three days there was not one which he did not happily compose. Thus he became, as it were, a pillar of confidence among us.

And so the second day of the Retreat moved to its close. We were still walking on the yielding waters, but Our Beloved Lord was making them grow more solid beneath our feet with every step we took. Not one girl had left us, and there were many pleasing signs.

The following morning, Sunday 16th July, Father Creedon and I met at about 11:30 and went to Government Buildings in great anxiety. There we were presented with a letter, the envelope of which bore the writing of Mr. Cosgrave. We tore it open with a sensation of actual fear, for we realized that it contained the fate of our Retreat party. The letter informed us that the premises now known as "*Sancta Maria*" were at our disposal free of rent and taxes for a period of three months from that day. With joy we continued on to Baldoyle. We found many of our party already assembled there. At first the announcement that we

actually had a place to go to on Monday morning was received with unmixed delight. But gradually another point of view began to be ventilated. How would our aviary of wild-birds fit in with the amenities of a street which was largely the home of hotels and professional men. This was not Low Street, and despite the best intentions much might be done which would not accord with the locality. The unfavorable attention of the neighbors might be attracted, complaints made, and our great experiment brought to an untimely end. So argued a section among us, and it must be admitted that all felt the force of their misgivings. Still what else could we do? There appeared to be no other way than that which had offered itself. Again, we, all of us, had felt that we were being led along each step by an almost visible Providence, and we reasoned that this latest step could not be other than in keeping. Thus argument and counter-argument went on during the day, at the meals and at the other times when we found ourselves free to talk. In the meantime the Retreat moved admirably along in spite of not a few of the little alarms to which reference has already been made.

A PAVEMENT PARLEY

Confessions had been in progress during the whole of the day. Surely no confessors ever before had so extraordinary a party! The final joyful event of the day was the reconciliation to the Church of a very beautiful young girl of about twenty who had, late on in the evening, admitted that she had formally apostatized from the Church. What a fuss ensued! The girl herself and all of us were terribly anxious that she would be able to receive Holy Communion the following morning with all the others. Therefore she must be received back into the Church that night. The question arose as to the getting of the faculties. There was no telephone; it represented one of the casualties of the Civil War. It was uncharitably alleged that I was the only person of our company without a vital job. So it was agreed to send me into Dublin to see the Vicar-General, Msgr. Fitzpatrick, and ask him for the faculties. I went with all haste, running the half-mile to the tram, and conversing the other gaps between conveyances in the same way. This extreme of haste, which might have seemed to be unnecessary, proved providential. For when I reached Harrington Street, there was the Monsignor waiting to board an approaching tram-car. A few seconds more and he would have been away!

I spoke to him and described my errand and all the attendant circumstances of the Retreat. He did not know me, but he was very charming to me, though much perplexed. He said: "This is a most extraordinary thing, to be stopped on the pavement by a layman for faculties. Who is the priest? He must be very young and inexperienced. Did he not give you anything in writing? Well, well, tell him he should not do the same again. I have never given faculties to a layman in my life, but I suppose it is not too late to mend. Go back to that young priest and tell him from me he may proceed. And bear my compliments to all concerned upon this great work which they have in hand."

Thus uniquely armed with the faculties, I made my way back to Baldoyle with the same degree of expedition as when coming in. The girl was summoned into the chapel, and there we had a profoundly impressive ceremony. And so came the end of the third day of the Retreat, finding in the hearts of all of us a touch of that peace which transcends understanding. One by one, our helpers reluctantly tore themselves away to return to town and home, till eventually I alone was left. Earlier in the evening it had been agreed that I would stay the night. In the room where Father Philip was sleeping, a second bed was put up. This I was to occupy. When, however, the appropriate time had come for retiring to a well-earned repose, bed could not be thought of. The excitements of the previous days, with gradual rising to their joyful climax, were such as to dispel the idea of sleep. Father Philip and I for hour upon hour paced the garden discussing the situation and the future which lay before the work. Eventually, far on towards the morning, we decided we must call a halt. We entered the chapel by the outer door and said our prayers, concluding with the Stations of the Cross. And so to bed.

Then morning with its early rising ... To the chapel where already those regenerate souls were waiting ... Then Mass, said by Father Philip. During it, I occupied my usual place at the back. I can say without hesitation that it was the most wonderful Mass at which I have ever assisted. Then came the moment for Holy Communion, a moment of the most intense joy that can be imagined. I found myself at the altar-rail between two of the girls. In a few minutes all had received Holy Communion with the exception of the two Protestants. This was the first exercise of the Retreat which these had missed, and it was perforce.

5. Sancta Maria is Born

The last chapter brought our adventure to the stage of the completion of the wondrous Retreat. Mass and Holy Communion were followed by breakfast. Then while the girls were still doing justice to what was probably the sweetest, happiest breakfast of their lives, some of us had to dash off to the city. The future home of the work was as yet no more to us than a street and a number. We had to see exactly where it was situated, to take possession, and to make some sort of arrangements for the large family who in about an hour would be setting out from that convent of unique memories.

But let me mark up the calendar and weather-chart. It is Monday the 17th July. It is a beautiful day, matching those which went before it. Back we go along the sea-road which the party had followed on its outward journey. That was only three days before. Yet what ancient history that pleasant charabanc run already seemed!

On reaching town, I went straight to my office. I found that my family had already been there making anxious enquiry. I had unfortunately neglected to send word that I would be away the previous night. Shortly after, there drifted in, independently, but led by the impulse of a common doubt, Fathers Creedon, Toher, and Devane, and Mr. Tom Fallon. The latter was a notable figure in the Dublin of that time. Then a prominent Civil Servant and an utterly devoted worker in the St. Vincent de Paul Society, he was destined soon afterwards to shear through a thousand close ties, and enter the priesthood in Mexico, where he has labored ever since with fruit incalculable. Though Tom Fallon was not actually present at any of the earlier developments of the position, he was by reason of his special intimacy with myself in close touch with all that was happening.

The misgiving that brought us all together was the old one of the suitability of the premises, having regard to the good locality in which they lay. That doubt had been painfully debated at Baldoyle the previous day, and eventually put away. But overnight it had reasserted itself, and here we were again caught up in a whirlwind of indecision! Two of our number were rigidly convinced that the taking over of that particular house would be in the nature of a fatal mistake. The discussion afforded no sign of early agreement. So hastily we rang up one of our Legionaries and dispatched her to Baldoyle with instructions that the girls were to be held back until dinner, instead of leaving early as previously arranged. That done, we breathed more easily. Now we had a couple of hours of elbow-room. We could review the situation logically, calmly. Oh, if we had only known that at that very time the girls were filing out of the Convent at Baldoyle, so that when our messenger would arrive post-haste, she would find them gone! In blissful ignorance we argued every angle of the question. None of us was blind to the possible danger arising out of the site of the house. It need not be a case of

actual misconduct to create unpleasant situations. More free and easy ways, all right in Low Street but definitely not the thing in other spots, mere ebullitions of feeling, horseplay – all these could do much harm if those who lived around about had purely worldly outlooks and only believed in solving evils strictly within the limits of convenience to themselves.

We saw these things in vision. Intimidated, we seized the telephone and rang Sir Joseph Glynn. He was a very special friend of the Legion and of each one of us personally. He was running a hostel for unemployed servants. It was in a less-good locality. We asked him if he would let us have that hostel for a month or so. During that time we would pay for the maintenance of its present residents in any other lodging-house or hostel. At first, Sir Joseph thought this proposition was a form of joke. When he realized that it was seriously meant, he lost no time in saying “no.” That wild idea exploded, the choice before us was naked in its simplicity: The premises we had been offered or the girls’ old home, No. 25 Low Street. Even the most wavering among us saw that No. 25 was altogether out of reckoning. So, the gift premises it must be! That point reached, all fears evaporated so that we almost wondered why we had had them. Still they were nothing to be ashamed of. They showed that though we necessarily were flying blind, we did not in addition shut our eyes.

WE GET THE KEYS

Then Tom Fallon went down to the Department of Local Government for the Sancta Maria keys. By the way, he belonged to that Department. Five minutes saw him back again, the keys in one hand, and in the other a check from E. P. McCarron for £25 to help us on our way. We then broke up, having arranged to meet later in the day in our new premises. Fathers Creedon and Toher set out at once for Baldoyle in the belief that the party would still be out there.

Taking the keys, I started off in leisurely fashion for the house. I scented heavy work ahead and difficulties, and in such circumstances it is not good for man to be alone. And I knew the man I wanted with me. So, on the way, I dropped into No. 40 Lower Kevin Street. There resided a friend and companion of mine in many an arduous enterprise, Mr. Joseph Gabbett. Mr. Gabbett was a shoemaker who specialized in surgical and high-grade work. He was hard at it when I walked in. In twenty sentences I put him in possession of the facts. He worked while I was speaking; he always did. Likewise he worked while he was talking, and his time of talking normally set down the balance heavily. He always spoke very slowly, as if weighing every word. This time, however, he did not say anything. Even when I was finished, he made no comment. He just laid his work aside at once, rose from his seat, doffed his apron, put on his coat and hat, and came with me. As I walked along beside that erect, powerful man, I described events in greater detail. He took all as a matter of course. Indeed he would have taken any sort of adventure casually, especially adventuring of the present kind. Mr. Gabbett was a fervent soul, though his dark, piercing eyes, coal-black hair

and heavy moustache gave him an air of fierceness. He was a comfortable sort of man to be with in an emergency; you knew him to be dependable, “game” all through.

Soon we stood on the stone steps of “our house.” The key turned in the lock, and the door swung open. We entered the bleak, empty hall. All about were the cobwebs and the dirt which had been behind things, and which furniture-removers have the knack of bringing to the light of day. As a parenthesis: it is at least a coincidence of a unique order that the house had been empty for a few days only – since the previous Thursday in fact. The premises had been the offices of the Dail Local Government Department, which had coalesced with the main Local Government Department. During the self-same hours that we had spent canvassing the girls in No. 25 Low Street, the furniture-men were busy emptying the house and transferring its contents to the Government Buildings in Upper Merrion Street. Thus, two events, which seemed utterly unrelated, were providentially intended one for the other. A further amazing fact is that the letter, received by us the previous day, which placed the house at our disposal bore that very address as its printed heading!

SANCTA MARIA IS BORN

But even coincidences which suggest the supernatural must not hold up our narrative. No sooner had Mr. Gabbett and I entered the hall than a pattering of feet was heard outside. Looking around in apprehension, for nerves had not completely settled down after those wracking days, we saw pour into the hall those very persons – girls and Legionaries – whom we fondly supposed to be at that moment in Baldoyle, probably sitting at their dinner. I have explained that the Legionary sent to delay their departure had not arrived in time to do so. The party had left about the time arranged and had come on straight to the house, the door of which they were horrified to find inhospitably closed against them. Twenty-five persons could not wait on the pathway. It was necessary to find some harbourage. The nearest convenient place was the Art Gallery, a little lower down on the other side of the street. Thither they repaired and waited. The ladies were almost sick with anxiety. They could not but believe that the loan of the house to us had fallen through. Now here is another wonderful circumstance. It is that although 25 Low Street, which had been so long their home, lay little more than a quarter of a mile from that spot, nevertheless the girls patiently endured that agonizing wait of two long hours. Not one of them broke away from the flock. Not one of them even grumbled about doing so. This amounted to a miracle!

But at last that period of strain and of real peril terminated. Two figures passed on the other side and opened the door on which their eyes were resting so intently. In a rush the twenty-five crossed the street and entered. And in that second a wonderful thing, an historic event, had taken place. A house had suddenly become the very first Sancta Maria.

Explanations given, my heart nearly stopped at learning of the danger which had been run. Then we scattered on a mystery tour through the premises. We had to find out what it was like, how many rooms it had; and each of those rooms had to be allocated to its use. Reference has been made to the dirt. That was a small matter which fifty arms would soon set right. Momentarily disconcerting was the discovery that the entire basement was many inches deep in water, caused by a burst pipe. It was one of the girls who traced the fault and rectified it by first-aid methods of a drastic kind. The thing of greatest concern was that in the entire house there was but one article which would be described as furniture. That was an old counter which had not been thought worthy of removal to Merrion Street. Yet a use was found for it the very moment it was seen. It was the improvised couch on which one girl was laid, pending the securing of medical aid. A vein or something of the kind had burst in her leg, and she was no longer able to stand.

Of course we had no coal or food. These at least could be readily and cheaply bought. But whatever were we to do for furniture? At that moment, the beds and bedding should according to schedule be on their way from Baldoyle. But beds and bedding, all important though they be, do not furnish a house. We had no money to justify a buying expedition to the shops – even to the second-hand ones. Yet something had to be done – and done without delay!

RAIDING FOR FURNITURE

A few words between Mr. Gabbett and myself determined what that something was to be. We thought we knew where we could get a loan of a *lot* of furniture. Leaving the ladies with instructions to buy provisions, etc., we proceeded down to Great Longford Street, not far off, where a carrier called Connolly had his yard. We hired a four-wheeled horse-dray, and drove with it to Myra House. Our way brought us along Golden Lane past the end of Low Street – the very route taken by the girls and the swirling crowd which moved with them three days before. Along St. Patrick's Park, through Hanover Lane – barely wide enough to let the dray pass through – into Francis Street. Then Myra House again! We opened the door. Once more the Sacred Heart looks down on us serenely, and we know – approvingly. Four grim days have just been lived through for Him, and we are facing up to more of them – in fact, an endless series of such days if the work goes on successfully. And relief at the price of the failure of the work forms still more ghastly contemplation. But this is only by the way! As we pass in, I cannot help a laugh. The Sacred Heart has all the look of smiling on the dubious job we have in view.

The caretaker of the House was a most unusual character, an ex-Petty Officer of the Navy, a war-time veteran, whose paralysed throat-muscles and impeded utterance were relics of a distinguished service. He was a man of gigantic build and a martinet of the first quality. His idea of duty lay in requiring people to present permits for every little thing transcending merest routine. Being

members, we did not require a permit to enter the House. But for our next act, undoubtedly we did. But we did not ask of him a leave we had no chance of getting. We only thought of the girls in that other house, empty but for an old counter. When we set ourselves to lift and carry out articles of the equipment which had been committed to his care, Mr. Healy's horror was extreme – a horror which could only be appreciated by those who knew him. As the two of us approached the door, bearing between us a long and heavy seat, he menacingly barred the way and demanded the meaning of our operations. I answered him to the effect that we were not in a position to argue about the matter, nor had we any intention of being obstructed: "If you think that anything is wrong, Mr. Healy, you have your remedy. Just get out a notebook and write down everything we take, and report us to the House Committee, which will deal with us. In the meantime, you must stand out of the way. We have to get this stuff."

It was patent that we were in earnest. I do not think that my physique exercised intimidatory effect, but that of Gabbett who was over six feet high – added to his naturally fierce demeanor – unquestionably did. The way opened to us, and the two amateur house-breakers set to work, silently and speedily. I have previously spoken of the good-class furniture in the Boardroom of the House. We respected that, but we laid hands on everything of the rougher order – and out to Connolly's dray with it. Benches, chairs, tables, crockery and cutlery, statues and pictures; all soon formed a part of the miscellaneous, lofty pile upon the dray. At length, the latter would hold no more. We carefully shut the door of Myra House, there being no caretaker in sight to perform that duty. He had vanished and we had wondered where he was gone to. We had felt a gnawing fear at the thought that he might have gone for the police, which certainly would have created a most unpleasant situation. As we drove off, however, the mystery was solved. We saw that he was leaning half-way out of the window of his apartment on the second floor, faking on a long sheet of paper an inventory of the articles as they left the house. Rattling down the paved street, we made for the new hostel, the problem of the immediate future driving from our minds all thoughts of ex-Petty Officers and of the inevitable day of reckoning.

But here I must diverge to tell the issue of that reckoning. At the following meeting of the House Committee, a very serious complaint indeed was personally lodged by Mr. Healy against two members of the House. Their threatening attitude was done full justice to, and it is certain that no item was omitted from the really formidable list which told of what was gone. It is understood that the said Committee saw considerable comedy where Healy saw but tragedy. When he left the room after making his indictment, they looked at each other, and they laughed for quite a while. Then they became serious, because other aspects of the affair occurred to them. They did not seem to be at all concerned about the losses – just the opposite in fact, as if the House had gained! Then they composed a letter to us, which stands to their eternal honor. That letter did not contain a word of protest. It gave us as a gift the things that we had taken. It enclosed a check for £5 to help to get other things that might be

needed. Finally it stated that their hearts were with us in our formidable task, and it said that they would pray for our success.

It is of interest to recall that the President of that Committee was the late James Joseph Nagle, the uncle of the present President of the Concilium Legionis¹.

FURNISHED IN A MINUTE

Now to resume the thread of the events. Sancta Maria was about a half-a-mile from Myra House. On reaching there, we found that Gorevan's van had already arrived. Some of the girls were actually assisting in the transferring of its load. Others came to help Gabbett and myself with our consignment. Short work was made of the emptying of the two lorries.

Upstairs or downstairs were hurried the various articles as they came in. All now looked for directions to Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton, who were in their realm, and stood marshalling the movement of each item of equipment to its ordained place. Before Connolly's dray departed, the two ladies who had some furniture of their own in storage commissioned him to get it. Thus, in a couple of hours a regular miracle was wrought. Aladdin's magic lamp could do no more! A hostel had suddenly come into being, reasonably equipped with all things necessary. Its large family were in residence. Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton, only in touch with the Legion for a few weeks, were there to live in the house and manage it. The hostel had its chaplain and its Praesidium – providentially erected only a fortnight before – to run it. One thing alone remained to make the place really home for all within its walls – the first repast. An expert cook had been found among the girls. Yet it was Gabbett who prepared it. He was a host in an emergency of this kind. He removed his coat, made a fire in the range, and applied himself to the task of cooking. Presently, all were seated, partaking of their first meal in their new home. In the interval, brushes had been bought, and already the whole house shone with cleanliness.

Why! It's evening! We are reminded of the fact by the gathering of our clans for the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart. This act was to seal our occupancy of the premises. Father Philip has just come in. Despite a natural imperturbability, he shows astonishment. It only seems an hour or two since the girls were starting off from the Convent to take possession of an empty house. Heavens! Is this the empty house? And are these domesticated-looking girls the wild-birds whose flutterings had kept us on tenterhooks for days?

And here are Fathers Creedon and Toher, back from their unnecessary journey to Baldoyle, and indescribably relieved at finding that all is well in spite of the premature departure of the girls. Then comes Father Robinson. He simply

¹1938.

cannot believe his eyes, for he had been present at the various confabs in Myra House. Then all had been mist, indecision, dreaming. But the dreaming has come true!

We must clean ourselves. Our strenuous exertions have left us grime from head to foot. So we scatter in search of soap and water. Then we find that the water must be really hot and the soap plentiful to accomplish our purpose.

THE ENTHRONEMENT OF THE SACRED HEART

Finally, all shining and neat, we gather in the large common-room. A big human semi-circle forms before the Sacred Heart picture which now hangs above the mantel-piece. That picture had even then an interesting history. It formed part of the booty brought from Myra House, but years before it had presided over a notable work run by Mr. Gabbett. When that work had run its course, he gave the picture to Myra House; and now he had taken it away again to play another part.

Then Father Creedon begins: "In the name of the Father,..." and the Invocation of the Holy Ghost and the Rosary follow; then the Enthronement ceremony. We try to put our hearts into the words of consecration. But it is not hard to be in earnest at such a moment. We realize full well that our work requires overwhelming grace. Humanly speaking we have not a chance of success. Yet during the prayers a sort of confidence has grown up in us. Surely that special grace will be given. It cannot be that all our agony is only froth, and our work a passing thing fated to fall asunder tomorrow, or the day after.

The prayers are finished, there is an expectant pause. Some words to signalize the occasion are required. Then half a dozen sincere and simple little talks are given. Each one takes a different line, but in the end everything is covered from piety to rules of conduct. That leaves us brimful of emotion. We chat a little while, and then we go, leaving Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton with their charges. What does the morrow hold for them? We bear that tormenting thought with us down the street.

6. After the Storm Comes ...?

I start off by warning readers that in this chapter there is a slowing down of *tempo* – for a space.

What has been narrated thus far partakes of the whirlwind character of a bombardment with its sequel of wild onrush. After successful attack, there follows the vital stage of consolidation, the building up of new structures on the ruins of what had previously stood there. This is a period which does not so grievously wrack the nerves of the participants. But neither does it provide the headlines, the painful heart-beats, the bubbling excitement which the time of attack did. So at this point the reader, also, may relax – just for a while, as I have already said. For that era of hectic happenings, which had prevailed for near a fortnight, came to its end on the night of the 17th July.

In the previous chapter you have heard how we walked down the street late that night, leaving behind us the first Sancta Maria, furnished, filled, happy. But we did not leave behind us the specter of anxious doubt. He stalked us close, whispering uneasy things about the next day in our minds, and doing his grim best to spoil the recollection of the wonderful scene which we had just been part of. But for the moment there is before us a night's rest, with no early reveille, and without the dread zero-hour of a definite engagement to fact. Soldiers, rest, your warfare o'er!

Now, this is the next morning – Tuesday the 18th July. Sancta Maria had no telephone as yet. So we had all to call round there to find how things were going. The military expression “all present and correct” represents the gratifying report which we were given, though indeed Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton did not put it precisely in that way – nor so briefly. Well, well, no departures, no rows during the night, no morning restlessness. How joyful that is! Perhaps we are really going to keep our lady boarders or most of them. Maybe our Sancta Maria has come to stay!

We wandered through the house, struck in particular by the air of settlement which was evident. Every step meant a new thought. One feature jutted out as strangely providential. Ordinarily, one would expect to find the ground-floor space fairly evenly divided between the front and back rooms. But here this was not so, and fortunately! Most of the square yards had been captured by the back-room, which was a fine one, while the front-room was quite a little cabin. One wondered what the builder had been up to, for most families would not be inconvenienced by such an arrangement. But it met *our* requirements with uncanny exactitude. We needed – and we got – a common-room, the largest possible, and then a small room which would serve as office and as sitting and dining and meeting room for the Legionaries. In addition, the ladies, on establishing their headquarters in the aforesaid little cabin, found already fitted

there a washing-basin with running hot and cold water, and also considerable cupboard-space. Add these convenient “coincidences” to the many previously described, and there is surely food for thought – and praise!

HEARTS’ DESIRE

In the center of one wall of the large common-room was a spacious alcove which aroused our curiosity. The faded words of consecration, which circled the oval, in-curved molding at the top, showed that some time in the past it housed an altar. But the history of this has not been ascertained by us.

Up to the very top, the fifth story, we went to inspect the upper dormitories. Incidentally, the lofty skylight, which overhangs and gives light to the deep well of the staircase, was the very one through which, a year or two before, Michael Collins had made an incredible escape to the roof when his presence in the house had been discovered and it was suddenly surrounded.

Everyone seemed so contented, and most of all Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton, who were radiant with satisfaction. They had found the goal they had long been seeking. Here was their hearts’ desire, the every-minute employment for souls in need. They spoke of next steps, and my thoughts flew back to that first talk I had with them, only a few weeks before, when they talked wild things and I had listened sympathetically. And behold! their folly and my credulity had alike had been justified. The water had suddenly grown solid beneath their feet. My thoughts amounted to a meditation as I left the house. I suppose the other members of our band, when they called, reacted much as I did to what they saw.

But here I must go back a little to cover important ground.

THE VICAR-GENERAL BLESSES THE WORK

You will recall my unorthodox application to the Vicar-General, Msgr. Fitzpatrick, for faculties for the reconciliation to the Church of one of the Retreatants at Baldoyle. When Fathers Creedon and Toher had returned from Baldoyle the previous day and found that the party had not only arrived in the house but looked like staying, forthwith they went to see the Monsignor and there retold and continued the story which I had sketched to him on Sunday night. He was a very calm old man. The photograph which the Summer, 1938, issue of MARIA LEGIONIS carried is a faithful showing of that masterful and holy character. He treated more or less as a matter of course the whole series of unique events, which would have stupefied most other men. I may mention that as chaplain to Mountjoy Prison for many years of his life the Monsignor had ample experience of the type of girl who was in question. “How many of them do you expect to keep?” was an early question put by him. “All of them, Monsignor,” came back unhesitatingly. The old man smiled his pleasure at such boldness. “You are a very hopeful young man,” was his rejoinder. “I hope that you are destined to be

right. But I know only too well the weakness of those with whom you are dealing, and I say that if you succeed in holding even a small percentage of them, you will have done a great day's work. May God bless the efforts which you are making." With that, he gave Father Creedon full faculties for Confessions and all spiritual matters arising in connection with the Hostel. Thus heartened, the two priests took their leave of him, and came back to the Hostel for the Enthronement ceremony already chronicled.

Thus provided with the essential equipment, both spiritual and temporal, the work was begun of building up the Hostel system which will some day be absolutely world-wide. In these very early weeks we appear to have held many meetings in addition to the ordinary weekly Praesidium meeting. In fact, for a while we actually held formal meetings every second or third evening. To read the records of those meetings is now of absorbing interest. How many things were the subject of needless fears and, on the other hand, how many great trials gave no sign of their approach and caught us in a false security. As we run through these pages, over which successive secretaries laboured, the thought occurs that really they should have been written in our blood, so much did the things they tell of cost us! Those pages are now so old that the ink has rather faded like ourselves whose acts and words they photographed. Now many of the valiant workers, whose names they hold, are gone from our ranks to the great rewarding.

But as we read, we see that there was nothing amateurish or weak about the handling of the problems which marched four-deep on us. From the first, the mission of the Hostel was clearly visioned. It was not imagined that it would substitute the more-than-valuable, the indispensable Good Shepherd Convent. We saw it as an additional link in the system, and I stress this fact – *a missing link*, one which, it would seem, is destined to remain a sad deficiency in every city until a Sancta Maria is planted in each one of them. The idea was not merely to receive the girls. It was intended to return to 25 Low Street and to try to secure those girls whom we had failed to get on the first Retreat, and it was intended to keep up that trying forever, if necessary. Furthermore, it was intended to go to all the other "25 Low Streets" in the City and to keep on visiting them in the same way. Moreover, in the first couple of meetings arrangements were made for the weekly visitation of the Lock Hospital and certain other hospitals which fell naturally into the ambit of the Hostel's work.

There would be losses – surely! The degree of faith which we possessed did not shut out that certainty. Losses! What sort? There was utter refusal to admit the possibility of their being fixed ones. They would, so far as lay in our power, be followed up assiduously until safely gathered into the fold once more. No girl who had been one of that first miraculous draught out of the deep sea of sin could ever be forgotten by us or abandoned to her waywardness. Likewise, those who would leave us as successes would be kept in touch with in order to ensure not merely perseverance but further advance in goodness.

Every girl was to be regarded as a separate and distinct problem, to be dealt with as if there was no other in the Hostel. The first thing was of course to let the supercharged nervous system settle down to normal. Easily said, but not so easily accomplished! The chief difficulty would lie in the cutting off of drink, which all had been taking in varying degrees of quantity and quality. Some consumed methylated spirits freely with the direst consequences. Drink, more than any other circumstance, had held them anchored in the sea of sorrow. Could they ever be torn loose from its masterful hold?

Then there was the question of tobacco. This had meant in their case an all-the-day-long relay-race of cigarettes. We had decided at the outset not to veto smoking. In their old life the girls had indulged in it to such excess that we judged it over-severe and certainly unwise to try to force them to abandon suddenly a practice which, after all, involved no sin. Moreover, the fear of loss of cigarettes would turn the hesitating scale in many cases against the idea of entering the Hostel. In fact, more was done than to permit the girls to smoke. To each inveterate smoker was allowed a daily ration of five small cigarettes of a well-known cheap variety.

The reality of these problems, as is oftentimes the case, was less ferocious than their prospect. Many of the girls, from the very first, shook free completely from the grip of drink, and strange to say the slender cigarette allowance proved adequate to stay their cravings. Thus aided, the regular meals, the light work and the moderate discipline of the Hostel, and above all the regular routine of prayer and the frequentation of the Sacraments worked visible wonders of restoration in our big household. Perhaps I may effectively clinch this by quoting a letter addressed to us about that time. It is headed The Sisters of Charity, Baldoyle, Feast of St. Ignatius, 1922, and it bears the honored signature of Mother Angela Walsh:

Your letter to hand only arrived yesterday; the post at present is very uncertain. Your news was most welcome, and was of the keenest interest to all the Sisters in the House, as they are offering up their prayers, penances, and works for the girls' steady perseverance. We called twice to Sancta Maria, and were struck by the happy look in the girls' faces. What we saw was a wonderful manifestation of the Grace of God.

If you find *all* doors closed to you and another Retreat, let me know, and come out and see us and have a talk.

BALDOYLE'S DOOR WILL OPEN AGAIN

Retreat! You see the way the word recurs as a pivotal idea. We were little more than in the Hostel when talk began of a second Retreat, and almost at once approach had been made to Mother Angela for the further loan of her premises.

In those early days, and indeed for quite a time, we attached a capital and possibly a disproportionate importance to the idea of an opening Retreat. The first party had begun with one, and that party had been such a wholesale success that it was inevitable that we should regard it as a divinely-intended pattern for future practice. Hence, a torturing problem presented itself on the second evening of the Hostel's life, when Maggie Perrin knocked at the door and said she wanted to leave her bad way of life and come in. That was a poser for the ladies in charge. Manifestly, she could not be turned away. Neither would she be taken in; for was not the avenue of entry a Retreat? And no Retreat was in the offing. Here was a crisis which demanded yet another council of war. So, without more ado, Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton donned their outdoor apparel and walked along with Maggie to Myra House.

There, some of us were taken out from a meeting, and the position was explained to us. Every room was occupied. We stood out in the theatre and talked things over. To Maggie, all was very simple; she just wanted to lead a good life. That was all. She could not understand what we were making a fuss about. She listened perplexedly to our questions and our proposals. Then she began to speak: "Why shouldn't she be let in? Was there not room for her? Surely one extra would make no difference in that big house."

Would she not enter one of the Good Shepherd Convents, we pleaded. No, she would not, but she *would* come into the Hostel, and she meant to make good there. Retreat! Of course she'd make a Retreat. She'd like to, and goodness only knew she needed one!

That was the crux. There was no Retreat in immediate prospect, and we hung on desperately to what we regarded as our scheme. We felt we could not take in anyone except through that doorway of Retreat. A Retreat which all of us regarded as patently miraculous had taken place. To it we ascribed in great measure the spirit of good intention and the steadiness which were there for all to witness. Therefore, it seemed to us, the advent of this pleasant, round-faced girl was nothing but a threat to the Hostel system, whereas all depended on the solidity of that system. No, we could not take her in otherwise than through a Retreat. We would hold another Retreat soon, we hoped, just as soon as we got our feet and settled up some of the present population of the Hostel. How long ahead would that be? We knew not. In the meantime what was to be done with Maggie?

We stood and looked at each other and at the girl in anguish. A great big point of principle, concerning the future of the work and therefore of many souls, was at stake. Likewise, there was the question of one particular soul, who stood before us. The problem bulked as big as any of those others which had studded the previous weeks. In the end it was the girl herself who suggested the solution: "If you promise to take me in on the next Retreat, I will go straight off to the Magdalen Asylum and wait there till you are ready." That was an ideal result; we

breathed freely once again. It met all points of view, and kept our system intact. So off went Miss Plunkett and myself with Maggie to ensure nothing would betide on the way to the convent which would bring shipwreck to her pious purpose. Thus was Maggie Perrin safely landed in the Asylum, where – already No. 1 of Party No. 2 – she waited for the time of the Retreat. Naturally this solution did not commend itself to the nuns, who did not deal with their intending penitents on terms of stays of limited duration.

I have said that each girl in the Hostel was the subject of individual and intense consideration. The very first meeting, of which minutes were taken, shows this painstaking system in operation: Provision for hospital treatment made for one; another sent home to her people; the marriage of another being arranged for; the husband of another being searched for; two more to suitable jobs; another placed under instruction; while another, to the bitter sorrow of us all, has left to resume her old life – two Legionaries being at once detailed to follow her up. And so on, week after week, and destined to go on untiringly, until those weeks have lengthened into sixteen long years.¹ In those years, the one Sancta Maria has grown into four (Belfast, Glasgow, London), while many others are advancing slowly out of the night of mere dreaming into the twilight-stage of discussion and preparation.

But this is rushing on too far ahead! We are still in 1922, and far from sure as yet of continued existence. A document written at that time declares: “Up to the present the experiment must be granted to be a success. However, one is painfully aware that one builds upon a quicksand, and that the results of long and patient building may disappear in a single day.” Yet, the latter statement, though it sounded fine and judicial, went too far. For much of what had already been achieved could not have been lost even were the Hostel to have been closed down.

TELLING FIGURES

The following represents the statistics of the party at the end of August, 1922. Statistics may be cold, uninteresting things – a matter of “damn dots,” a celebrated but non-figure-minded statesman one time termed them. But if you are inclined to think so, remember that it is to the facts which are here enshrined that all our fevered efforts and the excitement of our story have been gravitating:

(a)	Married to men they had long known	3
(b)	Arrangements being made for marriage	1
(c)	In appropriate hospitals	2
(d)	Return to their own homes	2
(e)	In employment	5
(f)	Failures	2
(g)	In Hostel	8

¹ Now almost forty years. Sancta Maria is still at work.

But, it may be asked, where those unquestionably striking figures stable? To what extent did they suffer wear and tear as time went on? Well, the present-day record lies before me, with quite a dossier about each one. That record shows that we have not receded further, but advanced further. Those we then had we have held, and those we lost we have regained. In all that list there is only one really distressing item. It is a very sad one. Summarized, it reads: "Returned to the old life. Was readmitted to the Hostel time after time, but appeared to make little or no effort. In January 1933, during a period when she was not in the Hostel, she lost her life in tragic circumstances."

Of the remainder of the party, *one* only may be reckoned on the wrong side of the record, and that one hardly in the "street" category at all. What joyful demonstration of the fact that no word shall be impossible with God. For will it be denied that the reputedly impossible has been achieved, or that the 1938 results form fitting sequel to the providential happenings of 1922? Does the history of rescue effort afford a parallel? I wonder.

I have forced myself against my inclinations into figures and these claims. But as they *have been* mentioned, it is well to specify that the honor of the Legion is pledged to their accuracy. In return, perhaps those facts and figures guarantee the Legion, just in the fashion that a bird supports the wings which in their turn upbear him. And having briefly made that double point – for special noting by all cities which have as yet no Sancta Maria and still more for those which have no Legion – I pass on from "the dots." Or rather, I intend to take some of those figures which are like tabloids of human lives, and expand them back again to flesh and blood.

7. The Second Retreat

A special landmark was the First Marriage. Its making started in the days of the Retreat, out in the nuns' garden. Winnie spoke of one who had for long been a part of her life, but who often said to her that he would marry her if he could think that she would amend. Soon after the Retreat, he sought us out to ask the question if we believed that her present excellence of life would last. He was informed that Winnie was the ultra-well-intentioned of our party. Later, he came to say he had made up his mind. That marriage took place on the 3rd of August in Francis Street. One of the other girls was the bridesmaid. I was the best man, a post I subsequently filled on innumerable occasions. The wedding breakfast was given in the home of one of our members, and the honeymoon was spent – in Dublin! Now, sixteen years have slipped away, long enough to form a judgment on that or any marriage. The judgment is that seldom have we known a happier marriage. On not a single day of it has Winnie ceased to edify, though many of those days were very hard – most of them marked by great poverty.

Another landmark was the First Reception. You will remember the two Protestant girls who insisted on attending the lectures when Father Philip had suggested that they might prefer to stay outside. Subsequently they asked for and undertook instruction. On the 27th August, the first of them (she who had spoken first) was received into the Church. Her instruction had been a devoted one; no one could have been better prepared than she. The ceremony took place in the little chapel adjoining the sacristy in Francis Street. Father Creedon officiated, and six or seven of us were present. In the memory of those privileged to be there that event stands as one unique for happiness and evidence of grace. When the ceremony was completed there was a momentary pause. The newborn child of Holy Church still knelt and all the rest stood waiting. Then Father Creedon declared the thought of each one's mind: "Eva, you have made us all very happy. We welcome you into the Church." We read of people crying with joy. It is not so often seen. You have to see it to understand it. We saw it then – the prolonged unrestrained weeping of sheer joy. It was not easy to refrain from joining in. I expect that each would say that the others had. Some did so openly. I afterwards assisted at many other receptions, and twice again in that same oratory, in the self-same circumstances – that is also (strange to say) from children of Sancta Maria I witnessed that same pouring out of perfect joy in floods of tears. Each of those three occasions was really something quite wonderful, but Eva's the most, perhaps because it was the first. They cried as Mary Magdalen must have cried when her Beloved looked down on her repentance and said to her: "Thou hast loved much ... Thy sins are forgiven thee."

For many years now, Eva has been in a Magdalen community where she has been distinguished for her holiness. She was anointed recently.

Her Protestant companion of the same Retreat was received into the Church on the afternoon of the 4th September, 1922. She was married a couple of years later. After years of very happy married life, she has now been left a widow with three beautiful children.

But this chronicling of “landmarks” must for the moment cease. For the mention of that 4th September is the hammer on the tocsin of memory, stridently warning that we must put aside such peaceful thoughts. For we are at war again – suddenly. And it started off on the very evening of the reception just mentioned. According as the numbers in the house diminished, so had our thoughts turned more persistently to the question of the next Retreat. We had a fully-equipped Hostel. We had room in it. We had gathered that the same facilities would be accorded to us in Baldoyle. Yet we dallied a little. Why? Partly it was the fact that we did not quite know where to strike this time. But rather I suppose it was a lurking fear of failure. We could not altogether rid ourselves of the notion that the first Retreat was ninety-nine per cent miraculous; that such things are not on tap, and that we could not bring off a second coup. But partly, too, we believed we *could* count upon the same again, and we half-awaited a signal. Anyway, we hesitated. It must not have been an utterly unworthy hesitation, for indeed the signal came – abruptly. At once we moved, as move the runners with the pistol-shot. Then things began to happen with the precision and with all the atmosphere which had characterized the doings of July.

It was the evening of the 4th September. Father Creedon, Father Toher and I were sitting in the former’s rooms in Francis Street. The reception had taken place a while before. The subject of our talk was of course – the Legion. I cannot now recall for certain if we discussed the question of the Retreat, but I take it that we did. The Retreat was all the topic of the moment; we could hardly get away from the idea. The maid came in and stated that there was a woman down below who wanted to see Father Creedon about her daughter who was in No. 48 Clifton Street. This simple announcement electrified us. Was this our signal? It looked as if it was. For 48 Clifton Street was such another house as 25 Low Street – a street-girls’ lodging-house. So far it never had been visited, and the numbers and the names of the girls residing there were all unknown to us. The three of us went down to interview the woman. We found a decent soul from Gloucester Street. She told her story in rambling and pathetic fashion. Her daughter Queenie, she alleged, was born to break her mother’s heart, and this sad work was now in process of accomplishment. Details were not lacking. But it all boiled down to this: that one Peg Talkie (it really was as odd a name as that!) had taken Queenie away from home and led her onto the streets of misfortune, and the two of them were now in No. 48, and could we do anything to bring her Queenie home to her again. There was no viciousness in her little girl, it was all due to Peg (whom she left to God). She had been told that the new “Hossel” was the place to go to get a job of that kind done. So she “had went” there, and they sent her over to us.

The poor soul stood there looking tearfully at each of us in turn, pleading for her erring girl's return, quite satisfied from the information she had gotten that if we only took the trouble we could restore the prodigal to her mother's arms.

We took her address and promised we would do our best. When she left, we debated the situation briefly. It was felt that this occurrence was a providential pointing to that particular house and, as well, an excellent excuse for visiting it. We agreed that it was better not to approach the house as a party, as we wished to avoid the public excitement which had attended the visits to Low Street. For the same reason, it was judged that I should go rather than either of the priests. I put on my hat and went straight over. The house stood on a spacious square. Some stone steps led up to the hall-door, which on that evening lay hospitably open. Some girls, who looked like residents, were standing on the topmost step. I spoke to them and enquired if the two girls, whose names I mentioned, were staying in the house. They assured me "no," so then I remarked that they must be there under false names, and that I would go in and look through the house for them. I did not explain that I had not the slightest idea of the appearance of the girls I was seeking. I entered the hall. One of the officials of the place came out from the "front-parlor" and barred my way: "What do you want?" I repeated my story of Queenie and Peg. It was again explained to me that they were not there, so I renewed my suggestion that they were sporting false names, and that I would move around and see all the girls. I was warned I could not roam around the house like that. I disregarded this injunction, told the woman with whom I was conversing that I would not be long in going through, and pushed past her down the hall and up the stairway. I deemed it best to go first to the highest rooms. I reasoned that they might be in mood for an angry wrangle in the hall, but not so anxious to climb three stories for it; natural inertia would urge them to let me have my way. But I reasoned wrong. I was near the top-landing when I heard heavy boots pounding savagely up the stairs below. A man was rushing up. That looked bad for me. It meant a fight or else my ignominious ejection. However, I hurried on, and was actually talking to the girls who occupied the top front room when my pursuer burst furiously in.

He was the son of the proprietor. I only knew him by name, but in his own sphere he was a well-known individual. He was not a man to cross. Hotly he demanded what I meant by bursting in; hadn't I been told below that I could not tramp around the house like that? I took him very politely, and told my tale once more. I said I did not mean to make myself a nuisance, but that I thought the woman down below was only being disobedient, and that I knew the owners would never object if they were told the nature of my errand. He listened surlily, but my meekness won the day. He thought a while, looking at me through half-closed eyes. Then he grudgingly declared that I could go ahead, but that he would come along with me. Only later on did it occur to me that the attitude which I then thought one of mere obstructiveness and truculence was in reality one of self-preservation. In certain circumstances the presence of a man in a house like that might plunge the proprietor into seas of trouble with the police.

Through the whole house we campaigned together – the man and I. He did not try to speed my steps although my progression was snail-like. More than that, he positively collaborated, introducing me as we went along, and explaining why I was there. In each room, of course, I had to tell of Peg and Queenie, and of Queenie's grief-stricken mother. Then would come from my audience the assurance that the pair were not in that house. But some had heard of them, and helpful suggestions were forthcoming as to where and when they had last been seen, and who would be likely to know their present location. Then invariably the conversation switched over to Sancta Maria and 25 Low Street. Of course, they had all heard of what had taken place, though some of their notions on the subject were strange and incorrect. There was a rush of questions. Had not Josie so-and-so cleared out of the Hostel? And was not the place little better than Mountjoy?¹

To the latter, the obvious retort was that if Sancta Maria was a prison, how had Josie freed herself so easily? Moreover, if it was an argument *against* the Hostel that one or two had left it, then the twenty girls who stayed steady were arguments *for*. At this stage, effective appeal was made to my escort, who was a noted frequenter of the racecourses, for confirmation that those odds worked out at ten to one in favor of the Hostel. His dubious assent caused merriment, which I capped by saying that the odds were going up to 20 to 1 as Josie was reported to be almost on her way back. Argument and criticism raged good-humoredly. As one difficulty was partly met, another was proposed. "Were not the girls in Sancta Maria nearly demented for want of a drink or a smoke?" "No, they were not. They got enough cigarettes to tide them along. And they did not seem to mind the absence of the drink." The latter they could not credit, and each room in turn sang out its chorus of unbelief. Indeed, the very mention of a drink made half of those around me thirsty for one! They argued from their own case. They were accustomed to many drinks every day – every hour, some of them. They needed them. How could they survive a whole day without a single one? That was the toughest objection. You could see it telling on all who listened. I could only argue back: "What your own pals have done, you can do. Give the place a trial."

You will gather that the work of persuasion was altogether different from that of the 13th July in Low Street. No longer were the girls alternating violently between panic and reassurance, prepared to entertain the wildest rumor of a plot to lock them up forever. Here it was a case of ordinary doubtings, the natural struggle of good intention against the lower instincts or against deadlier inertia.

At last the tour is finished. Every room has been worked through, and appeal has been made to every girl. These numbered about 15, including three of eighteen years of age. All were interested. In spite of the presence of the

¹ Our great central prison.

“management,” which exercised a restraining influence, several of the girl said right out that they would come. Obviously, much has been achieved. But another visit, and perhaps several visits, will be required to rivet the yes’s, to reverse the no’s, and to determine the minds of those who had not declared themselves. But – painful thought! – will we be allowed to conduct such further canvassing?

It had only been on the turn of the balance that I, though possessed of a plausible excuse, had been let through this time. Surely the owner will resist an undisguised effort to empty her house. I turn to my escort: “May I come again tomorrow to continue my talk with the girls?” And such is the innate virtue of poor human nature that the answer comes readily enough: “You may.” Thanking him from my heart, I left and hastened back to the presbytery, where I delighted eager listeners with the account of all that had occurred.

The following day, Father Creedon met me, and we repaired to No. 48. We spent several hours going through the house. Practically all of the girls professed themselves anxious to avail of this opportunity of going straight. A couple hesitated. Only one refused point-blank. She gave two reasons: first that she was a Protestant, and second that she could not possibly do without a constant supply of drink. She made herself drunk early every day and remained drunk so long as she remained awake. In the course of our various visits special appeal was lavished on this highly intelligent, handsome girl. It was heart-breaking to think of failing to land so big a fish. Her life had been an amazing one. Born in another city, of a mixed marriage, she had been brought up a Catholic of sorts. Her statement to the contrary had been untrue. She gravitated to the streets at a very early age, and thereafter her career was one of unrestrained riot. It could be called a Tale of Three Cities, for three cities suffered at her hands. Drastic police action in two of them led to her migration to Dublin, where for some years she had been a particularly conspicuous figure. Her disorderliness – and her strength – may be gauged from her gentle boast that it always took three policemen to arrest her! But despite her prowess, arrest had been successfully effected many a time. Dare I suggest one hundred as her rating? Such was Daisy Warner.

One of the girls of 18 was a Protestant. Another girl was a pervert. Every case possessed many circumstances of interest, but, of course, followed naturally from the wildness of their lives.

When we left No. 48 that day, we immediately took in hand the making of arrangements for the Second Retreat. Baldoyle was once again to be the venue. And who should give the Retreat? Who else but Father Philip, who had given the memorable Number One, and thank Heaven, Father Philip was found to be available. All was fixed for the following Monday, the 11th September, 1922. The Retreat would follow on the same lines as the first one.

In the days before the 11th, No. 48 was visited every day by Legionaries. In order to quash finally the doubts which were still felt in regard to Sancta Maria, it was thought advisable to bring along on one of these occasions a couple of the Hostel girls. Their obvious contentment, their notably improved appearance, and their testimony had great effect.

Feeling that we could cope with a new party of about 25, other lodging-houses on the south side of the City were also visited. Likewise, No. 25 Low Street, where a small residue of girls had been living since the clearance, was again canvassed. The precedent of the first Retreat was adhered to in regard to the girls who declared their intention of taking part in the second. Each one pledged herself to abstain from the streets, and a payment was made in respect of her lodging.

In retrospect, no doubt, those days of preparation lacked the tempestuous quality of those of July. But do not gain a false impression. It was no placid time. They were days of exhausting anxiety, with many explosive moments that meant minor heart attacks for us. All the same, we felt surer of the girls and of everything.

At last, Monday the 11th! The day is gorgeously arrayed in our traditional Retreat weather. The charabanc – the very same one as before – stands ready in front of Myra House. The girls are beginning to put in an appearance, and the crowd to assemble – not so excited and not so big as the previous time. Things are being taken more as a matter of course; this is healthy. By the time appointed for departure, enough girls have arrived to indicate that the Retreat is not going to fail for lack of numbers. Among them, we are utterly delighted to observe the redoubtable Daisy. Also there is Queenie of the firm of Peg and Queenie. She had been unearthed in some other lodging-house. Yet we make no move to board the charabanc. It is rumored that missing personalities are on their way. In any event we are not going to lose a single girl by slavish subjection to mere punctuality. At last the number totals 26 – twenty newcomers and the six surviving residents of Sancta Maria which has been closed down for the duration of the Retreat. In addition are ourselves. All pack into the charabanc. Goodbyes are waved and shouted ... We are on our way.

Our route is the same as before. This time we are already sure of the priest, so we have not to stop at the Franciscan Friary. Nor do we even glance at the ruined Four Courts where, as we passed to the first Retreat, all was animation, crowds, armed soldiers, long lines of men strung on ropes, playing a grim sort of tug-of-war against swaying walls and pillars. In two months the destruction of the stately edifice has become mere history. Further down the river, we speed by another war relic, the gutted Custom House. Then, twenty minutes later, Baldoyle once more and the hearty welcome of Mother Angela and her nuns. The Second Retreat has begun.

The auspices seem altogether different from those of the previous time – just the difference between following a road and groping one's way over a pathless waste. We have a sense of security this time. We have been through so much, and have learned much. Why, this retreat is positively matter-of-fact to us! We feel we can confidently look ahead and give substance to the shadowy future. But just while we are thinking in this strain, a heavy blow is impending. Shortly after tea, one of the women – a dominating personality (oh, why is that sort so often on the wrong side!) came to us and announced her intention of leaving there and then. We pleaded with her, but to no avail, and she went to make herself ready for departure. When she returned, she had in her train, all dressed to go, two of the three whom we were most set on keeping – the eighteen-year-olds. This was appalling. We gathered round them, we entreated, we implored, we reasoned. But all that we could say was disregarded. The three went out into the darkness of the Autumn evening, out into the tragic gloom of grace rejected. And it was night

They left us rich in what the poet calls the luxury of woe. For a while we were in terror lest an exodus might ensue, but no other made a threatening move. The Retreat continued with its 17 newcomers and the 6 old hands – a fine array in the best of dispositions. The atmosphere of sorrow did not lift during the evening – and so ended for us that day of triumph!

8. The Growing Family

The last chapter brought us to the start of the second Retreat in Baldoyle. I have spoken of the shock we sustained at the very outset, when three of the girls changed their minds and went back to town, creating for a moment such an air of unsettlement that we feared lest all the others, sheep-like, might follow them. However, we were spared that. The remainder held firm, not only that night, but during the remainder of the Retreat. The latter ran its course almost smoothly. I do not mean to say we had no “danger-zones.” We had – and plenty. But somehow they lacked the frightening quality of those which characterized the first Retreat – or perhaps it was that we were less easily intimidated, custom having made us more courageous.

Father Philip excelled himself. As a lecturer he tuned in exactly with the mentality and mood of the girls and carried them with him all the time. In the intervals between the lectures he was the life and soul of the crowd, constantly moving around among them, talking to them individually.

Father Creedon was in his element as master of ceremonies, the general solver of doubts, the great recourse at moments of upset. Father Toher, too, lent priceless aid, and a good number of Legionaries attended. Of course, the Retreat was not completely orthodox as these events go. For instance, silence was not observed in the fulness of the law. Or rather, it was *not* the law. For speech might be a supreme relief for rebellious, jangling nerves, and goodness only knows the type of nerves that we were dealing with! Likewise, we had a little sports session during each afternoon. In the evening there was a short social interval when we all met together and there was some singing. Let none shake their heads at these references to relaxations in the regular Retreat code; for us they worked out well. Undoubtedly the Retreat was uniquely successful from every point of view – spiritually, mentally, physically. In addition (and in the circumstances it was an important point) it made of the Legionaries and their subjects a great family. This would help in the difficult times which were to be passed through when those days were over.

This Retreat, like No. 1, restored to the fold a rebel sheep. One of the girls was discovered to have formally apostatized. At first she would not kneel or take holy water, but soon enough a softening set in. She voiced her sorrow and during the Retreat she was formally reconciled. On this occasion correct approach was made to the Vicar-General for the necessary faculties. It was not necessary for Msgr. Fitzpatrick to pass them on through a layman.

That season of wholesale harvesting ascends now to its peak in the Mass and Holy Communion of the final morning. It does not bear us to the heights of bliss attained in the July finale; for the first joys of our heart come never back again! But why compare? This is joy, real joy!

After the happy breakfast, the girls are on their way back into the city. This time they are in no doubt as to their destination. Sancta Maria reasonably well equipped awaits them with fires lit. The moment they entered, life there resumed the even flicker of pre-Retreat days. It did not occur to us as necessary to signalize that evening by anything in the way of ceremony.

The meeting of the 19th September, the first after the Retreat, shows that the normal process of shaking-down and settlement was in steady operation. I take a few items from the crowded record of that single meeting in order to expand to its colorful reality that pallid reference to “shaking-down and settlement”:

- (a) A very satisfactory epistle was read from Jill McDaid. She it was who had been brought back into the Church in the First Retreat. She was married on the 3rd September following. Her husband had been received into the Church the previous day. He made his First Communion immediately before the marriage ceremony.
- (b) The marriage of Mary Ellen Harney was chronicled.
- (c) Two other cases encountered by our workers – too late for the Retreat, but safely landed in the Magdalen Asylums. One of these, aged 36, had 106 recorded convictions. The other (police statistics lacking) was an “extremer” case (believe it or not!).
- (d) Recall the three who walked out on us the first evening of the Retreat! One of these, Ellie Wilson, a young Protestant of 18, called to the Hostel on Sunday the 17 September to say she wished to change her life and to become a Catholic as well. A course of instruction was arranged for her, which she did not then attend. But this was a postponement – not a change of mind. Our minutes of the 19th December following contain the record that she was received into the Church on Friday the 15th, making her First Holy Communion and her Confirmation on the 17th. On Wednesday the 20th she was married to Sidney Dyer, likewise received into the Church. The wedding day was spent at – Baldoyle Convent!

Verily, is not this grace poured out – mirroring the Evangelist’s “good measure and pressed down and shaken together and running over”?

About this time we had a unique experience. Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton were prostrated by a violent attack of influenza which chained them helpless to their beds. We could not fill their places. Today, when the Legion has grown, it would be otherwise, but remember those were only cradle days. During that period of illness Sancta Maria was literally and absolutely run by some of the senior girls. Of course they took directions from the sick ladies, but they had the keys, did the shopping, and transacted all the housekeeping. During that spell

our hearts stayed permanently in our mouths; yet everything was sheer perfection.

It was an amazing thing to leave that house at night and hear the door being locked behind us by the girls who had charge of the keys. One would believe it almost impossible that some regrettable circumstances should not occur. Yet there was not one – not the smallest, slightest thing! Whether it was that the girls felt themselves on their mettle in view of the great responsibility cast upon them, or whether it represented a special outpouring of grace, one cannot say; but the fact is there. It became quite an epic among us, the tale of how the girls ran the house during the week of the indoor Sisters' sickness.

The chief heroine of that epic was Martha Connell. A trained cook, she had assumed that duty on the day we entered Sancta Maria, and ever since she had ruled over the kitchen and its staff. She had shown herself reliable. She never went out for she feared temptation and collapse, so in this emergency she was the natural person to take charge and fully did she justify that trust reposed in her. After years of excellence with us, Martha left for reinstatement in her family from which she had been alienated for half her life by her dissolute career. She proved to be the mainstay of the family. She never again relapsed.

Here the mention of Miss Scratton bids me interrupt a moment to say that she has just died.¹ For eleven years she was a nun in the Good Shepherd Convent, High Park, Drumcondra. During that time her ardent interest in Sancta Maria never abated. It was her greatest pleasure to see its workers and to discuss its concerns. Miss Plunkett died in 1925. What happiness in the heavenly meeting of these inseparable friends, life-long collaborators for souls, the very first two Indoor Legionaries! When Miss Scratton died, it was suggested with reverent humor that her first request on entering Heaven would surely be: "I want to see Josephine Plunkett." To this it was rejoined: "No, Josephine would be waiting on the threshold for her." May those noble Legionaries rest in peace. May they always watch over that work whose twin pillars they once were.

In the previous chapter I spoke of Daisy Warner. I also spoke of "landmarks" of our history. Well, Daisy provided one of these – the First Row! You will remember that she used to make herself deliberately drunk each day as a preparation for her street life. It had been her primary excuse for not taking part in the proposed Retreat that she could not remain sober for a single day. Her coming with us was a great surprise. Her subsequent admission that she was a Catholic, not a Protestant as she had alleged, was a second joyful surprise. She made the Retreat quite admirably. Neither during it, nor for some time after the return to Sancta Maria was there in her any sign of undue craving for drink. That was a marvel, but we could not hope that it would be an enduring one. Daisy was hardly one of those resplendent types where recovery takes place and there

¹ 1939.

is nevermore a turning back. Hers, we suspected, would be the commoner path, the falling and then by the grace of God the rising once again.

Actually six weeks elapsed before the crisis came, and then it gave no special sign of its approach. One afternoon she took the air, declaring that she was leaving altogether; but at seven in the evening she returned well primed with spirits and was admitted. She walked and spoke quite steadily, long custom having given her that capacity. For a while all went normally. Then some word of jest or blame was spoken to her by another of the girls, and at once the tempest broke. Like a veritable tigress she threw herself upon the offending one and overwhelmed her by a volley of blows and kicks. Then she turned vengefully on a couple who had tried to separate her from her prey, and in a few moments she had beaten them into a like submission. In addition to Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton, some other Legionaries were in the house on duty. By sheer luck these had thus far escaped the worst consequences of the row.

Having secured a quick and decisive victory, Daisy grew calm again. But obviously it was no more than a momentary lull. The first word or look which irritated her would galvanize her into frenzy once again. All realized and dreaded this, yet they were reluctant to invoke the aid of the police – at least until the ultimate resort. The Hostel was still too young, too unconventional in its methods, to make desirable a washing of our dirty linen out in public. Remember that one of our original doubts in regard to going to that locality was the fear of such occurrence which might draw the public eye unfavorably to the house. Yet something must be done. Where Daisy struck, she crushed. She must be prevented from reducing all our population to battered flesh. A middle course between invoking the police and meekly awaiting slaughter was sought. The ladies sent an S.O.S. to Myra House for the help of a man. A Brother came immediately on his bicycle. All previous records for the journey between the two houses were broken. On arrival, the Brother found the ominous calm still holding. The chief figure stood by herself in the large common-room. She talked to no one. Her stance was of one waiting. The doubt was not that her hurricane attack would be resumed, but of where the blow would fall. It was not long delayed. Memory does not record the precise cause; but someone offended, and once again Daisy struck. The Brother acted promptly and ran to help the victim. At once Daisy turned on him. A sharp fierce struggle followed, which ended in the overthrow of Daisy who found herself cast down and firmly held. In view of her vaunted and undoubtedly prodigious strength, this was a phenomenon. Viciously she struck and bit and kicked for a while. Then, with startling suddenness her fury passed, and unaffected sorrow for her actions took its place. There was no recurrence that evening nor for many a day to come. It was our first experience of real violence in the Hostel, and it was a nerve-racking one. One trembled to think of it happening again. Yet if it should, it must be faced unflinchingly. An arm-chair outlook will never save souls that are in real stress.

But do not suppose that such sensations were rated as routine by us. No such thing! They were rare and grew mercifully rarer in proportion as the Hostel system advanced in age and influence and settled itself like a light but ever-strengthening yoke on our mettlesome subjects, effectively governing them. Consider the verdict – after all these venturing years – of the person best qualified to judge, that is our next-door neighbor: “The girls have been extraordinarily good.”

The incident had another facet, and a delightful one. That next-door neighbor of the Hostel was a hotel. It is known that the proprietress had hoped to acquire our premises whenever the Government Department vacated them. Instead, like the proverbial bolt from the blue, we dropped in. At best, I suppose she could have been better neighbors; at worst, she could hardly have had worse; and the absolute worst had now occurred. To see what took place you would have had to be inside our premises; but to hear what took place it was sufficient to be in the hotel adjoining. It is understood that our battle-royal was very clearly heard in that hotel. Lack of definite knowledge of what was going on must have made things seem even worse than they really were. No doubt it sounded as if murder on a grand scale was being committed. So our first thought when the hubbub died down was for the owner of that hotel, who had always shown herself so kindly, so well-disposed to us. Father Creedon and I waited on her the following day and expressed our deep regret for what had taken place, and the resulting inconvenience to her. Providentially, Mrs. Dunne was not one of the many who genially survey the washing up of a messy social evil, until a tiny splash falls on themselves! Consider, too, how easily the best of folk are able to make watertight compartments of their business and of their Christian charity. Not so here. “You must not be distressed on my account,” she said. “The position is the other way about. I greatly feel for your wonderful workers, and what they went through last night. Personally I regard it as a very great honor to have such a work beside me. It must bring a blessing on my house. Certain inconveniences are at times inevitable. We must expect them, and show Christian feeling when they present themselves. That is the way I look at the position, and I think that all my guests likewise take a proper view of things.”

Surely that reply is classical, and surely the high-water mark of general decency has been reached! Seventeen long years have fallen off the chain since then, but never has that tide of decency abated – not by a finger’s breadth! All honor!

NEW PRAESIDIA ESTABLISHED

While all these things were taking place, another great milestone of Legion life was reached. This was the establishment of the third Praesidium. I turn to it because it would not do to pass over in silence such an event, although it was not particularly connected with the work we have been describing. This new Praesidium was named “The Immaculate Conception.” It represented a division of the original Praesidium, “Our Lady of Mercy.” It had started off with

approximately half the field of work of that Praesidium and set itself to develop it. Mrs. Kirwan assumed the Presidency in addition to that of “Our Lady of Mercy,” and held it for a considerable time before relinquishing it to Miss Agatha Cox.

Then came the fourth Praesidium. It also split directly from “Our Lady of Mercy,” but it was suggested by the operations of Sancta Maria. The latter, by its incursions into the lodging-houses at the seasons of Retreats, had proved the imperative need for regular and intensive visitations of such places, many of which were dens. It was agreed that “Our Lady of Mercy” should attend to this. Two Legionaries who had shown evidence of great capacity, were asked if they would undertake this task. Of course they assented. A Sunday, because of Mass-missing, was fixed for their trial trip. On the principle of having due regard both for the perfection of the work and for the safety of the workers, recourse was had to the two members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society who shortly before had inaugurated the visitation of the men’s lodging-houses of the city. They were asked to initiate the Legionaries. Those gentlemen were Peter Corbally and Thomas J. Greene,² two devoted friends. Of them it is the truth to say that they had but one objective in life, which they pursued unswervingly – the glory of God and the good of souls. It was now their privilege to help to launch what was destined to become a vital part of Legionary activity. Later, both of them became active Legionaries.

Those Brothers were then visiting some lodging-houses in the neighborhood of Myra House. Close by, and under the same management were women’s lodging-houses of the type which the Legion had in view. Thither the Brothers guided the two Legionaries. They interviewed the proprietress and invited her cooperation, promising that the Legionaries would respect all rules and regulations. The said proprietress acted quite graciously and made the Legionaries welcome to her house. The first visitation took place right away. In prospect it had seemed very venturesome work to the Legionaries essaying it. But in reality it did not prove so formidable. Difficult types, it is true, were encountered, many of them subjects for Sancta Maria, but they received the visitors kindly enough. The time spent there that Sunday proved far from boring, and obviously there was boundless field for zeal. At the Praesidium meeting the following Wednesday, all the members were agog to hear the tale of what had happened. That interest was stimulated by the actual reports. Two things emerged: first, that the work was sorely needed; second, that many other Legionaries now ambitioned to undertake it. Mrs. Kirwan’s eye searchingly surveyed her flock. She picked on two more Legionaries. Each of those who had made the first visitation was given a novice for companion. They would visit, as before, on Sunday.

From this simple root sprang sturdy growth. Members were pouring in, and at almost every meeting it was possible to add to the number on that work. Soon it

² Mr. Greene died within a few days of Miss Scratton.

became evident that the latter required a special Praesidium to deal with it. So a severance was made of all those doing the lodging-houses. These formed the new Praesidium "Our Lady of Refuge." Miss Colette Gill became its first President. A successor of hers was Edel Quinn.

The following sentences from the *Handbook* of the Legion show the intimate relation which that particular work bears to Legionary idealism:

Till the Legion in any center can say with truth that its members know personally, and are in touch in some way with, *each and every individual member of the degraded classes*, its work must be regarded as being still in a stage of incomplete development. False fears will be the first obstacles. But false or founded, *someone must do this work* (Handbook, XXXVI,2).

These foundations made four Praesidia. It took a year to bring that number. Nowadays, a single day may bring as many!

9. Cinderella Retreat House

Settlements of cases went on apace. The numbers in the House diminished. Automatically this brought up the question of the next Retreat. But we faced a crisis this time. Soon after the Second Retreat, we had been given to understand that the Baldoyle school premises could no longer be lent for our Retreats by reason of the danger of complicating two different works. This did not dismay us as it deserved. For, truth to tell, we did not doubt our ability to have that decision reversed when such should be necessary. Soon it *had* become necessary. Then our application was renewed – and unsuccessfully. That proved a shock. By November things had come to a critical pass. We had only a handful of girls in the house. We were over-ripe for another forward move. Yet we could not make it, as we still remained generally constant to our original principle of “No Retreat, No Admission.” However, a certain weakening on our part was indicated by the fact that we had found justification for acting otherwise in a couple of cases.

All this time, visitation of the lodging-houses was going on. The Hostel was becoming known. Girls were calling at the door. You will remember our method of dealing with would-be entrants by sending them to some institution where they would wait till we were holding a Retreat. Now, in many such “havens” girls were waiting. There was restiveness among them at the prolonged delay, and some lost patience altogether and marched out. Miss Whyte, the Matron of the Lock Hospital (already for some time the subject of a weekly visitation) was anxious to discharge some to us. By the way, Miss Whyte was helpful to us. To professional capacity was added apostolic outlook. She never lost sight of the spiritual interests of those under her charge.

One such “haven” case merits a “cameo” here. She was Ellie Cusack. She had been encountered under circumstances which are doubly interesting by reason of the fact that they concern a second important field of Legionary operations. Not far from the Hostel – to be precise, at the rear of the Carmelite Church – was an institution known as 6 ½ Whitefriar Street. It formed a link in that strangely unworthy system popularly known as “Proselytism.” Possessed of ample financial resources contributed by persons who regarded with calm the almost total unbelief manifested inside their own creed, but who blazed with monomaniacal zeal for the conversion of Romanists on any terms, 6 ½ had carried on its work since the time of a minor famine, 1878. The work was the exploitation of the necessities of the very poor and the frailties of the less principled. They provided a free breakfast on Sunday mornings but sandwiched in with the meal was a religious service, and a sermon based on the idea of destroying faith in the Catholic system.

This work constituted an enormity against Heaven. It was anti-social as well. The only hope of restoration of those decayed elements lay in a rebuilding of

their religious fibre which 6 ½, whatever their intentions, operated to disintegrate. It was admitted by the person who presided over the destinies of that place, that no Catholic was uplifted by it. I amplify this by stating the simple fact that every Catholic touched by their work wilted as if under a witch's spell. Faith and citizenship alike were poisoned. A notable proportion finished up insane.

For three hours every Sunday morning our workers stood outside that place appealing to the better instincts of those intent on entering, and referring them to a Catholic free meal center. One such morning there approached a woman whose appearance was conspicuous even in that weird stream of humanity. Drunken and deplorable, she looked as if she had been in a mud-bath fully clothed. The mud was solid and caked on her. Her unsteady steps bore her along, up to a waiting Legionary. When spoken to, she subsided on to a step; then turned up her face, terribly indicative of grim living. The thing that had been a hat flopped over from front to back. Apparently it was hanging by a single tress of hair. She listened, at first irascibly and then more amenably. Yes, she knew she should not be entering a mean place like that. She would go away. Yes, it was a long time since she had been to the Sacraments. Yes, she was leading that sort of life – and for a long time, too! She had no love of it, but it was hard to pull out of it. Yes, she had heard of the Hostel; perhaps she might try it some day. After a while she was assisted to her feet and guided on towards Francis Street, the pair an object of interest and amusement to the well-groomed Sunday morning crowds. On arrival she was interviewed by Father Creedon, who was in his vestments about to say Mass. Completely won over, she was brought by taxi to one of the Magdalen Asylums. The idea was that she should there await the next Hostel Retreat. But to our greater satisfaction, she settled down to life in the convent, subsequently earning for herself the judgment of the nuns that she was the best penitent they had ever had. Some years later a restless fit took her out. Thus flying off at a fatal tangent, she was trapped by the Hostel. Thence she was prevailed on after a spell to return to the convent where she still is, an example of holiness, a sweet model to all. Just as I am in the middle of these very sentences, a letter comes to me from her. It reads: "A line to wish you a holy and happy Easter. Hoping you are quite well and that you don't forget to pray for me. I never forget you. God bless you is the prayer of your faithful Ellie Cusack." It was I who supported her up to Francis Street that morning, and her grateful heart retains the memory. Not one of the big Feasts passes without such a thoughtful note from her.

This "cameo," typical of innumerable cases, exhibits a pleasing and *essential* cooperation between the Magdalen Asylum and Sancta Maria in the interests of a soul. But there are as yet only a few cities where a Sancta Maria exists!

Early in November, Father Creedon and I saw Father John Flanagan, a distinguished Dublin priest then Administrator of the Pro-Cathedral, and on several occasions discussed with him our future plans (which partly concerned his own area), and also our difficulties, the main one being the hold-up of

operations. Father Flanagan was more than sympathetic. He made a special effort to secure Baldoyle for us, but in vain. Definitely, that trump-card of our hand must be discarded. At last we wakened up to the realization of the fact. Then ensued a heart-breaking spell, in which there was not only no Retreat, but no apparent prospect of one. During that period, we went as suppliants to many places, but everywhere there were impediments to the undertaking of this novel type of Retreat, i.e., fears for their existing works, other sorts of fears, no room, outside of scope, and so forth. We had to admit to ourselves that those refusals were based on reasonable grounds. But there we were: no Retreat House – therefore no Retreat – therefore stagnation! “The setting of each hope was like the setting of the sun. The brightness of our life was gone.” But – that sun rose daily!

One disappointment was particularly keen. In our wanderings we had gone to St. John’s, North Brunswick Street. Sister Augustine was the moving spirit there. She interested the aged Ma Soeur in the idea, and without exception the other nuns were keenly in favor. There was no doubt that St. John’s would make a great success for our Retreats. The grounds were poor, but that was the only drawback. We went through the convent, and allotted uses. There was joy in our camp when this successful issue of all our weary seeking was reported at the meeting of the 5th December. But alas! things had flattered but to deceive! Success was not yet. The final word had not been spoken. That word rested with the higher authority of the Order, and their regretful decision was – No! The reason was: “Outside of scope.”

That was a grievous blow. It extinguished the last gleam of outside expectation. This time the sun of hope passed into a permanent eclipse, plunging our work into chill disastrous twilight. But why not dispel that gloom by turning on the artificial light – that is to say, hold the Retreat in the Hostel itself? This suggestion had been advanced long before, but had only seemed absurd; and the idea had become the less inviting the more consideration it received. Our tiny garden so overlooked that it could not be utilized would mean a Retreat entirely indoors. Indoors, as well, the elementary facilities were lacking. With our minds attuned to the perfect arrangements of the Retreats already held, we were now contemplating one, for the purposes of which a large room would have to serve alike as dining-room, common-room and grounds! How long would the types, who had been restive even in the spacious, varied grounds of Baldoyle, put up with that? This did not bear thinking over. A violent outburst in the premises might seal our fate. At once were revived the terrors of the First Retreat.

Nevertheless, the decision was unanimous. We agreed to go ahead – and not too downheartedly at that. We reasoned thus: We have not stinted our efforts in this work, nor failed too shamefully in our trust of God and of our Heavenly Queen. Why, therefore, should we doubt that the barring of all other avenues

meant that the Retreat in the Hostel was the Will and the New Way of God? And if that was His Will, why should we want our way?

We proceeded to take stock of the requirements. First of all, approach was made to Msgr. Fitzpatrick for permission to hold this novel Retreat. It was forthcoming, and the kindly word of encouragement which he always had for us was spoken as we left him.

Up to then, we had no Oratory or special place for prayer in the Hostel. The daily prayers were said before the Sacred Heart picture in the common-room. But now we must have proper provision for the Mass. The room above our little office – and larger than the latter by the width of the hall – was converted into a charming Oratory. A large statue of the Immaculate Conception was needed. We went to Bull's to look for one. There, facing us on entry, was the most beautiful model I had ever seen. Strangely enough, it had a little checkered history of its own. It had been sold, actually delivered to a convent down the country, and then returned as not being in accordance with specification. It had only been replaced in the showroom a matter of minutes when we walked in. A single glance was enough; it became the property of Sancta Maria. It was a coincidence that the rejected statue should find its way to us, who had been sent away from many a door of late.

At a slightly later stage, Myra House – true to its traditions of helpfulness – bought for us a costly and exquisite statue of the Sacred Heart.

Usually imagination outstrips reality. Not so in this case. Until we set about it ourselves, we could never have imagined all that goes towards the mere routine of a Retreat. What an orgy of borrowing ensued! Many quarters earned our gratitude in those days of making ready. In what a miscellany of loaned plumage we decked our premises to play its newest role of Retreat House! All was not magnificent, but at least each urgent need was covered.

Of course, all our old reliables were on the scene to help. Father Philip, the constant, was again to conduct the Retreat. The President of Sancta Maria at that time was Miss May Massey, who is still faithful to her Legionary labors.¹ The minutes of those meetings, into which I have been delving, were, up to the 21st November, 1922, the work of Miss May Woodhead. She was then succeeded as Secretary by Miss Estelle Condell, who now holds the Presidency of the Hostel.² The records from the start were kept by Miss Mary Stallard, a particularly gallant and spiritual little worker, destined in spite of rooted delicacy to occupy a succession of presidencies and to build up many Praesidia. Pilgrims on the Second Legion Pilgrimage to Lourdes will remember her as a “stretcher case,” and shortly after that she entered into her reward.

¹ 1939.

² 1939.

The Retreat opened on the evening of Sunday, the 4th February, 1923. It was precluded by the usual hurricane campaign of canvassing. In addition to the residue in the Hostel, fourteen new girls were gathered in from the south side lodging-houses and from the various institutions in which they had been more or less patiently awaiting this event. The Retreat was due to last until Wednesday morning. Five Legionaries came in to live in the Hostel, so as to free the girls from household duties and otherwise to lend a hand during that critical period. Our sense of strain bore close relationship to that of the First Retreat. Now, again, we were facing the untried.

The first newcomer has arrived. We do not recall her identity, or we would give you a little paragraph about her, for surely the First Entrant into our very own Retreat House would be worthy of such! As each new girl presents herself, our satisfaction grows. At least our poor little Cinderella of a Retreat House – no less than its grander sisters – has been able to captivate!

Now all are assembled. Our new Oratory fills up for the first time, and with the opening lecture the venturesome experiment takes off.

A well-filled timetable was gone through without a hitch, without a dull moment. The spiritual impression made by the Retreat, with all its improvised arrangements, was no less than that of the former Retreats. The same effort after goodness, meaning in most cases a fierce battle with old evil inclinations, was almost universally manifested. The daily Masses in the Oratory touched heights for us which no stately ceremony outside could equal. Everything there – people and things – had been painfully gathered together by us and this gave unique intimacy to the coming among us of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. I had the privilege of serving those three Masses.

The summing up of that Retreat is contained in the following terse reference taken from the minutes of the next meeting: “The Retreat was a great success. It has given us courage to continue, and it was suggested that we should try to have a Retreat once a month.” Once a month! – that *would* be a violent swing of the pendulum. From a state of things when we could have *no* Retreat, we now were talking of *one a month!* But do not regard this as the hysterical overdoing of a good idea. For it marked the sure confidence to get a new batch of girls for each new Retreat, to handle and dispose of them, and to keep in touch with all that had previously been dealt with.

Now, dear readers, may I moralize just a little? Thus far you have been spared it. Perhaps you will not mind sitting back and listening patiently a moment? Have you been taking the foregoing all for granted, regarding it as a matter of course that girls should be gathered together in this wholesale fashion straight from their evil life? Remember, too, that all of them had been drinking heavily. A couple had come in actually drunk to start that very Retreat; and do not let your faces even slightly sour at hearing this. It needs courage to ginger oneself up to

tear one's life asunder and to take on real self-denial; so look mildly on those who must weakly get that courage from a bottle. The nerves of all of them were on a cruel tension. Nevertheless they threw themselves wholeheartedly into a three-day Retreat subject to the disadvantages already detailed. These strange Retreatants spent those days between the little Oratory – packed to suffocation – their dormitories, and one large room which served alike as dining-room, common-room, and grounds. Would not this try the steadfast and pious? Yet not much difficulty was experienced in keeping them in hand, and the spiritual results were of the first order.

But most of you who are reading this know human nature. Knowing it, you must appreciate that those things, which began in July, 1922, and have now gone on to February, 1923, are not natural, but supernatural, patently miraculous. Yet that long-drawn-out miracle has been shaped to normal routine by a Catholicism which boldly believed and boldly acted. Sancta Maria was a system which sought to bring grace to those souls, and which first, last, and all the time relied mainly on grace. The results were a triumph of the Catholic system. They were no product of fine organization or of any psychological process of uplift. At the risk of appearing to labor the point unduly, I must emphasize that to the religious side of the work must be given full credit as being the basis of its success.

In these ultra-scientific days, when everything must be explained away, there might be a tendency for us to boast about our reformatory process. I cannot even imagine Sancta Maria's success coming from any such. No one will deny that an institution working along secular lines may have *some* success. But I venture to deny, and do it absolutely, that such an institution could take housefuls of girls living dreadful lives, drink-sodden, and almost without the will to emancipate themselves, and do with them what had been achieved in those seven months; then consolidate those results; and after that go on and actually improve on them in the long years which followed.

I cannot conceive how the secular idea could *really* reform, except in the odd case. The human mind will always seek what seems to it to be the greater good. If religion is not there to point out the higher way, then things like leisure, excitement, pleasure, money and the comforts which money brings, must inevitably be the supreme attraction. They will be sought in the face of certain incidental discomforts, and in fact the risks of punishment, disease, and even death do not deter. Logically then religion is the only means through which a universal (i.e., other than in that which happens in exceptional cases) reform can be hoped for.

In practice, it worked out so with us. We had neither experience nor any special qualification for the work. We did not think in terms of psychology or psychiatry. We banked everything on the religious appeal and on the dynamics of grace. Lodging-houses were visited almost as we met them, and the occupants taken in bulk. A significant point is that we got general or unselected material. It could

not be said that the minorities we failed to capture were any tougher than those we did get. This was important. It marked a real success. It seemed to demonstrate the practicability of reducing to systematic solution an evil usually deemed unsolvable.

Now that the necessary moral has been pointed, I forsake the rose-strewn path of theory and get back to the thornier one of action. In the Hostel work goes on untiringly.

Already our First Reception into the Church, our First Marriage, our First Row have been told. Now into our narrative falls another such event: our First Infant Baptism. The little one in question was the newborn girl of one of our first Receptions. The aggregation to the Mystical Body of this tiny additional member took place in St. Nicholas of Myra's, Francis Street. The baby received a fine string of names, almost as many as a royal stripling.

Mention of the above event concerning one of our first two converts recalls another simultaneous item relating to the other convert. The record quaintly reads that Eva had some of her teeth extracted, and while under the anesthetic said the most beautiful prayers!

PART TWO

LEGION BEGINNINGS

**HOW THE
LEGION OF MARY
CAME TO BE**

10. The Seeds Are Sown

You have been reading about one of the first apostolic enterprises of the Legion of Mary. By this time you must have acquired some measure of conviction that the Legion is an effective apostolic organization and that its achievements for the glory of God and the good of souls are evident signs of the divine good pleasure in its regard. The questions spontaneously arise: What *is* the Legion of Mary? What is its structure, its apostolate, its spirit? How and where and when did it begin?

To answer these and a host of other questions would require the writing of another whole book which, please God, may not be too far in the future. At this point, however, we will merely draw a rough historical sketch for you of the beginnings of the Legion, and refer you to its "Handbook," which is easily obtainable, for a complete exposition of its structure, apostolate, spirit, etc.

The Legion of Mary originated in Myra House, Francis Street, Dublin, the property of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. It was originally Lord Iveagh's Play Centre, and became vacant when the present grandiose Play Centre was built on the Bull Road. Prior to its use for the purposes of a Play Centre, the house in Francis Street had been a bacon factory. The Francis Street Conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society secured the premises as a free gift from the owner, Mrs. Donnelly, during the presidency and through the instrumentality of Mr. Frank Sweeney. The securing of that house was an unconscious preparation for the Legion of Mary. Without the room afforded for meeting, the Legion would, humanly speaking, never have arisen.

For a time before being thus taken over, Myra House had been practically derelict. One room had been used for the purpose of a local men's club, and on Sunday mornings the large hall had been loaned to the Society to enable free breakfasts to be given to children.

The advent of Brother Frank Sweeney and others wrought a great change in the place. Things began to "hum." New members came along in great numbers. The original Conference was split up and a second formed under the title of St. Patrick's.

Shortly afterwards a branch of the Pioneer Temperance Association was inaugurated for that – the South – side of the city. Father Toher became Spiritual Director of both St. Patrick's Conference and the Pioneer Association. The Pioneer Association played an important part in the establishment of the Legion since it was the main means of introducing women into the work of Myra House. A certain number had of course been associated with the Sunday morning free breakfasts, helping in the preparation and distribution of the food to the children.

In interviewing the children at the breakfasts, one of the Brothers began to have grave doubts that many of them did not really require a free breakfast at all; eventually a list was compiled of the names and addresses of the children who came on a particular morning and an Easter Monday was devoted to visiting their homes.

At the end of the day it was discovered that in only one instance did a free meal seem to be justified. The children's parents were all employed, but they looked upon the sending of the children to the free breakfast as an act of piety since it meant that the children would be properly cared for and taken to Mass. Following this discovery, it was agreed to close down the free breakfasts.

There was, however, great desolation among the ladies when it was announced that their title to stay in Myra House was going to expire. But "there is nothing dies but something lives"

The Pioneer Association was launched and a canvass was made for members. One of the Brothers remembered a certain lady, not very young, whom he used to see every day going into the Convent of Adoration in Merrion Square. She was evidently working somewhere in the vicinity, and she often came in her apron. He was very impressed by her manner and devotion. So he boldly waylaid her in the hall one day and asked her if she ever did anything in the way of what would nowadays be called Catholic Action. She said she was a member of the Cincture in John's Lane, and in response to a suggestion she agreed to join the Pioneer Association. She came and proved to be none other than Mrs. Elizabeth Kirwan, the first President of the Legion of Mary, who is still happily among us.¹ The Center duly opened once a week to receive applications for membership. Those wishing to join attended to hear an explanation of the rules and benefits of membership. Especially was stress laid on the ideal of reparation to the Sacred Heart as the true basis of membership.

PART PLAYED BY THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

A Council to rule the Pioneers was later formed, into which came several St. Vincent de Paul Brothers and a number of ladies, Miss Donnelly and some of the Free Breakfast Committee, Mrs. Kirwan, and several others. These ladies began to take a great interest in the work of the House, and were available for all manner of purposes and among other things looked up special cases where there was need for the services of women. It would be unfair to the St. Vincent de Paul Society to conclude that to the Pioneer Association was due the Legion of Mary; such was far from being the case. The St. Vincent de Paul Society was really responsible for the Legion of Mary. But Providence brought in the ladies for the start through the medium of the Pioneer Council.

¹ Mrs. Kirwan has since died.

It was realized from the beginning by the Pioneer Council that their meetings should have a definite form, definite prayers and a system of reports in order to maintain a keen interest in the work. These things were introduced. The opening prayers were taken from the St. Vincent de Paul prayer-card, with the addition of five decades of the Rosary; then there was a Spiritual Reading.

Next, the minutes of the last meeting were read and signed, and the business of the meeting was proceeded with. There was a formal agenda, but as the regular Pioneer items were quickly disposed of, the practice was introduced of requiring everyone present to give a report on any variety of apostolic work on which he or she might be engaged. All of those on the Council were actively associated with some one or other of the activities that now centered round Myra House. The men were all doing visitation either of the homes of the people or of the hospitals. The ladies were engaged on special cases or in the teaching of Catechism or other classes.

It is now amazing to see the way in which Providence was shaping out the whole groundwork and laying the foundations of the Legion of Mary. The prayers foreshadowed the future Legion prayers. In addition consider how the following foreshadowed the Legion ideas of time-limitation of the meetings and of the Catena.

The Council meeting opened at 4:30 p.m. At 6 o'clock, as the Angelus rang out in the church across the road, everybody immediately rose, irrespective of the state of the business, and the Angelus was recited, and with that the meeting itself ended. The members then sat down and the ladies provided tea, during which invaluable informal discussion of methods and projects took place. And so, time went by 1918, 1919, 1920, 1921.

All sorts of things were discussed at these meetings. Father Toher was always there, of course and Mrs. Kirwan, also Miss Murray, now a nun in the Cross and Passion Order, Lily Keogh, now a Sister of the Assumption, Rose Donnelly, destined later to succeed Mrs. Kirwan in the presidency of the Praesidium, and eleven others whose names are written in the Legionary Book of Life.

One of the frequent topics of discussion at the time was Grignon De Montfort's "True Devotion to Mary." The idea was very unusual then – almost unknown in fact – and not clearly grasped even by those of the group who were prominent in proposing the Devotion. All, however, were so deeply interested in it that a special meeting was summoned for the purpose of discussing it and enabling all to grasp its idea. "I have often," said one of those concerned, "tried to place that particular event; it must have been almost immediately before the start of the Legion, a matter of a month or so. It was just like making an electric connection, and something happens. We spent the evening talking about the Devotion. I do not say that even so we understood it fully, but at least we were in ardent sympathy with it. We desired to practice it. Then at once the Legion happened."

11. How the Work Commenced

Hot foot on top of that little meeting the Legion of Mary commenced. At the usual Council meeting one Sunday, the members proceeded to tell their little story of work done, and in his turn Matt Murray, the present caretaker of Myra House,¹ described a visit paid by him and another brother that very morning to the Dublin Union, strangely enough to the women's hospital. The Holy Ghost must have been busy, for a more inspiring account it would be difficult to imagine, a simple record, yet most touching and one that had an extraordinary effect on those who heard it. The meeting went on till the Angelus rang out. Then the little group stood up, never dreaming that momentous, world-shaking things were about to happen.

After the Angelus was said, they sat down and tea was duly served. While it was being passed round two ladies of those present approached some of their officers and said: "Couldn't something be done to enable us to undertake the sort of work which the St. Vincent de Paul Brothers are doing every Sunday morning in visiting the Union?"

The answer was: "Can you count on support? Are there any more of you?"

They moved away, and after a while, amid the rattle of cups, they came back and said, "We have only asked a few and yet we have six."

The answer was: "Well, six is a sizeable number and there seems to be no reason why we should not make a start."

The six were gathered together, and the subject was debated. A meeting was fixed for the following Wednesday evening at the convenient hour of eight o'clock in the back premises. All were told to "broadcast" the fact among their friends with a view to securing support.

Wednesday evening arrived and the meeting assembled. There were fifteen ladies present with Father Toher. *What was their surprise to see that she whose name they were to bear was there before them!* They came to the meeting ready to serve as soldiers under her banner and patronage, and as in the case of all proper armies, the Commander was there waiting to receive their enrolments.

When they came into the room, the table around which they were to meet and which was usually bare, was decked out just as for a present-day praesidium meeting. There was the white cloth and the statue of the Immaculate

¹ 1938.

Conception, two vases with flowers, two candlesticks with lighted candles – the standard was not there – but otherwise they had the ordinary Legion Altar. *The Queen was waiting for her soldiers.*

Now it is not known who so arranged things.² No instructions were given to that effect. It is not suggested it was miraculously accomplished, but certainly someone was inspired to it. The meeting commenced, and the St. Vincent de Paul Prayer Card was used. The invocation and prayer to the Holy Ghost was said, followed by five decades of the Rosary and the ejaculations, “Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us; Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us; St. Joseph, pray for us; St. Vincent de Paul, pray for us”; and those were the prayers said by the Legionaries for many a long day. The concluding prayer was the St. Vincent de Paul concluding prayer, which was said for some time until our own prayer was composed. When the opening prayers were finished there was a Spiritual Reading. Then those present were seated and without realizing it, applied themselves to one of the great historical events of the world, the mapping out of the Legion of Mary.

The first question raised concerned the auspices under which they were going to work. The unhesitating answer was that they had come together to serve Our Blessed Lady. That decided, the next thing was clear, viz., that they were going to hold a meeting every week, and do weekly work.

What was to be the framework of that meeting? How beautiful the little altar looked before them – that must be the setting at every meeting. And what prayers? What others than those they had already said?

What was to be their work? The visitation of the Dublin Union Hospital. It had brought them together. It was to be the first work to be taken in hand, but not the only work. It was agreed that the work-obligation could be satisfied by any substantial active work whatsoever, except the giving of material relief. The St. Vincent de Paul Society was doing that in the right spirit and doing it well, so there was no need for them to venture in on that domain. For the moment all other works were excluded. The work to be done, and done adequately, was the visitation of the Dublin Union.

A Secretary was appointed at that first meeting, and a very fine one; she set the pattern for all future Secretaries. It was agreed that the visits should be made in pairs, a ward being allotted to each pair, and when it came to the Cancer Ward there was almost a quarrel among the ladies as to who would do it – they all wanted to undertake it!

The Legion is now hardened to unpleasant work, and nowadays would think nothing of such a visitation. But at that time these things were uncommon, and

² It was later discovered that one of the members of the original Praesidium arranged the altar. She entered religion and has since died in Canada.

the Cancer Ward was a name of horror. The cases were all very bad as the poor neglected themselves before seeking treatment. However, this was what the new Legionaries fought for the honour of doing. Eventually two were assigned to it and everybody was provided for.

After that they discussed, at considerable length, the spirit in which the work was to be done, that is, they were to see in each one of those visited the Person of Our Lord. The 25th Chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew was read and explained. There followed a discussion of methods and discipline which has affected the Legion from that day to this. Finally they were urged to use the Miraculous Medal in their work. The next meeting was arranged for that evening next week at the same hour. All visitations were to be completed before then, and reports to be made in each case.

It was agreed that somebody should announce all this to the Sisters of Mercy and get their benediction. The Sisters replied, welcoming the visitors with all their hearts and promising that the whole Community would offer up Mass and Holy Communion for them the following Sunday. That first unit of the Legion of Mary was named Our Lady of Mercy out of compliment to the Sisters of Mercy into whose Hospital they were going. Incidentally, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy was on the 24th of that month.

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE LEGION

Now here is a strange fact: those Legionaries never adverted to the date on which they first met, and years later when it came to pass that these things had to be put down on paper, not one of them could remember that date. They knew the day of the week, but that was all. They had to dig up the old Minute Book and consult it to find the date. It proved to be the 7th September, which caused them profound disappointment – they regretted they had not paused to think so that they would have fixed the meeting for the 8th, the feast of Our Lady's Nativity! What a wonderful day that would have been! What a wonderful thing for the Legion to be born, as it were, with her, grow and succeed with her, and with her bring forth Our Lord in the souls of the people they were dealing with!

And this they had missed by thoughtfulness and one day! It quickly occurred to them, however, that if they had reasoned, they would have spoiled everything, because if they had met on the 8th, they would have met at 8 o'clock, when the feast was dying, whereas, in fact, they met when the Church was celebrating the First Vespers of the feast. So the Legion came into life with the first fragrance of the feast itself; *we were really born with Mary.*

That is a wonderful circumstance, and these strange circumstances have manifested themselves at all times during the life of the Legion. The Legion has been unlike other great organizations of the Church in many ways, but particularly in this direction, that its origin was signalized by none of the patently

miraculous signs, visions, apparitions, declarations from Heaven, etc., which marked those other organizations. We should take pleasure in the fact that in the Legion of Mary there have been none of these things, and that the miraculous has shown itself in more commonplace ways – its wonderful growth, its interesting coincidences and its impressive successes, but all working through human channels. In answer to all those who have been struck by the system or by its notable result, and have suggested that the Legion of Mary probably was the outcome of an apparition or miraculous interposition of some sort, it is here declared that such was not the case. The Legion of Mary happened in the simple but wonderful way just described. But not the least wonderful thing was that the very first meeting showed us the Legion of Mary as it is today. There were a few things that were necessarily absent – we had not the name Legion of Mary, we had not the Standard, we had not the purely Legion Prayers – all these came at a later stage. But as regards the system and setting, the devotional outlook, the spirit and the atmosphere, the Legion was as fully grown at its first meeting as it is today.

12. The Seeds Take Root

The following Wednesday the group met again, and every thing went like clockwork. Just as today the Prayers were said and each member was asked for her report. Father Toher had become Spiritual Director. The President was Mrs. Kirwan, the lady already mentioned. Among other valuable things, she brought the note of poverty into that meeting; she was, undoubtedly, the poorest person in the room. Mrs. Kirwan caused the right note to be struck from the first meeting, the real Legion note, the absence of all social and worldly distinctions in its membership.

Mrs. Kirwan proved to be a wonderful President. She was the only elderly person in the room, but she had the affection and confidence of all the young people around her. She ruled the Legion with a rod of iron. After a little while she introduced into the meeting the monthly reading of four points which were roughly equivalent to the Standing Instruction now read at our meetings.

At the time it was not fully realized that this item, too, was part of the system. As the Legion began to grow, presidents were chosen and sent to other parts, and just as many of the readers of this book have had the experience of coming to the later Presidents of the Concilium, before they went out to their new charges, so in those days such Legionaries were summoned to Mrs. Kirwan's home. Then she gave them their instructions and various admonitions, one of which was to show them the Crucifix, and say, "Keep that bright and pray to the Holy Ghost."

And so the Legion grew, branch after branch, and difficulties came along. It became necessary to teach the new recruits the essentials of their work and membership, and to devise a means of constantly bringing these essentials to their minds. So it was that what we now know as the "Standing Instruction" was compiled and ordered to be read every fourth week. At first the idea arose that this was a sort of innovation, but it was not; it was only going back to the original practice which was still preserved in every Praesidium that sprang directly from Our Lady of Mercy.

The following is the Standing Instruction as it is read today:

Legionary duty requires from each Legionary: -

First, the punctual and regular attendance at the weekly meetings of the Praesidium, and the furnishing there of an adequate and audible report on the work done;

Second, the daily recitation of the Catena;

Third, the performance of a substantial active Legionary work, in the spirit of faith, and in union with Mary, in such fashion that in those worked for and in one's fellow-members, the Person of Our Lord is once again seen and served by Mary, His Mother;

Fourth, the preservation of an absolute secrecy in regard to any matter discussed at the meeting or learned in connection with the Legionary work.¹

Another thing which some people thought to be an innovation was the Allocutio, but this had been a regular part of every Legion meeting for years. Father Creedon and Father Toher between them managed to cover all Legion meetings for several years, and the talks given by them were part and parcel of every meeting. As the Legion expanded, however, meetings were held at which none of these and no Spiritual Director was present, and at those particular meetings no Allocutio was given.

In the course of time the absence of this was noted and it was embodied in a rule that the talk must be given by somebody. At that time it was the rule that the Allocutio be given at the end of the meeting before the Concluding Prayers, because in practice that was when it was given in the early days.

It came to be altered in the following manner. When I went to Rome with Msgr. O'Brien, I noticed that when describing his own meeting the Monsignor used to say that the Allocutio was given immediately after the Catena.² I thought at first he was making a mistake, because it was otherwise mentioned in the Handbook. However, the Monsignor, when questioned, admitted to being out of order in the matter, but urged that his method was preferable on two grounds; first that the members were in a more receptive mood at the post-Catena stage; and secondly that the placing of the Allocutio at the end commonly meant that it was crowded out altogether, or else that the closing-rule was transgressed. The matter ended

¹ *Legio Mariae*, XXXIV, 7.

² All members stand and recite the Catena Legionis midway through the weekly Praesidium meeting. Every active Legionary recites the Catena daily. Auxiliary members also recite it daily as part of their Legion prayer obligations.

Antiphon. Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in battle array?
My soul doth magnify the Lord.
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
Because He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid: For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For He that is mighty hath done great things to me, and holy is His name.
And His mercy is from generation unto generations to them that fear Him.
He hath showed might in His arm: He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble.
He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich He hath sent empty away.
He hath received Israel His servant: being mindful of His mercy.
As He spoke to our fathers: to Abraham and to his seed for ever.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Antiphon. Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in battle array?
V. O Mary, conceived without sin.
R. Pray for us who have recourse to thee.

in detailed examination by the Concilium. The result of this was the unanimous judgment that the Monsignor was right, and that the ideal place was immediately after the Catena, and so it was decided.

Perhaps this will be sufficient on Legion beginnings for the present. Let us return to the theme of our narrative and take up a second phase of Legion rescue work which proved to be even more exciting adventure in grace than what has gone before.

Let us Pray

O Lord Jesus Christ, our Mediator with the Father, who hast been pleased to appoint the Most Blessed Virgin, Thy Mother, to be our Mother also, and our Mediatrix with Thee, mercifully grant that whosoever comes to Thee seeking Thy favors, may rejoice to receive all of them through her. Amen. *Legio Mariae*, XIII, 2.

PART THREE

BENTLEY PLACE

THE
LEGION OF MARY
CLEANS UP A
VICE DISTRICT

13. Facing the Unknown

Now comes an entry in those memoried yellow-page minutes which was the most momentous of all, though little we suspected it. A single sentence states that Lizzie Manley and Kathleen Deegan had left the Hostel and had gone to live in Bentley Place. On the face of things it was an item to provoke a sigh for it marked the loss of two of those whom we had salvaged and given patient labor to. Yet, here may we not – in the words of the poet – “yoke a smiling with our sigh”? That directing of our minds to Bentley Place was a circumstance of major importance, a sign-post to a greater work, the port of taking off on a Columbus-like voyage out over the illimitable, uncharted ocean of spiritual adventure. At least, Columbus glimpsed what lay between starting-point and the dreamt-of journey's end in that far-beyond toward which he set the prow of *his* stout little “Sancta Maria.” But that inconspicuous entry about the two girls was destined to set the helm of *our* barque of souls toward the absolute unknown, out into the main of great terrors and perils, into the fogs and mists of lies and misunderstandings, into devils' storms!

What was Bentley Place that it should figure thus as a region of mystery and imagination? And what happened when – according to our ordinary methods of working – we immediately tracked Lizzie Manley and Kathleen Deegan to their new quarters in Bentley Place? That was just the trouble! We did not set out after them. We stood perplexed and disconcerted. We *could not* follow them. It simply was not to be attempted – we were told. In Bentley Place those two girls were as much gone from our reach as if they had crossed the seas. More, indeed, for if they had gone to another country, we could no doubt find someone over there who would look them up for us. But in Bentley Place – though near us as distance went – they were gone from us and from the farthest outstretched arm of our influence. Visitation of Bentley Place by persons such as ourselves was flatly out of the question!

Of course, this was far from being the first time that we had heard of the locality. *Everybody* had heard of it, and many people would profess to know all about it; but in fact they knew little or nothing about it except its general purpose. Beyond that, everything was a whirling smoke-screen of tale and fable, whispering, unsavory anecdotes, and hintings at most dreadful things. Even when our attention became riveted on the place and we began to forage round for facts we could get little worth while. The comparative few who frequented the place, and who were capable of putting their knowledge into crisp authentic shape, were naturally reticent. Even the people residing nearby, and others anxious to facilitate us, had only information of the vaguest sort, such as we ourselves had already gleaned from our girls. The latter, though prepared to enlighten us to the best of their ability, proved of little help in regard to statistics and the definite particulars which we were hunting for. The following would be typical of what we met with in our search for detail, even from girls who had lived down there:

“Molly, how many girls are down in that place?”

“Indeed, I could not tell you.”

“Are there 50?”

“Oh, there would be ever so many more than that.”

“Would there be 100?”

“I do not know. I think a lot more.”

“Would there be 500?”

“I haven’t an idea. I never tried to count them.”

“Did you ever hear anyone mention a number?”

“No.”

There it was! Except that the area existed and was dedicated to evil, we could gather but little. The district was compact, clearly marked off from the great populous surrounding territory of mere poverty. It was much like what one would read in a fairy tale – there ran the dividing line or border; on the other side lay this cut-off land steeped in its evil fantastic quality of mystery. Everyone felt this. The summing up of a great worker and wonderful man (already mentioned in the course of this narrative) is worth quoting. This was Tom Fallon, who had for many strenuous years worked all around the area without ever penetrating into it. The devil, he said, had enveloped the whole area in an absolute fog which distorted what it did not conceal. It was impossible to sift the real from the unreal. The corruption within its borders was apparently so extensive, so unhandleable, the stories in circulation so fear-inspiring, that even the holiest and bravest were convinced that nothing but harm could come of an attempt to grapple with the evil.

A sordid tale – better left untold, someone will say! But why? Is there to be no such thing as truthful history? And viewed from any angle, Bentley Place is history. But apart from that, the tale is not sordid – taken as a whole. Was Redemption sordid because it was preceded by sickening sin? When we put all the facts into their right relation, and lead them on to their amazing climax, we reach the strangely happy ending that everybody, verily everybody emerges with credit from the long and painful unravelling! So let us, as Rabbi Ezra says, “See all nor be afraid!” It seems to me that the annals of the Church afford few more triumphant pages than these later episodes in the history of Bentley Place. They show the irresistible onslaught of grace upon the inner and imagined-impregnable entrenchments of the devil himself. They manifest a miraculous Christianity – as potent as it was in any era to melt stony hearts in bulk – to effect wholesale conversions – to win not merely one hardened Magdalen, but great numbers of them and find that they never sin again; and not alone the “girls,” but their “bosses” and the “bullies.” Those happenings exhibit the Faith in all its proud might within the compass of our own days, our own streets, our own Legion. Surely that is a tale to tell!

Though Bentley Place was only the name of a single street, we always applied it to the whole infected area. But the name stood for more than an area. It

represented a system and an anomaly. The system was the terrible one of organized tolerated vice. The anomaly was that of a compact exceptionally vicious area in an exceptionally good city. There was no other district like it in the city, nor in any other city of Ireland, or of England or Scotland. Of course, the whole thing was illegal. It represented a permitted disregard of the common law, which prohibited under heavy penalties not only such an area, but even a single house from carrying on the traffic which formed the basic livelihood of this territory. That traffic was in womanhood. But, it will be asked, what else have you been treating of in your narrative for many chapters past? No, I have been dealing with the section of the sad sisterhood who live in lodging-houses. Many of those lodging-houses were not nice places; but they were lodging-houses and nothing more. They did not allow the actual commission of offence beneath their roofs. The girl went forth for that. In Bentley Place, however, the premises played their part, and not only for the girls who actually lived there, but for any visiting girl who came with her companion and sought accommodation.

An article in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Tenth Edition, Vol. XXXII, refers as follows to the area: "Dublin furnishes an exception to the usual practice in the United Kingdom. In that city the police permit open 'houses,' confined to one street; but carried on more publicly than even in the south of Europe or in Algeria."

Such was the sad fame to which our genuinely good city had attained. Certainly there was no like spot in the world so far-known as Bentley Place; more widely bandied about in the conversation of men; a glaring incitement to every man, where vice was usually alluring, free from publicity, and – if carried on according to the "rules" of the place – easy; and where the basic temptation of the place was supplemented by the availability of drink at all hours without licensing restrictions. This latter formed a most serious complication, for it drew to Bentley Place great numbers who would not otherwise have gone there. After the usual closing hours in public houses and theatre bars, men gravitated down there for no other purpose than to continue their drinking. Then another evil steps in and they drift into the category of regular frequenters.

Anyone willing to spend money and conform to the established standards was welcome there; but it was likely to prove expensive to him. As long as he kept to the ordinary routine of the place, paying for everything and generally conducting himself according to local lights, everything would go smoothly. That man would not only come safely out of it, but would be quite a popular figure. He must, however, be prepared for certain things. He will be plied with drinks, for which he must pay a price 500 per cent above public house rates. The girls' instructions were to make a man as drunk as possible and then relieve him of every penny in his possession. This organized, methodical robbery was an integral part of the system, and by the admission of the "chiefs" of the area, it constituted the most lucrative source of local revenue. The visitor, who had been so imprudent as to bring a large sum of money with him (and there were many such imprudent ones

– rumors of £100, £500, £1,000 coups filled the air down there!), must take its loss without carrying his protest too far. As long as he merely voiced his indignation, they would be patient with him – after all, was he not perhaps a naturally aggrieved customer? But if he considered a row, at that stage danger dawned for him. A few roughs would pile around ... and then anything might happen.

The Continental system of registered houses had nothing in common with what prevailed in Bentley Place. Here they carried on as they pleased, without regulation of any description save what they themselves imposed in their own interest. Anyone that wanted ran a “house,” that is if they could secure the premises – that was the only hindrance! Anyone that liked could sell drink all around the clock. Anyone could lend money there, and the standard rates ranged from 1,300 to 2,000 per cent per annum. The place had its own “bosses,” its own law, its own financial system. This was not a written code, but it operated efficiently. Its driving power was crude violence operating swiftly. It did not argue. It simply ordered and struck. The instruments of that force were, to use the local words, the “bullies.” The bullies protected the girls and the “houses,” kept order generally, and generally enforced the code on locals and visitors alike. A troublesome visitor, one crazed by drink or too truculent about a robbery, or a girl who had been found out in trying to hold back more than her due “divide” of spoils – all of these had to reckon with the bully, or, if necessary, with a group of them. And that settlement was a terrible thing which he or she who paid would not readily forget. Rumor insisted that the place had its array of hidden murders. In the atmosphere of the place, one had no difficulty in crediting that; it is not so easy to stop at just the right point when dealing out savage punishment. Anyone who has been down there can visualize the scene: the cries proceeding from a struggling knot; a figure that does not rise, but lies still; awed whisperings, and in a little while the body is carried away for disposal in a backyard grave; then a universal conspiracy of silence!

The arrival – straight from their ships – of cab-loads of sailors from most distant climes was a common feature.

The roots of the situation there lay deep in the past. Probably the area had existed for considerably over a century. In the course of its history its confines varied somewhat and the names of the streets changed several times. In our time, the streets which had originally formed the backbone of the area, had changed over from cesspool to mere slum. For some time prior to Sancta Maria days, the tainted area consisted of Bentley Place and two other streets. The three were so disposed as to form a sort of great F reversed, Bentley Place itself being the middle stroke.

The toleration of the traffic there was a matter of deliberate policy. How it actually germinated, no one nowadays can declare. Perhaps it took rise out of a military cantonments system. But in modern times it only got a most reluctant

immunity as the awkward outcome of a dilemma, in which eradication was a terrifying thought, while out-and-out recognition was impossible. Those in authority deplored it; they regarded it with horror. But they feared with a great fear the consequences of drastic action against it. Would not closing-down mean “scattering the evil”? That phrase, “scattering the evil,” was destined to become to us “a horrid hideous sound of woe, sadder than the owl-song.” For no Maginot or Siegfried Line, with their deep-sunk fortifications and ingenious defense-works, could do more for the nations behind them, than did that phrase for Bentley Place! Nothing *could* be done, nothing *should* be done, BECAUSE THE EVIL WOULD BE SCATTERED if it were touched. Better have it where it is a known quantity, where it has always been! A gruesome picture was conjured up before the mind of a deluge of corruption sweeping forth from the area, in which it had so long been scientifically and carefully damned up, and flowing over the respectable parts of the city engulfing them in its own foulness. That vision had always been efficacious to hold to precedent the high police officers who might have become restive in regard to the accepted theory of toleration.

In certain circumstances, of course, it is legitimate for civil authorities to tolerate evils which, in their judgment, cannot be suppressed. The law cannot legislate virtue, but only establish conditions favorable to virtue. But without denying or condemning such principles of law and government, it is permissible, and indeed, urgent that every Christian do what he can by the exercise of charity to rescue these “least of Christ’s brethren,” from so great dangers to their salvation.

According to the story, one attempt at remedy had failed. A fine man, Sir John Ross of Bladensburg, had become Chief Commissioner of Police, the first Catholic to occupy that post. Disgusted at the situation which he found and after weighing up the pros and cons, Sir John struck at the area. He picked on one street out of the then large area, and he shut down the “houses” in it. Tradition has it that his move was a failure – a disastrous one, it was emphasized by the many who ever after told the story – all of them telling it in the same words, just like a formula, and always ending on the one note that the “evil had been scattered.”

When we came on the scene asking questions, we found that their tradition, with its sequel of helplessness, was universally accepted. Possibly there was *some* scattering, for there was no accompanying effort to win over the girls. But to listen to those who talked, one would be led to believe that a bad house had sprung up in every respectable street in the city; and generally one’s flesh would be made to creep by convincing details of dire consequence. From what I now know, I would largely discount those grisly yarns. First, because I have positively known many like tales in later times – elaborately garnished with detail and circumstance, and almost sworn to – to represent *unadulterated*, that is to say, 100 per cent fiction. Second, the normal sequel to a partial clearance would be that most of the girls would transfer into adjacent still-immune houses, not the

effort to establish houses in other localities where no immunity existed, and where vigilant police action would inevitably and soon run them down.

However, Sir John Ross had enough. He was impressed by the clamor which ensued. He went no further with his efforts, and things presumably relapsed into their former state. This rendered impregnable the tradition against touching the evil.

14. The Night Before

I begin by touching on a misgiving which has been voiced from a couple of quarters. These say they fear that in the last chapter I have over-colored the picture. They cannot bring themselves to believe that so good a city should break out with so foul a plague-spot.

As to this, there has been no “heightening of the effect.” The actuality of Bentley Place was so crimson that there is no need to redden it up in the interests of this narrative. In point of fact the reverse procedure has had to be adopted. Any number of circumstances and incidents which would add greatly to the story as a story, and which in a sense are necessary to its complete accuracy, have been suppressed or veiled so that even the young may read these pages without being too much informed by them. So there!

We have seen that Sir John Ross had gallantly tried and failed. Or rather let us put it that he had ceased to try. Thus, action had proceeded on the principle of the pendulum swing – one extreme to the other – from drastic repression unaccompanied by moral suasion to the absence of effort of any description; and the reversion to the grand old theory that the situation was irremediable Had it not proved that by lasting a hundred years and more? Men are men and must be catered to It is madness to risk scattering the evil And see what happened to Sir John Ross’s experiment!

The latter enunciation formed water-tight roofing for the philosophy of despair. The upshot was that the area was exempt from further shock-tactics. Henceforth the system pursued the even tenor of its way, constituting a permanent and many-tentacled temptation for men in the way previously touched on. The place had its whirl of life and its sort of glamor. One got to know and like people there; that meant additional drawing power. It was convenient to get at – and to get out of; it had half-a-dozen different approaches. Once there, the customer was (subject, of course, to those rules of conduct!) reasonably safe and immune from disclosure. After all when one visitor met another, it was the usual case of six and half-a-dozen; neither had anything on the other.

That was the general setting which faced us in the early part of the year 1923. Other details of the system will be brought in as our adventure develops – that is, much in the order in which we learned them ourselves.

What could one hope to accomplish against such a situation – historic, firmly rooted, accepted, fraught with danger? Our own reasonings suggested “nothing,” and our hearts shrank from even trying. However, we were not completely free agents in the matter. Various circumstances operated to shape our thoughts and move our hearts, and even to egg on our steps. The stages of becoming interested in Bentley Place, and of learning how bad things were down

there, were succeeded by the stage of talking about it and wondering what could be done. Then came a time of taking stock when we tried to balance our fears and our hopes, that is, the supposedly insuperable difficulties against certain assets which we possessed. First among these was the fact that we had now penetrated into all the street girls' haunts with the exception of Bentley Place alone – and it was just galling to be held up now, even by alleged impossibility. We had been surprisingly successful. Starting off originally with the conviction that a street girl was a well-nigh hopeless proposition, we had been delightfully disillusioned. We found that even housefuls of them could be won over. Indeed our experiences seemed to indicate that so far from that poor class being the most hardened and incurable, it was in fact the other way about. Then why, why should we allow ourselves to be hypnotized by the slogan that Bentley Place was untouchable – even though that slogan was on everybody's lips?

The Bentley Place girls were no different from those others whom we had made fine prizes of. We had no doubt that we would likewise influence them, if only we were allowed to approach them and to apply the ordinary methods of our apostolate. But would we be allowed? Every voice said "no." The unanimous view was that we would be denied that approach; and that if we were persistent, we would be driven out with a degree of ill-usage proportioned to our obstinacy. Blood-curdling detail was not wanting. We would be kicked, we would be barbarously beaten. The rival techniques of the sandbag and the knuckle-duster were enlarged upon, and it was insisted that a broken bottle makes a ghastly mess if the jagged end is ground into one's face. Most scaring of all – because it ended in a gruesome query mark – a vivid picture would be thrown upon the mental screen: two Legionaries being called into a hallway; behind them the door shuts stealthily and firmly; then nothing more is ever heard of that rash pair! Why, it almost serves them right for being such fools!

Yes, it is easy to laugh at all that now, but at the time it sounded very convincing, very fearsome! Had we been merely an unorganized group of individuals, I have no doubt that this A to Z of creepy arguments – ranging from public policy to personal risk and from the futility of our meddling to the madness of it – would have borne down our anxiety to help those girls; and would have permanently halted us in sheer confusion as to where the right course lay. But we were not merely individuals. We were the Legion of Mary, and that made a difference which affords an interesting study in psychology. Incidentally, it shows how ordinary people can be brought to the doing of almost anything, that is if step is linked to step like a chain, and if the somewhat spasmodic surgings of spiritual idealism are supplemental and steadied by a right sort of discipline.

How did this operate in regard to the Bentley Place enigma? In the first place the problem was methodically approached and every consideration was weighed to the accompaniment of prayer. All this took place around our little altar of Mary Immaculate which – as Pius XI of revered memory said to us – kept high and holy thoughts before our minds. Mary herself we regarded as our leader, and

ourselves as her army; and the system claimed standards of courage and sacrifice no less virile than those of the armies of the world, which are able to say confidently to their men: "here is your duty and your destruction."

Did the Legion mean this? Was it real? If it was, let us view this question as an army command would view a position which they deem it important to take. They calmly estimate the value of the capture as against the heavy price of lives which will have to be paid for it. If the advantages outweigh the loss, the order to go ahead is given, and automatically the action is on. Applying that analogy to Bentley Place, what did it point to?

As you have seen, the final analysis of the position boiled down to this. We were satisfied that we could win over the girls if we were able to enter the area. As against that, we were advised by all who should know, that we would not be allowed to enter, and that disaster lay in trying. A "military" summing-up of these alternatives pointed to trying. For if sin is the greatest evil, and if souls are eternal, then something must be done; and we seemed to be the people who should do it. We seemed to have been providentially assigned to the problem. If now we were to cower down before Bentley Place, how far-fetched, how unreal becomes all this description of ourselves as an army, using the terminology of war, yet hesitating to go into action because of risk. That army idea was dynamic. It drove home the infinitely important truth, which otherwise we might not have sufficiently appreciated; that religion unbacked by that same sort of reality is only like a boiler with a hole in it – there is much steam and stir but no force developed!

If you have ever been at a Legion meeting, glimpsed its methods, breathed in a little of its atmosphere and spirit, then you have already guessed the result of our deliberations. The decision was that we must visit Bentley Place. But how often do the firmest decisions mean nothing. What is determined on at night is set aside as madness in the colder light of the following morning! Hence – when immediately afterwards the inevitable well-informed person came along to hand us some new "facts" and a few home truths on the subject of our folly – did we not switch over to the softer way, the prudent plan, of simply doing nothing? No, we had our stable system with its time for acting and we were now far beyond the second stage. The decision to enter Bentley Place had passed at once to the stage of preparation!

Who would be the visitors? A survey ended in the appointment of two. By the way, no element of conscription entered in. That pair was desperately anxious to be allowed to go. One of them was Josephine Plunkett. Miss Plunkett died before the days of wider expansion of the Legion, and few of the present Legionaries ever knew her. That is a pity, for to know her was an education. Her faith was white-hot. Her sweetness was absolute. Nothing could have frightened her, or perhaps it is safer to say that fear could not deter her. She was a person with a single-track mind. If there was a soul in danger, she simply went after it.

Nothing else mattered. It might almost be said that she saw nothing else. Thank God, we have many a one like her in the Legion today!

A day was fixed for the take-off. It was to be Thursday, the 22nd of March. The hour was to be noon. The two “victims” took a pretty serious view of the enterprise, and said some extra prayers, and gave themselves a good rubdown spiritually. I suppose this amounts to saying that they were prepared for the worst. It would have been irrational to act otherwise, in view of the dire things that had been prophesied. But they were not woebegone about it and they got no special pity from their fellow members, all of whom would have liked to be on the job themselves.

One disquieting reflection was that our members would have to proceed into the area unvouched and absolutely unknown there. The two girls, who went to the place and first attracted our attention to it, had now moved out of it to pastures new. Actually, we only knew the name of one present resident in Bentley Place; but even that formed an asset. If at our first entry to the place some rough comes up to us and truculently demands – out of the side of his mouth as is the manner of his kind – what the mischief brought us there, it would at least be better than nothing to be able to mention a name. It would give a shadowy status.

That girl’s name was Mary Lyne. We had been told of her a little while before. We had fixed her name and address in our memory by casting them into the form of a nursery rhyme, thus:

“Mary Lyne
Of number nine.”

Mary did not know us, nor we her. She would not and could not vouch for us; nor could anyone else in the locality. That meant that just in the crucial initial moments we would be exposed to unrelieved hostility. Who were we? What were we up to? We were not customers. Were we police-spies or what? Look at all the explaining we would have to do to fix our category, and in an atmosphere of hard suspicion we would not be given the time to explain anything. But even some slight knowledge of us might cause them to hold their hand a little – and in that little time – tolerance? I might mention that Miss Plunkett had a wonderfully charming manner. As regards our chances of influencing the girls, we judge it most important that our *bona fides* should not be suspected. Our experiences in the south side lodging-houses had impressed that on us. With all the girls in the latter aware of our identity, the going was nevertheless very difficult there as will be remembered. We felt that had they not known us at all we would have achieved nothing. In all the circumstances, therefore, it seemed essential that we should possess some means of identifying ourselves and introducing ourselves to our Bentley Place mission.

We went to Mr. Russell,¹ a prominent and respected gentleman, who resided in the parish – outside the rotten region but not too far from it. We told him our intentions to visit the area. He thought that something should be tried, though he judged the situation there as hopeless, and he warned us against the danger of a trap being set for us. We told him of our views on the subject of identification, and then appealed to him to walk with us through the various streets that constituted the area – this to be done in full daylight, without entering any house or even loitering on the way. We were satisfied that our being seen in this manner in the company of this universally-known man would serve to identify us sufficiently, and probably to incline the inhabitants to some extent in our favor.

His reply was a shock: “Under no circumstances could I do as you request. My knees would only go from under me if I attempted to enter there. But you are doing the right thing yourselves. I would ever so much love to go along with you and help you like a man. But I am not in a position to face up to the likely consequences.”

Those words did not proceed from a weakling but from one who had on many an occasion given positive proof of courage and bigness of heart. It only showed how well entrenched was Bentley Place.

¹ This name, like many of the others mentioned, is not the real one.

15. We Enter the Danger Zone

We did not press him for his reasons, and he did not volunteer them. Presumably that earlier reference of his to the possibility of a trap supplies the key. Thus, if you penetrated through the half-brick and half-bottle barrage, it would only be to enter a zone of false charges and blackmail! The peril of these latter had been drummed up to us frequently during the time of our deliberations. I need not discourse on its intimidatory force. Tom Fallon reckoned it as the major danger we would have to face down there.

Mr. Russell, though unable to bring himself to help in the way we wanted, volunteered to help in another way. He would bring us to a person who would help us with information, and probably in more practical forms as well. This was a Mrs. Brewer, now leading a correct life, but in her earlier years one of the belles of that underworld, and, as Pink Leroy, known far and wide. Mr. Russell told us her history. At first, a girl in one of the big "houses" there, she had gravitated upwards into the ownership of a number of them, which had a fashionable clientele. Later she had parted with that property, and at the time of these events she was living on the outskirts of the area. It was round to her home that Mr. Russell brought us on the night of March 21st, that is the very eve of our grim mystery tour.

Mrs. Brewer was a most impressive-looking person. She was fully six feet tall. Though fairly advanced in years, she retained elements of her earlier beauty. She dressed quietly, but with discrimination, I would say. Mr. Russell introduced us, and then departed, leaving us to talk. We chatted for a long time, but we were not successful in getting much new information from her. She was chiefly concerned with talking about herself and of the respect in which she was held, the good influence she had among the girls, etc.

Eventually we came to the point of our visit. We mentioned that we were going down into the area the following day in the effort to induce the girls to come away with us. Would she come with us and smooth our path? That statement made a sensation. If we had suddenly produced a bombshell, it could not have startled her more. To this day the scene stays clear-cut to me. We were sitting on very low chairs, she overshadowing us from a high one. For quite awhile after our announcement, she sat looking down on us with an expressionless face. Then suddenly this immense woman rose to her feet and stood towering, her face now showing consternation. "That would be madness!" she said haltingly, as if after getting her breath: "I implore you to do nothing of the kind. For forty-five years I have lived in and around Bentley Place, and I know everything about it. I could not answer for your lives for a minute if you went into it on that business. Besides, you would be wasting your time in trying to take any girl away. They would only laugh you to scorn."

Whew! That was what one might call getting it from the horse's mouth with a vengeance! Who should know if she did not? It shook us badly. Had it come earlier on, that dramatic pronouncement of hers might have plumped the wavering scales. But now the time of weighing was over. We explained that to Mrs. Brewer, and said that we were under orders to go down there. Orders were orders, so now the only thing that mattered to us was to try to make a success of the venture, and we hoped she would give us her valuable aid.

Her reply was that the whole thing was too serious; we did not realize how serious! It would be out of the question for her to give any sort of help to such a harebrained scheme. We must promise not to show previous knowledge of her if we should happen to meet her in the area. We were bewildered by her attitude. But fearing to turn even an obstructive neutral into a full-blooded antagonist, we gave the promise on which she insisted. Then we took our leave of her, suspicion fermenting in our minds.

On the way out, we had to traverse a passage at right-angles with the hall. We passed an open door. What we glimpsed through it gave us a jolt. The walls of that room were festooned with ladies' apparel. Even our fleeting glance showed that it included articles of a quality which would have no market in the poor area which, like a great sea around an islet, encircled Bentley Place. Right-facing the door was a fine full-length mirror. You may ask why should it jar us to see a few furs and silk things? Well, it meant only one thing to us. It told us that Mrs. Brewer was the costumer to Bentley Place. The costumer was a notable limpet on the sorrowful sisterhood. A woman got a few pounds together and started trading with these unfortunate girls. That trading was "tangle-skein" with usury. Every purchase was a credit one, and credit was not such as we understand it, but a loan at interest – and what interest!

We passed on – but no longer perplexed. Now we knew why Mrs. Brewer wanted to have nothing to do with us. Her interests (in every sense of the word) were bound up in the continuance of the system which we, like up-to-date Don Quixotes, were getting ready to tilt against.

Thus terminated our interview with the Pink Leroy of other days. It instances the steadiness of the Legion system, then so young, that even her well-informed alarmism did not stampede us into summoning an emergency meeting. We just went off home; the appointment for the morrow stayed put.

Now it is Thursday, the 22nd of March. I have always given the weather-chart on these peak-days of our progress; so for this outstanding one among them I record the fact that it is a bright, pleasant day.

The two adventurers were to meet at twelve o'clock, and they did so punctually – despite the fact that one of them, when starting off, was all but run down by a furiously driven bread-van. The meeting place was about ten minutes walk from

Bentley Place. That silent walk lay through streets lowly, but not vicious. A turn to the right brought them into a one-time main artery of the evil traffic, long gone over to mere poverty. Now they were nearing Bentley Place itself; it would be the next turn on the right. Their pulses quickened. As their sense of apprehension tensed, so did their grip on their crucifixes. They were on the brink of their plunge into the unknown so looked forward to and yet so dreaded. Now they were at fate's corner!

Stretching out before them, they saw Bentley Place for the first time. The atmosphere was forbidding and peculiar. The place always gave an impression of gloom and mystery. It was felt that day, though the sun was shining brightly. To pass from the adjacent street into Bentley Place was like the step into a hallway from the fuller light of day.

But, of course, you have already reasoned out the explanation: obviously the play on the imagination of long-stored-up and dwelt-on impulses of horror! No, this was no mere effect of the imagination. If it had been, it would have gone for good that day – as you will see. Instead, it persisted for years – contradicting even St. Thomas Aquinas, who declares that familiarity breeds contempt. For in those years, every house and room and stick and stone and man and woman and child had become quite familiar friends to us. But finally – and suddenly – that phenomenon ceased!

But I am outstripping the narrative. The two Legionaries (I will shorten this to "We" for the future) paused a moment to take their bearings. The first house on the left is No. 1; the first on the right is No. 21. Order being heavenly, we would normally have entered first into one or the other of these houses. Besides, in them we would be nearest to escape! Today, however, our thoughts are centered on another number. It had been running in our minds since we met; and as we walked, it beat time with our steps: "Mary Lyne of No. 9 ... Mary Lyne of No. 9 ... Mary Lyne ... No. 9 ...!" We were looking for Mary Lyne of No. 9! That number must be somewhere down at the far end. In actual fact it proved to be the third last house on the left hand side ... We started off down Bentley Place, expecting every second to be set upon. There was a sprinkling of people in the street – just hanging about; no one there seemed to be occupied. The term "sinister" could fairly be applied to their appearance. They eyed the invaders curiously, but no one made a move to obstruct us. We had not penetrated far when the first thing happened.

Perhaps those things, into which Legionaries delight in reading the touches of their Mother's hand, are merely innumerable coincidences. Or perhaps they are not; for coincidence, like elastic, only stretches to a limited extent. In any case, we discerned beneath the surface of that first Bentley Place incident an allegorical or deeper meaning. Allegory, says the poet, dwells in a transparent palace. Our allegory resided in a transparent ruin – the ruin of a man; which was fitting, because he typified the broken lives that we ambioned to rebuild.

Leaning limply up against a wall was one of those filthy, drink-sodden, degraded specimens of humanity that somehow one seems only to encounter in furtive places. Suddenly he came to life; he had espied us. As we came near him, he left his wall and shambled quickly towards us. It looked as if our troubles were about to start. Instead, to my amazement, he called on me by name. Then I remembered meeting him once or twice before, when picketing the proselytizing dens. I tendered him my hand, but what he did was to seize it and cover it with kisses. Thus our reception to that dreadful place was love and homage, and not some act of savagery as we had feared.

There was *our* beautiful allegory! Profoundly moved by it, we went ahead with added heart. Those faces, eyeing us so doubtfully, seemed softer, more human. No one else approached us. Now we were at No. 9. The hall door lay open. We turned in and knocked at the front-room door. Someone shouted to come in. We entered. In that room were five women, four of them standing, and one in bed. The latter was far gone in sickness; she looked very near to death. In order to establish our status, we asked if Mary Lyne lived there. "That's her in the bed," was the reply. Some questioning ensued:

"She seems to be very bad?"

"Yes, she is dying."

"Has she had the priest?"

"No."

"Has she had the doctor?"

"She won't let us send for him."

"Is it possible that you are going to let that poor girl die there like a dog?"

"Ah! what can we do?"

At this stage the bulk of our misgivings had vanished. We had found our feet. Here we were in the thick of our ordinary Legionary trade of remonstrating with and coaxing people; and we found these tough-looking women willing to listen to us. We talked to the sick girl. Incidentally, we learned that she was 27 years of age and had pursued that manner of life for nine years. To our surprise, we had little difficulty in getting her to agree to go to a hospital. I went outside. Right opposite was a grim young man lounging up against a door post. I went over to him, explained the position, and asked him to get a cab for me. Off he went cheerfully – another unimagined circumstance: our orders actually being obeyed in Bentley Place! After about five minutes the cab arrived with my messenger inside; I thanked him with the added fervor of surprise. Then the poor girl was wrapped up in blankets, tenderly enough carried out, and placed in the cab. A couple of the other women went with her. Her destination was the Lock Hospital. On arrival she was rushed to bed. The priest was hurriedly summoned, and Mary Lyne made her peace with the Good Shepherd who had used us like a pair of sheep-dogs to seek her out in Bentley Place, bring her away, and restore her after all those years of riot to His eternal embrace.

In the old minute book of that time, I see that it is stated that the matron said that she would not have lived two days without medical attention. Actually what was said was *one hour*. After getting that attention she rallied and lived for two months. In the course of that time she made an extremely fervent preparation for death. On several occasions she told Legionary visitors that she hoped she would not recover, as never again would she be so well prepared. Shortly before her death she called for the Rosary in the ward, joined in it herself and died on its conclusion.

Her funeral was the most amazing turnout that I have ever seen. Father Creedon said a Requiem Mass in the Lock Hospital for her, and I served it. Most of the girls from Sancta Maria came to the funeral, also many Legionaries, and a gallant array of Mary Lyne's friends and sympathizers from Bentley Place, who out of their setting still more aggressively looked their trade. Ordinarily these latter would not have mustered in any force. But the circumstances of Mary Lyne's death and of our visitation (by then two months in progress) had caught the imagination of the denizens to a great degree, and had already started a ripple of the supernatural over the territory. After the Mass, off went the funeral – all cabs. In Glasnevin Cemetery we met Father Flanagan at another funeral. When he saw our incredibly diversified and almost weird assortment coming along, he nearly dropped. I have seen ultra-startled looks on people's faces on several occasions; and that was certainly one of them.

16. The Legion Gets In

The episode of Mary Lyne was of tremendous value to us. We looked on it as a palpable display of the supernatural, as of course it was. I suppose in all Ireland at that moment no soul was in such spiritual need as that poor girl; and just as if we were led on a string, we walked straight to her, and long before we left the place that evening the Last Sacraments had been administered to her. Note that but for our nursery rhyme, we would have entered No. 1 or No. 21. We would not that day, nor for many days, have tackled No. 9 and then Mary Lyne would have been dead!

After Mary had left for the hospital, we had a sort of triumphal progress. We spent 4 ½ hours that day going from one room to another, and from house to house. In all we spoke to a great number of girls. Many of these had already heard of Sancta Maria, while some had not. In the different places that we met them – ones, and twos and threes, and fours – we explained our mission over and over again, till the mere act of speaking became hard labor. Everyone was amazingly nice to us, and we ran up against very few who expressed themselves in terms of obduracy. Most said they intended to give up that life *some day*. Others said they would like to do so now, but that they knew they would not be able to persevere. A great obstacle was that of debt. So far as they were concerned, their life was not a paying game. They made big money, but it evaporated explosively. Clothing was a very serious proposition; but I have already explained that position. It was possible to pay week after week, and yet never clear away one's debt. You may say, could they not leave the place and all the debt behind them? True! But God help them in the day they would return to that place or fall into the hands of the people whom they had "defrauded." The punishments meted out were swift and crude. All had witnessed the awful examples and this intimidated them. How on earth could they leave owing money when they might have to come back?

I have described two striking incidents; the third one occurred, as far as I can recall, in the first room of the second house we entered. In this room were three girls, who listened to our explanation courteously. When we had been talking to them for a while, a man sidled into the room! He was a young, reckless, good-looking fellow, with a little of the look of that former film star, Rudolph Valentino. He did not speak. He stood up against the mantelpiece, one elbow upon it, and listened intently, while contemplating us out of the corners of his eyes. I said to myself: "The crisis has come. This fellow has been sent in to get rid of us." I made up my mind that we would have to go down fighting in any case; that if we submitted meekly to be expelled from the place, our cause was lost forevermore. So I clenched my fists in my pockets and stopped talking. Miss Plunkett continued with the latter, while I tensely waited for a tiger-spring. But as I watched, I could see no evidence of ill-will in him. After a few moments I moved over to him and struck up conversation. I found what was pathetically typical of

the whole place. There you had an unfortunate poor devil in the grip of a system which overbore his own nature. He was doing filthy things, but doing them as a business, as a matter of course – just like a soldier who does terrible things in time of war yet may be the quietest of people naturally. I elicited his story. He was a shoplifter by day and a “bully” by night; and he was the brother of a stylish beauty who was one of those in the room! Now, the “bully” has previously been defined. He was a sort of policeman down there. Some of the bullies lived with particular women, and on their earnings, and some did not. Their duty was to keep order. If there was trouble of any kind, they would deal with it. If a visitor kicked up a fuss about being robbed, they gave him a hiding. They played their little part, too, in the robberies, and did odd jobs as well. An unlovely profession! Yet here was one of them in the flesh, and you find that there are decent elements in him. I pleaded with him, and got an unexpected response. He told me that he would love to get clear of the whole life, but he also had the usual cry: “What else can I do? I must live.” I asked him if he would make a Retreat. When I explained the idea, he said he would. So there and then I scribbled out a note of introduction for him to Father Devane who was very interested in that area and its problems. “Valentino” duly presented that letter, made a week-end Retreat, and immediately afterwards went over to Liverpool, where he made good and eventually got married.

When that room was “finished,” we took the next nearest one.

Now what sort of people had we come across? You could not possibly imagine a greater diversity of type than in the women there. They ranged from beautiful, trim, elegantly-dressed girls to the most awful specimens of the human race. Mention of the latter category calls up a mental cameo. There was a “nest” of five of them in one room we entered. They were in one bed – the whole quintet! Some of their heads were visible; some were under the cover. Heads and legs protruded from the latter at every angle. It was almost fantastic; we could not guess how many people there were there. They were in the first or early stages of a drunken sleep. We had never seen anything quite like it. We gazed on them for a while, disconcerted. What use to talk to people in that condition? We were tempted for a moment to leave them and pass on. No, we must get to know them.

We picked a head and gave a pull or two at the savage mop-like tangle to which the feminine glory had become debased – oh! when had it last been attacked by a comb? Some muttering and spluttering, and its owner was awake. Her face was drink-bloated and not washed of late. Looking at us out of blood-shot eyes, she saw that somehow we did not fit into the ordinary picture. She wriggled herself up. She was fully dressed. It seemed futile, but in a few sentences we explained our purpose. You would expect that anyone in such a state, so wakened, would show resentment by hard words. No, the poor creature listened quietly, and when she did speak, it was only to apologize for her condition. We suggested that she waken up the rest and she did. Then it was that we

discovered their number, and also realized how much humanity could disfigure itself. For they seemed hardly human. Was it grace, or indeed what else could it be in such circumstances, that made them – though thus drastically awakened from a methylated spirit slumber – receive us genially and listen sympathetically to what we had to say? It was inconceivable, yet it was the case. It was still more incredible that they ended by giving us a promise to come along on our Retreat – the whole “nest” of them.

That was our last port of call in Bentley Place that evening. As we left there, we were conscious that we had with us the same irresistible force which had been operating in the work since the previous July. We were superlatively tired, but equally bucked up by the day’s proceedings. All the lurid prophecies had burnt themselves out in smoke. WE HAD GOT IN. More than that, we had been made welcome! Still more, we had secured one stupendous capture in the person of Mary Lyne. We had a marvelous array of prospective ones – not less than forty promises, which we could hardly hope to deal with if all of them materialized. We had notified these that the Retreat would begin in Sancta Maria on the following Sunday night, which would be – further interesting circumstance! – the Feast of the Annunciation.

We dragged our weary feet in the direction where anxious colleagues were awaiting word. I need not tell you that there were both surprise and elation in our camp when we narrated our adventures. Surprise was the dominant note, because our entry had proved so easy – an anti-climax almost. All had tuned themselves up to the expectation of terrible things, and it was a sort of disappointment to some that there had been no fireworks! The general surprise was crystallized in the following paragraph taken from the Minutes of our next meeting held on the 23rd March, 1923.

Our visitors were received at all houses with great courtesy, and succeeded in getting 15 girls of a very mixed type to come for the Retreat on Sunday. Mr. Duff said he could not understand what all the fear and talk was about, since they had met with nothing but kindness and courtesy.

“How successfully the Devil has blinded the eyes of everyone!” was Tom Fallon’s exclamation when he heard how readily entry had been effected. Tom’s own gloomy view of the prospects of our enterprise was quoted some chapters back.

Now for the Retreat itself! The ecclesiastical authorities were approached for permission to hold it. This they graciously accorded, declaring that they were very pleased with the work. Thus the general arrangements were rushed forward. One gap in the equipment of our little Oratory was to be made good. Two of our members went to Bull’s on Friday morning to select a statue of the Sacred Heart, which was being presented to the Hostel by the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Myra House. We found a fine model and ordered its immediate

delivery. While there, the genial Manager, Mr. Dowling, questioned us about the happenings. His interest warmed, and he insisted on presenting us with a beautiful set of Stations of the Cross.

That day – Friday – we went down into Bentley Place again, and we had another long session there. This time things were even easier than before. We were hailed as old friends by a proportion of those whom we met. We covered the old ground, confirming the resolutions of those who had promised. We broke some new ground and got some fresh promises. We again encountered some or all of our “quintet.” Whether it was a case of better light or of cooler survey on our part, we realized this time that those particular ladies could not leave the place as they were – except in a closed conveyance. They were in an unbelievable state. It was obvious that we would have to do something for them in the way of clothing. Do I hear someone talk acidly about material relief? Well, it could be argued in the circumstances; but I suppose the simplest refuge is to say that the Handbook was not even thought of then.

Accordingly we gathered up a quantity of old clothing, and on Saturday afternoon May Massey, Mary Stallard, Rose Donnelly and I went down with the clothes. Miss Massey and Miss Donnelly are still devoted members of the Legion. Miss Stallard is dead. That Saturday afternoon was indescribably shocking and depressing. Even that early, the business side of the place was in full swing. The men had poured down in great numbers, and the general orgy aspect was sickeningly in evidence. The atmosphere reeked with evil. The general effect of our previous visits seemed to be obliterated. We could not find the people we knew, and in any case the idea of talking to them about religion only seemed to be ridiculous. Part of our job that evening was to round up the five who needed clothing. Finally we ran them to earth, and then it was to witness something that amounted to a page out of a fairy book. It was a veritable witch’s kitchen. Ask Miss Massey or Miss Donnelly their recollections of that afternoon! Our five – and now they had two or three more with them – were all dreadfully drunk. We had time to say that we had the clothes – but not a word more, for at that point in came someone with an immense bottle of methylated spirits. Then we were forgotten, and everything else save that big bottle alone! There ensued what was like a religious rite – so solemnly was it carried out. They ranged themselves round in a circle, and silence reigned. The carrier of the methylated spirit stood inside that circle. To each woman she gave two glasses, one large and one small. The small glass was filled with methylated spirit and the large one with water. Then, immediately, down went the glassful of methylated spirit followed by the glass of water to prevent the spirits’ actually burning her. There they were, rigid except for trembling hands, their eyes starting out of their heads, all riveted on the methylated spirit and following its circulatory progression. It was just as if the Blessed Sacrament were being carried round a room full of good people; every eye would be fixed on the Blessed Sacrament. The craving of their souls for the drink was in their faces. As each one’s turn came, the glasses were passed to her and convulsively clutched as if life itself depended on

the elixir which was at that moment gurgling out of the big black bottle into the little glass. This proceeding was repeated until all had their share. Then they dragged us into it. Round and round until the little breath they had gave out. Outside a play you never say anything like it; and even among plays I cannot recall its parallel. Then they commenced to get into the clothes we had brought, and my presence made absolutely no difference! The weirdness and abandon of it all was crushing to us; it meant the failure of our efforts up to date. We could not conceive even one good impression surviving in that atmosphere. Still less could we vision one of them on the Retreat.

In the middle of all this riot, Marcella Dean suddenly falls out in order to drag me into a corner of the room. Still grasping my arm, she whispers to me with an earnestness which was startling by contrast with her wild gyrations of a minute before. She said: "I want to get out of this life, but I will never be able to get over to the Hostel tomorrow. Would you not take me over there with you now? It is my only chance." Well, you can hardly understand (and I can hardly understand it myself) the rigidity of our attitude at that time about our taking girls other than by way of the Retreat. We were not prepared to take her in that night. We regarded entry by Retreat as being essential, and as being God's way, and we were in terror of departing from that light. So I wrote a note to the Matron of the Lock Hospital and asked her to take Marcella in for the night. Off went Marcella with that note. That should have been a piece of consolation to us, but we were too numbed to have any feelings of pleasure. Indeed we did not believe that she would steer her way out of the place. Yet on Sunday she was the first newcomer to ring at the door of Sancta Maria!

She had been 16 years on the streets. During a great portion of that time she had been a fully acclimatized methylated spirit drinker – what they called in their slang a "Spunker." I would grade her the second worst-looking type down in that place. "Remember Lot's wife, and do not turn back," says the Gospel. Marcella may not have known that Scripture, but in that hour she heard it in her soul. She never looked back. Never by as much as one glance did she look back after that day. She gave up drink and never went back to it. After some little time she demanded my attention and told me of Artie Morris who had often said to her he would marry her if he thought she would only keep straight. I went down and interviewed Artie one Saturday afternoon. He was definitely a tough shot! He was reclining on his bed. He questioned me about her and I stated what I believed on the subject of her good intentions. I well remember the eventual long pause, while he weighed the situation from its various angles. Then he said: "I'll marry the old hen." In due course they were married and lived happily ever after – that is, down to the present day.

Another of the "witch-dancers" – and worse than Marcella Dean – was Jess McGuinness, popularly known as the Queen of the Spunkers. She had been 22 years on the street. She, too, was simply saturated with methylated spirit. You would want to see people who were addicted to it to realize the fantastic

demoralization it brought about. It made its victims look like and act like devils. Those who took methylated spirit never properly sobered up. After liquoring up on it, and sleeping it off, the effect could be restarted in all its primitive vigor by simply drinking a glass of water. Yet Jess was another of those who confounded our pessimism by presenting herself at the Retreat the following day; after which she went on to demonstrate with utter finality – by never again turning back – that God's ways are not our ways!

But these triumphs were not even dreamt of then. Without a gleam of comfort we surveyed the nightmare scene which surged dizzily around us as we moved desperately her and there in the effort to find people. It was a heartbreak. There did not appear to be a particle of reason for staying on. No one was prepared to listen to us. Every minute brought more men flocking in, and every minute the chaos of drink became more rampant. At about 6 o'clock we left, with all our hopes collapsed about our ears. We wrote off Bentley Place as a prospect altogether. It seemed monstrously unfortunate that we should have chosen the week-end for our expedition. The balance of that evening and the first half of Sunday was a time of sheer depression for us. Yet here comes Marcella Dean, and not long after her, her sparring-partner Jess McGuinness, then Mary Jane Keegan, and Tilly Smith, and Katty Edwards, and so on, until we realized that a phenomenon had come to pass. We had our standard number for the Retreat; that is, 15 newcomers together with the girls already in the house. Of those newcomers 8 were from Bentley Place and "Mary Lyne again means nine." Unquestionably we were experiencing the supernatural. For how those people ever kept the thought of the Retreat in their minds through the whirlwind which we had witnessed I cannot imagine. Yet so it was. True the great bulk of the promises had been swept away; but we got the worst in the whole place, and in all we got as many as the Hostel was capable of handling. And that is not the peak of the marvel. Here it is: Not a single person out of the Bentley Place contingent ever turned back. Not one! We never had that happen with any other party before or after; and no other party comprised such ineligible elements! Nevertheless not one of that nine ever went back to the old life. Let those who specialize in explaining away the miraculous try their hand on that! Was it our reformatory process, or was it sudden self-discipline, or was it that more-than-miraculous coincidence that can be expertly stretched to cover all things?

I have mentioned that that day was the Feast of the Annunciation. The Retreat was to be given by Father Philip. Thus the auspices were excellent, but it proved to be one of the worst evenings we ever went through in our lives. We might have anticipated something of the kind. That Retreat was the first deadly blow dealt at the tenure of the Prince of Darkness in Bentley Place. Was it likely to pass uneventfully? You will remember Daisy Warner the wayward, who figured as the heroine in our "First Row"? Well, we had held on to her up to this very day, though such had originally – and often since – seemed outside the bounds of possibility. This evening she was drunk, very drunk, and when she was that way she was like a cyclone. When Father Philip arrived to start the Retreat, the

cyclone was winding itself up. She was shouting and demanding to be let out – more by way of a demonstration than really for release. Everyone took a turn at arguing with her and pleading with her. Temporary abatements were only followed by greater heights of fury. How we were going to have a Retreat in the house nobody knew. Then when things were at their worst she managed to seize the keys, opened the door, and flew out into the street. It was a tragedy after we had held on to her so long.

As well as that, we all liked this characterful girl. We felt that the next thing would be the window coming in, but that did not happen. After a minute the bell rang violently. She was back! The door opened, but not quick enough or wide enough. In burst the cyclone in full swing, those in the way being ruthlessly hurled against the walls. Immediately on the left was a large picture. She raised her fist and put it through the glass, cutting herself badly. Her next objective was the hall clock, a valuable antique, the property of Miss Scratton. The latter rushed forward prepared to lay down her life for her precious clock. Daisy made a fierce bang at her which fortunately missed. At this stage, her adversary of the First Row, a Brother, came down on Daisy like the wolf on the fold, and saved Miss Scratton. Daisy replied by hitting him repeatedly in the face with her mangled hand, so that in a trice both of them were quite covered with blood. A violent struggle ensued before he could secure a grip. He must have been supernaturally succoured, for her immense strength was crushed; and she, whose boast it was that it took three policemen to arrest her, was pinned to the floor. But that was not the end by any means. She made her neck maneuver as if it was a rubber, and she used her teeth with amazing success, again and again biting the Brother who held her. Eventually water and more water was obtained and poured in her face. At this stage she capitulated. Such was the state of nerves and the excitement that the first lecture of the Retreat had to be called off. She continued to sit in the hall, unapproachable and menacing, because it was not imagined that we had finished with her. At about 11 o'clock a knock came on the door of the office. It was Daisy. Looking for a second round? No, she was standing there pathetically, just like a dog with a wounded paw, holding it up and wanting to have it dressed!

But why on earth not call the police and put her out, or have her arrested? Do you believe in ruining your whole retreat, and shattering everybody's nerves, and destroying your property – all for the sake of one turbulent girl? The answer: Yes ... and we read that the Good Shepherd always thinks of that unruly one to the apparent detriment of the ninety-nine. With Him, we must always reason what will happen to that poor soul if cast adrift. If we in our Hostels were to eject people whenever they became hurtful to us, we should soon be doctors without patients.

17. Hectic Times

That Retreat concluded – the most momentous since the historic first one – the twin processes of settling up and getting ready for the next Retreat began. The rapid and permanent settlement of many lives, that had for years been drifting destructively along, showed that the worst evils of the world could be relieved if only workers enough could be found to give detailed attention to the individuals in need of it. From the record of those reconstructed lives I picked an item which merits incorporation in our “First” series. It was our first (and only) “mass-marriage.” Three of the girls who had formed part of that first contingent from Bentley Place were married on a single evening, the 29th of May. The ceremony was performed by Father Creedon in the presence of a cluster of us. Afterwards the happy couples were entertained at tea in Sancta Maria. The feature of the tea was an impressive speech by one of the grooms. He said he had to voice the deep gratitude of all the members of the wedding party for the transformation which had been effected in their lives; but for our workers things would have just dragged on. Of course, that *could have been* the usual aftermeal, unmeant utterance, but it wasn’t. If you had been there, and had seen the faces, you would have wanted to cry!

From then on, Bentley Place formed part of the Legion’s sphere of operations, and received visitation not less frequently than twice a week. But do not think, because we had gotten safely in – and out again – bearing away with us a rich spiritual booty, that we at once lost all apprehension of the place and henceforward worked there with the nonchalance which now characterized our visits to No. 25 Low Street or to any other of the street girls’ lodging-houses. Such was not the case. We never came to treat Bentley Place lightly, even in the later stages of our visitation there. I have already furnished one reason for this, namely, the uncanny, evil atmosphere which pervaded the region and which was never thinned down by familiarity. Another reason was the very obvious danger; though in this respect things had worked out differently from original anticipations. We had expected something like the spring of a tiger hurling himself on the intruders the instant they entered his lair. Instead, the Bentley Place tiger had remained crouched, even purring cat-like at us. But we never knew the hour nor the moment when some act of ours would overstrain that tigerish tolerance. The scene on that Saturday night had formed early education for us. The evening had been young when we left, yet its possibilities seemed infinite. How murder was not done that night and every night was a puzzle. That puzzle pointed the moral: how easy it would be for us, who were throwing ourselves athwart the life and interests of the place, to be ground to dust!

And why did that logical thing not happen? If not at the outset, why not as our campaign developed, and it was seen that we were not only in opposition to the local industry, but successfully so – that we were getting away their girls, and in other ways interfering with trade. For instance, we were violating the privacy of

that haunt of vice: picture for yourself the dumfounded expression of a certain gentleman when down there one night he met face to face two Legionaries who worked in the same city office as he.

As we analyze them, the reasons for our immunity were these: We did not enter the place merely as seekers and would-be friends of the girls, but of all. We did not jump to the conclusion that because the girls were in a sense being exploited, they were thereby more sinned against than sinning, and that the bosses and manageresses and the male frequenters were the real villains of the piece. We took no sides, played no part in the divisions or disputes of the place, and whatever prejudices we formed we kept them to ourselves. We tried to think in terms only of the souls of those we met there: a lot of souls astray, one as bad as the other, destroying themselves and each other; and yet not a terrible dose of malice in them all.

We spoke straight to all about the offence they were giving to God, the loss of grace, the harm to other souls; but not as an attack on them, never by way of siding against them. We railed at nobody, "told off" nobody, dished out no menaces, no judgments. We endeavored to be nice to all, not merely because we felt the thinness of the crust of tolerance on which we were tiptoeing, but mainly because we had the idea that we were scouts from God to all those people, a loophole of grace to them, possibly their big or only chance of setting main things right. The miracle of Mary Lyne had utterly subdued us by its magnificence, and had made us realize our purely instrumental role – but also that Omnipotence had deigned to use those instruments, and probably would continue to do so if we did not run away from that job of ours in Bentley Place.

The most amazing thing of all was that the nature of our mission was at once sized up, and the purity of our motives given more than full credit. It was understood we wanted to do no man or woman harm; that we had no game of our own to play. Our operations down there were accepted by that city of outlaw-souls as being the veritable strivings of the Good God to capture them; and somehow even the toughest of them softened and proved responsive.

That was why the people of Bentley Place submitted to our forays into their kingdom. And somehow, too, we put them all on the defensive; so that they stood back and watched, inoffensively, transactions which struck at the livelihood of every single one among them. It is extraordinary to think over at a distance from those events. It WAS extraordinary. Yet, as I have said, that forbearance was as a thin crust; under it raged fires which might on an instant – at some injudicious step, even an innocent or accidental one – break through and consume us. But there was no use weighing the intangible. For instance, the following incident must have represented a close-enough thing.

Down there, one day, we encountered two girls in an upper room of No. 1 Trusty Street (which was another of the three infected streets comprised in the general

designation Bentley Place). They were in bed, though the day was well on. They were in good humor, and we had a long chat with them. One of them, Anne Carey, was a Catholic. The other, universally known as Manchester May, was a Protestant. Her place of origin was indicated by the label. She had come over to Dublin with a man; they had separated, and she had drifted to Bentley Place. As we chatted with the pair, we worked them into a favorable mood and eventually secured a promise from Anne Carey that she would come away with us the following day. Well satisfied, we moved on.

The following day at the appointed hour we went to Trusty Street. But the door was locked, and the big window to the right of it was shuttered over. We knocked and knocked, but without response. At last we inquired next door and were told that the two girls had gone out the previous night and had not returned. That sort of thing would not be uncommon. It might be due to arrest or it might mean going elsewhere with "somebody." It was part of our routine to suffer disappointment; we were salted with it. So philosophically enough we turned away. Passing a group some little distance on, we overheard an observation to the effect that it was a shame to make fools of people. This sounded as if deception was on foot at No. 1. We retraced our steps. We tried knocking again. Then we examined the shutters on the windows. They were of an ancient type which clipped on to rests outside. It was found possible, by the application of some degree of force, to dislodge them. The window behind was not bolted, and opened readily enough. During these proceedings we were momentarily expecting the advent of angry, strong-arm men on vengeance bent; but no one came forward to interfere. The onlookers chose to be amused. We climbed in the window, went upstairs, and there found our pair fast asleep.

We awakened them, but found Anne Carey had changed her mind about leaving and was adamant. All argument was useless, and finally she turned her back impatiently on us and disposed herself for a further spell of sleep. Then the unexpected happened. Manchester May, who had been quietly listening, announced that *she* would come with us and there and then she rose from bed. Soon after, we were *enroute* for the Hostel. This wonder had a fitting sequel. A month later, those two Legionaries stood on each side of Manchester May in the little side-chapel in St. Nicholas of Myra, Francis Street. Fr. Creedon was receiving her into the Church, and they were her sponsors. The next step was the reconstitution of a broken home and the restoration of May to her children. That happy state of things, destined never to suffer setback, was the outcome of our act of "breaking and forcible entry." Of course, in that treacherous atmosphere, it was taking a full sized risk. But our glorious prize showed that we had acted wisely and well. Many a thing during those stirring times in Bentley Place might equally with that one be criticized as "imprudent." But critics don't win battles. Those acts were never really thoughtless or purposeless, and usually they scored or at least did no harm. The whole campaign would never have started, and certainly would not have been carried through, had our thoughts been centered on the delicate operation of tuning-in each step to the

cadence of what is generally but inexactly called “prudence.” The real prudence is a cardinal virtue; therefore it should not be a mere signpost pointing fixedly down “the good old way, the safer road, of simply doing nothing.” As our late and great Pope Pius XI stipulated: “Prudence must be such as Holy Scripture defines it and does not tire in recalling: the prudence of the sons of God, the prudence of the spirit. It must not be – it is not - the prudence of the flesh – weak, lazy, stupid, selfish, miserable.”

We wish we had those noble words by us at that time, when the other sort of prudence was being dinned into our ears, as if it was essentially wrong to run a risk; so that we felt half-guilty because we went ahead.

Now I think I had better complete your knowledge of the system of the place by supplying such details as have not yet been given. Forgive me if incidentally I have to touch on ground already covered in previous chapters.

The largest owner down there was Mrs. Curley. She had eight “houses,” each of which was in charge of a manageress. All profits were made the subject of a three-fold “divide,” one share going to Mrs. Curley, one to the manageress, and one to the girls. Profits accrued from (a) the basic traffic of the place, (b) robbery, (c) the sale of drink. If asked to decide as to which of the foregoing yielded the richest revenue, you would probably line them up in the above order. But it was the other way about. The liquor was the big profit-earner. But that I must explain. Drink was not sold at ordinary prices, but at rates appropriate to a desert or a drought. For the most part, the drink began to flow when the licensed premises closed. Thus there was no outside competition, and monopoly rates reigned in Bentley Place. Bottled stout was the ordinary tippie there. It was sold by the small glassful, and a bottle filled three glasses. For every glass, bang went a shilling! A bottle of stout in those days cost twopence retail; so you can work out for yourself the percentage of profit. You may wonder if it was possible to sell much drink on those terms. Yes, it ran in rivers. A man whose nerves are on edge for drink will pay any price to get it. Numbers went down there for the main purpose of getting drink. Moreover, it was the policy to ply men with it – partly because of the rich return – partly because it facilitated the act of subsequent robbery, which was kept strictly in view. The girl was supposed to rob the man, and the proceeds fell into the scope of the “divide.”

After Mrs. Curley were the smaller owners. Chief among these were Mrs. Moore, who had three houses, and “Kitten” Carr who had two. These latter were owner-managers, that is they dispensed with the manageresses on whom Mrs. Curley had to rely. This meant a different financial arrangement for those houses. The division of the spoils was into two instead of three; half going to the owner and half to the girl. On paper this would appear to work out much more advantageously for the girls there than for Mrs. Curley’s girls. The latter, however, did not look on Mrs. Curley’s houses as an inferior proposition; so somewhere in the system there was evidently a compensating adjustment.

Over these owners were bigger interests, ex-owners who had made money, now living away from the area, supposed to be retired, but with more than a finger on the pulse of their old property.

The bulk of the girls were attached to the "houses," but there was a large "privateer" section. These held their own rooms on rent and were complete free-lances. They had to find their own prey, whereas the girls in the "houses" had not to concern themselves too much about that.

In all, we estimated that there were about 200 girls plying the trade in Bentley Place at the time of the opening of our campaign.

18. We Deal a Deadly Blow

The life of these girls is often imagined to be one of glamor and pleasure. What fine dresses, gay effects, loud laughter, a “good time,” nothing to do but enjoy themselves! No distorting mirror ever reflected a more crooked image than that! The false laughter (always on the edge of tears) and the excitement come out of a bottle, and have to keep coming out of it pretty often, or else the pain of “being without” sets in; for nearly all of these girls drink. True, the dressing could be gay, sometimes elaborate. Once, in the course of an hour or two, we saw a girl appear in three quite different, expensive outfits. But all that finery represented a dead weight of debt, which pressed down on the wearers like a load on a slave. Often enough, the burden of debt outlived the garments themselves.

Glamor? Well, perhaps! – insofar as the word suggests a spurious glitter. But, if you could only know what we saw in the course of our Bentley Place adventures! The lives of these poor unhappy girls were purely sordid affairs, commerce at its ultra-vilest, all the time in the grip of a peremptory need for money to meet their debts and buy them drink.

Where drink is, there is not going to be much common cleanliness. Even where Bentley Place had an outward polish, it was only a cover for some sort of underlying filth. Universal was the defilement of disease. Each of those girls – the most pretty and elegantly got-up of them – had had, had, or soon would have had it. In all our experience of Bentley Place, we only knew of one girl there who had not been tainted, and even that one case needs explanation.

That was the “glamorous” spot into which the men thronged! Such was the “good time” which many a respectable poor girl eyed wistfully enough – from a distance!

Girls from the outside lodging-houses would frequently come into the area with their escorts. There was a quantity of rooms for hire by such visitors at the regular tariff of ten shillings per night. Drink was sold in every house, and practically in every room in the area. Many people there live out of the sale of drink, who were not otherwise discredibly employed.

Usury was, of course, the order of the day. Visitors had to pay spot cash for everything, but among the inhabitants credit was more usual than cash payments, and the interest charged was amazing. The biggest practitioner in this line was the Mrs. Brewer, or Pink Leroy, already mentioned. From her down ranged the lesser personalities, terminating in those who would lend sixpence for twopence interest, - per week sometimes, per day sometimes, according to the bargain struck at the time of lending.

The entire area depended on the traffic in one way or another. In some instances that dependence was only indirectly sinister. Many women lived by doing washing or cooking or mending for the girls. It was strange, but a fact, that there were some girls there who worked about the houses and who were good.

A particularly unpleasant feature – mitigated or aggravated (according to the way you eyed it) by the fact that it was all so much taken as a matter of course – was that children were there in numbers. They made their way into all rooms and situations, always hanging around waiting for the chance of being sent round the corner for a packet of cigarettes or a box of matches, for a handsome tip.

Add to the above the kindred details brought into previous chapters, and you have a general idea of the “business set-up” of Bentley Place. Now imagine our Legionaries in the midst of it all, moving around as freely as the regular dwellers, acclimatized to the place and the place to them; approaching all and trying to make friends with everybody: the girls, the bullies, the workers in the houses, the drink-vendors, the money-lenders, the manageresses, the bosses, the visitors, and all the weird assortment of hangers-on and all the rest. Imagine them listened to with attention and even with tears, treated with indifference, turned into a joke, stormed at; thus covering the scale from top to bottom, all according to the current moods of Mabel, Lena, Bridie, Mollie and Patricia. Mix in the chat with the “Wasp” seated on the window-ledge, another one with Johnny Mullen in the hall, the vicious scowl from Crusher Kelly on the stairs, and the friendly grin and comments of Billy Hill when coming out again. All that or something like it might represent the visitation of a single house.

In it we might be offered tea. Then accept we must, for fear of giving offence (which would be serious). Normally after hours and hours of talking, a cup of tea would be appreciated – but now down there, in those rooms simply reeking with evil and cosmetic, where every item of the simple meal, every detail of its serving, was an object of suspicion and revulsion to us.

We were beaten on a couple of occasions, but that was only by Dizzy Johnson, who was mad. The sympathies of the place boiled up against her, so that Dizzy had to run for dear life.

The “gentlemen visitors” did not generally aspire to be interviewed, but some were less elusive. They were appealed to on the subject of their lives. Often our Legionaries were laughed at for their pains, but were never rudely treated. Usually what they said was taken in good part. Sometimes they got a good response, and sometimes they even elicited promises! What fate were the latter to have?

Of course the Legionaries were often approached or harassed by men. But this was in ignorance of their identity and was not persisted in when the true position was – sometimes with difficulty – brought home to the forward one. I give a

string of names above (never the actual ones by the way) but they were not mere names to us. Each one was a battle, each one a page of our hectic history. I turn one page and then another, to try to make you see those names as real people.

Billy Hill's line was the ignoble one of "bully." But herein he must be judged a victim of circumstances; for his attitude to us through all that time was flawless. Thus he exemplified the topsy-turvy nature of the place, depravity and decency running in streaks like bacon. Wherever found, he could be counted on to do a service for the Legionaries. Eventually he married one of our "girls" with whom he had been friendly, and the pair made good.

"Wasp" Nealon is on the second page I turn. Many a long day she had lived the life of Bentley Place. A Legionary wormed her way into her heart and so one day the "Wasp" came with her to the Hostel, refusing any other escort. That was a feat! The Legionary was young and sensitive; the day was Easter Monday, and the route lay through the crowded central streets at mid-day. The "Wasp" had all the look of having lain in a sewer for a week. She was incapably drunk, yet she spurned the suggestion of a conveyance. On arrival the Legionary summed up her own feelings thus: "I nearly died!" But note that the bloodcurdling job was firmly carried through! That incident and others of like quality served to form the Legion mold, so that later on such things were done rather as a matter of course.

You will gather that, whatever else it was, the work was not monotonous. Verily there must have been an extra heartbeat or two per minute in it. But it had no flavor of the pleasant such as even difficult, risky employments sometimes acquire. The Legionaries hated it heartily, they said. To the end they never mastered the peculiar nervousness which fell on them whenever they turned into the area. Nevertheless, there was competition among them for inclusion in the team.

As our team, on any particular evening, would wend its way towards Bentley Place, we had not a notion as to what lay in store for us. Perhaps it would be the ever-dreaded counter-at-tack – at last unloosed by our devastating tactics. It might, on the other hand, be a sort of triumphal progress, i.e., several captures; but more likely it would be just hours and hours of continuous, exhausting talking without apparent fruit.

The ordinary routine was that when persuasion tilted over the doubting scale, and a girl agreed to come with us, we reassembled our team, sent someone for a cab (nearly always the old four-wheelers) and in it, rumbled off to Sancta Maria. There we would be received with elation. The girls would crowd out into the hall, curious to see who was the latest! Old pals would renew acquaintance. The captures, though they usually came a few at a time, came regularly, and so piled up to a big total as time went on. Some of them slipped back, but then again we would recover many.

For a long time we could not judge the general effect we were producing. So to speak, we knew the number of the fish we had landed, but for long we could not gauge the size of the pool out of which we were taking them. By reason of the peculiar indefiniteness of everything, we felt like people in a fog which veiled, twisted, magnified. We imagined the problem to be ever so much bigger than it really was; and relatively our successes seemed insignificant. We found it incredibly difficult to pick up information; that was a baffling characteristic of the place, but it did not proceed from artfulness or malice. It was as if they did not know the details themselves. For instance, we had little inkling of the number of girls, until we had at long last counted them up ourselves. And the latter computation required no small knowledge of the area and of everyone in it. It must have been at least a year before we had reached that stage of knowledge. At the end of that year, the position began to be clear. We were dealing the system a deadly blow; we had carried off well over a third of Bentley Place's complement of girls. It was obvious that a continuance of our present progress must bring an early crisis. The place must break, if it did not anticipate that stage by breaking us. The circumstances gave no room for a drawn battle. So to which side defeat and what exactly would defeat mean?

For the moment, however, the initiative was with us. We had not to face the ordeal of making a new decision. We had only to continue to hammer away at the place. Yet the people there looked on and did nothing hostile. Not only that – they were nice. They often did helpful things. Take for instance that mention of the fetching of cabs; it was nearly always the bullies who did that service for us. And it was no mere job of running round the corner; the nearest cab-rank was at quite a distance. More striking still, visualize the case where a Legionary – separated from her co-visitor who is “somewhere down the street” – makes a capture. The girl is willing to come away with us at once. So the missing Legionary has to be found, and a conveyance summoned. In addition the girl has to be made ready to travel. Sometimes this entails washing her and more or less re-dressing her. One Legionary cannot attend to all these things; if she turns her back for a moment, the girl may be wafted away. Of course those two Legionaries should not have allowed themselves to get separated; it is prohibited by their code. But if two girls were simultaneously found toying with the idea of a new life, it was beyond human nature, or the apostolic instinct perhaps, not to follow up both of them ... and their paths were sure to seek opposite poles!

Who will go and find Legionary No. 2? Who will go off for the cab? And while these details are being arranged for, *who will watch the girl* and see that she does not disappear into thin air? Who? You will agree that the absolutely least likely persons to trust with that charge would be the manageress of that very house or a bully hanging round it. Yet that charge has been accepted and honorably discharged by them on several occasions. So that Legionaries No. 1 and No. 2, hastening back, find the girl all ready for the road.

From the fact that I speak of going straight to the Hostel, you have gathered that we had abandoned our old principle of “no entry without a Retreat.” We now took them in whenever we got them. When we had five or six girls waiting, we decided on a Retreat. Ordinarily we visited not less than twice a week; but when a Retreat was in the air, we stirred up that tempo. We would usually go every day in the week preceding a Retreat. At those times very many parties of Legionaries might be engaged, so as to cast our nets completely over the bad area and the low-down lodging-houses. When the Retreat took place, we would have about fifteen newcomers on it. These, with the girls already in the Hostel, made sleeping accommodation a crucial problem; sometimes even box-rooms and pantries had to be commandeered. In connection with the Retreat held on the 30th May, 1923 (the next after the Bentley Place one), for which a record number was anticipated, one finds in the minutes the refreshing entry that a friend had offered to put up five or six girls in her own home each night of the Retreat. She was not even a Legionary, but the spirit of her act was the fervent spirit which radiated from the Hostel, and which alone made possible the miracles of restoration accomplished there.

Of late in this narrative you have been seeing only one side of the picture: the getting of the girls; but the handling of them was far more difficult. What infinite patience, infinite thoroughness, infinite faith had to be lavished on each case! But that Christ-like seed forced golden harvest out of the thorns and the rocks, just as if from rich soil. All the time the process of settlement went on: girls coming to and going from the Hostel; going to jobs, hospitals, Magdalen Asylums, Glasnevin; going home; getting married; instructed, received into the Church; and some fell away but that only meant putting them back on the “Search” list. The backbone and foundation of all that activity was one thing: the devotedness of the priests and women-workers of the Hostel. (Someone *must* say it!) Their love for those difficult souls was indomitable, heroic. It out-reasoned reason; it remained unconquered even when defeated; it trusted when hope was dead and buried.

That firm attitude towards the alleged hopeless cases was not indeed grounded in faith alone, but in experience as well. A whole series of dazzling episodes had provided demonstration of the divine law so quaintly and pithily expressed in an old Spanish saying: “Take what you want, says God, *but pay for it!*” One of those episodes occurred early in 1925. It formed such spectacular endorsement of the Legion’s policy never to grade items of work in terms of the “promising,” the “unpromising,” the “hopeless,” etc., that was incorporated in the Legion *Handbook*.¹ But that account in its passion to be brief, does scant justice to the startling transaction so I will retell it, trying to impart substance to the shadow.

A Legionary of wide experience of the most depraved sinners of a great city was

¹ XXXVIII, 3 (b).

asked if he had met any that were absolutely hopeless. Reluctant, as a Legionary, to acknowledge the existence of that category, he replied that many were terrible, but few were hopeless. Being pressed, he eventually admitted that he knew of one who seemed to be capable of being so described. That very evening he received his overwhelming rebuke.

At half-past seven, accompanied by two other Legionaries, he entered Bentley Place on the customary Friday visitation. Under his arm was a statue of the Sacred Heart, of length about 18 inches, which was being brought to some family thereabouts. It was wrapped up in brown paper, but so clumsily that the nature of the contents was not evident. As the Legionaries passed along the footpath, they were cheerily hailed from across the street by a girl named Nance O'Neill. She was sitting with another girl on a window-ledge. She was the girl whom that Legionary a couple of hours previously had selected out of all the tough cases of his experience as being the authentic, toughest, in fact, as being the one and only hopeless case! Perhaps that afternoon's conversation had something to do with the fact that the three Legionaries stopped at her hail and went over; but probably they would have done so in any case. Some badinage between the rival forces ensued. Then Nance O'Neill's eyes fell on the paper parcel. "What's that?" she demanded; at which the spirit of mischief entered into the Legionary:

"It is something you don't know a dot about, Nance."

"All the same, tell me what it is."

"It would be of no use. You wouldn't understand."

"You never can tell. In any case, I want to know."

"Oh, it is quite beyond you. It belongs to a different world altogether to you."

"Look, you simply must tell me or I'll die of curiosity. I know much more than you think."

"Maybe! but you don't know anything at all about this and you would not even be interested."

... and so on, until Nance was almost in pain with mortified curiosity. Then her tormentor said resignedly: "Well, have it your own way, Nance, but it is only a waste of time; and it may be a shock to you." Thereupon he took hold of the paper around the head of the statue and tore it clean off. The head of the statue showed out.

It was a shock to Nance; she sat for quite a while, just looking at us, her face strained and grim. Then she spoke very quietly: "Is that really what you think of me?" We were greatly taken aback; we had not meant to hurt her, nor expect this serious turn to a mere attempt at teasing. We seized on her last question:

"What else could we think of you, Nance?"

"Why should you regard me as so completely outside religion?"

"Forgive me, Nance, if I have hurt you. You know I would not wish to do that. You have never been anything but pleasant to us in all the time we have been

down here, and we are grateful for that. But somehow you have always seemed very hard; none of us has ever seen a soft spot in you – at any rate so far as religion is concerned.”

“Well, you are wrong there,” she retorted. “When I turn to God, it will not be to turn back again like some of them.”

“Do you really mean to be good some day, Nance?”

“I do.”

“When will that be?”

“Perhaps sooner than you think.”

“Why not make it now, Nance?”

There was a pause. Then she said: “I will.” She got off the window-ledge, and went into her “house” and made ready to leave. A quarter of an hour later our party was on its way to Sancta Maria. Nance O’Neill was as good as her threat. Thus uniquely brought back to God, she did not forsake Him.

The old saw says that truth is stranger than fiction. So strange is Nance O’Neill’s story, that if it were fiction it would be fantastic, and that to be true it must needs be a miracle. Out of all the notorious culprits of a city, one is deliberately picked as affording the very least prospect of conversion. Yet, at that moment, that girl is destined to be the first to be gathered in! Nay more, she is going to sleep under the roof of Sancta Maria *that very night!*

Later she will be married; and not only will she bring her husband into the Church, but she will bring him to the Baptismal font for the first time in his life!

We continued hammering away at Bentley Place. Each new capture bringing nearer the day of crisis.

19. Bleeding to Death

Visiting in Bentley Place was like being in another country – to use the phrase one sees recurring in the notes made by different Legionaries on their experiences down there. That “exotic” flavor did not arise from (though it was intensified by) the sort of visitors you would encounter – such for instance as the big party of Turks, complete with red fezzes, just come straight from their boat. That visit, by the way, was rounded off by a terrific row because some of them were robbed. The place was one of vivid contrasts – we adding another one ourselves. Dirt and cleanliness jostled. Rags and stylish raiment walked side by side as pals. Some poor creatures there would be short of a meal. But also you could see good breakfasts lying untouched, while their owners drank champagne instead, or stout if they had simpler tastes. Anywhere, anytime, you were liable to encounter the one and only Pink Leroy, an imposing figure, colorful in more than her name, draped with jewelry, going her rounds, one hand outstretched, so to speak, for the weekly dues on the clothing or money advanced by her; the other, amazing to relate, collecting for her favorite charities! Was there in all the land a stranger mind than hers?

Our work contained free from graver complication. There were “incidents” in plenty. But these held back from being “accidents,” though some ran close enough to be uncomfortable. Each of the Legionaries who served down there retained her own “pet” recollection of those days. To question them reveals the interesting fact that it was not always the biggest impression. Often quite a minor incident was able to elbow the more important happenings into the background. A typical example of that is contained in a letter received from “far foreign parts.” The writer is now Sister Evangelist, O.P. She played a gallant role in the most stirring events of that time. Yet here is the episode etched deepest on her memory:

The June issue of MARIA LEGIONIS makes fine reading and transports me on the magic carpet of remembrance right back to Bentley Place. Do you remember the night we tackled that awful-looking man with the immense head? He was an ex-schoolmaster. We had knocked. He shouted to come in. But the door would not budge, so – one, two, three – we heaved and almost took it off its hinges. We sat on a bench in front of his chair, almost like the children he used to have before him. Oh! he was a very tough person. After a lot of fruitless discussion, I whispered to you: “Don’t waste any more of your time and eloquence; that man has a devil in him.” But somehow he heard me and jumped up roaring furiously: ‘Who told *you* that?’ – almost as if he believed it was the truth! He did not touch me, but I lost my balance and fell off the end of the bench. Then the latter up-ended and sent you sprawling too.

During all the time we were with him I was afraid he was going to attack you, and I was ready to jump on him if he did.

The captures we got were typical of the place itself – very mixed. Some were indescribably battered; some were beautiful, even charming. Needless to say, these latter had not led the life for long.

The weeks merged into months and the months into Retreats; and, as we had come to realize by this time, each Retreat was a “tolling of the knell of parting day” for Bentley Place. What foolish man has said “there is no music to a knell”? The place, however, maintained a brave front of “business as usual.” Despite the great wastage of their staffs, the houses and dens preserved an air of bustle. To the casual eye things moved almost as of old. To us it was plain as the noonday sun that crisis-point impended. Surely Bentley Place itself realized the position. If it hoped to save itself at all, it must strike back at us – and very soon. Otherwise it was its fate to bleed peacefully to death.

We were fully aware of the precariousness of our hold. Any sort of concerted move, we knew, would dislodge us and keep us out. Should there be disorder, we feared we would also have the authorities against us. Viewed through the glasses of tradition which they had inherited from all previous regimes, we would surely appear to them as mere fanatics constructing a dangerous situation for the city, violating the unwritten pact – an odious pact, it was true; but was not anything better than scattering the evil? Seeing things in this light, they could hardly fail to intervene against us. In that case we would be hopelessly discredited. The wonderful results thus far obtained would be ignored or just brazenly denied. Who can reason with the audacious denier? No proof avails with him; grant him a miracle, and still he *will not* believe! We would become an up-to-date angle of the Sir John Ross of Bladensburg legend, thus constituting new moral support for the old policy of unmasterly inactivity. In peace profound the area of evil would build itself up again to a greater strength. No counter-measures, no apostolate! Need I say it to you: such alleged toleration would not be toleration at all, but countenancing and encouraging.

It was at a time when those futuristic glances of ours were most uneasy, or about twenty months after the opening of the campaign, that we made one of our efforts at a census of the locality. It astonished us. We reckoned that there were not forty girls in the whole place, that is only about one-fifth of its original complement. The comparative smallness of this figure engendered an idea. It was that we should write to the present Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, General William Murphy. He was probably the youngest man who had ever held that important post, and he had already won for himself the name of being energetic and progressive. The purpose of writing would be to explain the progress which had already been made in regard to that ancient problem, and to appeal to him to step in there now and enforce the ordinary law – namely, to shut down all the “houses.” Of course such a letter would take account of the various

phases of the problem. Especially it must meet the universally-held dread of "scattering" which was the foundation-stone of the policy of toleration. Even if that letter failed in its direct object, at least it should tend to make the Chief Commissioner sympathetic towards our operations as representing a logical, a desirable, an essential middle-course between drastic action and inaction.

The suggestion was thought well of, and the letter was roughly drafted. I have that old document before me now. It was never dispatched. It was never as much as cleanly written out. Circumstances of a superior, of a supernatural character intervened, and turned the course of history into a different channel. Still, that old letter is strangely interesting to read today. Everything it said was true. It stands justified even under the searchlight of sixteen years after. I would include it here but for its length and the fact that most of its points have been already touched on in these pages. Moreover, some of its contents are not exactly suitable for repetition here. They represented necessarily frank statements aimed at controverting "toleration" arguments of a type which can only be described as brutish.

Some of the contentions of the letter, however, will be unfamiliar to you and I extract or summarize them:

The existence of this place continues to pervert the moral sense of a wide band encircling the bad area itself. It is hard to understand how any of the men in that band remain moral, as many of them do. In all our experience of the poor of the city we have never, except in the encircling territory, heard poverty elicit from many an apparently respectable housewife the threat to go on the streets if things did not improve. Corruption is in the atmosphere, and in varying degree everybody is tainted by it. The whole character of the people, and even their appearance, is markedly inferior to that of other poor areas.

This concentration of girls naturally provides a happy hunting ground for the organizer and financier. Once in, these latter as a matter of livelihood must maintain and try to develop the traffic. Girls are sought, and dressed up to make them better earners. Should they be arrested (which would only occur if they go outside the area), their fines are paid and they are restored to circulation. We know one girl who was recently arrested three times in a single week, and her fine each time was paid immediately.

If this principle of organization were weakened by the withdrawal of tolerance, there would be a tendency for the whole evil traffic to lose momentum – just in the manner that the failure of a Banking system involves innumerable business houses in its own ruin.

But what of the other side of the question? Will not the destruction of Bentley Place mean that 'houses' will spring up everywhere like mushrooms – one in each street! Or alternatively, that ravening men will make the thoroughfares impassable for respectable womanhood? This is the view held by the great body of the population who, knowing nothing about the size of the problem, magnify it to nightmare dimensions.

With regard to such fears, the following facts and figures will put things into right proportion, and will show what would really be at stake in the snuffing out of Bentley Place. We have endeavored to set down the names of all the 'girls' who are at the moment living in the area. The interesting fact emerges that the undoubtedly serious and supposedly unhandleable evil gravitates around no more than 40 girls. By reason of the nature of the place, already detailed, this comparatively small number succeeds in doing a hundred times more harm to the moral and physical interests of the city than would the same number of girls living in the low lodging houses. The problem to be faced in 'closing down' would not be the fantastic one supposed. It would be simply one of forty girls, each one of whom is well known to us, and whose likely movements in the circumstances we are able to guess at or more than guess at. Below, we endeavor to guess or analyze along those lines. As a result we are led to believe that our hostel, Sancta Maria, would secure half of those girls right away. Of these a proportion, say a third, would fall away and drift to the streets (but not irrecoverably). More than counterbalancing this loss, a large number of those here classified as non-captives, would later come to Sancta Maria. Of the other half, some would drift to the street-girls' lodging-houses, where they have already been from time to time, and in which they would form an unimportant addition to existing numbers. Some, again, might go into private lodging (in which they would not usually be allowed to misconduct themselves). One or two might leave the country altogether.

Now observe that none of the foregoing categories would represent 'scattering' in the fullness of the dread sense attached to the term, that is, a mushroom growth of 'houses' in other parts of the city. Our own belief is that at the very outside three or four of the girls *might* find their way into some existing secret 'house,' or (to assume the worst) into a new one which some of the dispossessed harpies from Bentley Place might proceed to set up. This latter possibility forms a very different picture to that of the mushroom growth. But even so, let us pursue that one house a stage further and see what is involved thereby. In the first place, that house is only going to do a fraction of the harm that its Bentley Place

'opposite number' would effect. It would have to be very cautiously conducted. Once removed from the tolerated area, such houses would no longer get any quarter from the police, who would watch for them and hunt them down ruthlessly. Accordingly, their true identity would have to remain hidden even from their next-door neighbors. Since the latter would notify the police there could be no noise. The lid would have to be kept heavily pressed down. Necessarily, there would be some drinking but it would have to be rationed. For unrestrained and stimulated drinking of the Bentley Place pattern would lead to scenes which would attract the attention of a whole street. Result: the post-haste arrival of the boys in blue, and the subsequent sequel of closing up, with handsome penalties awarded to all concerned.

In fact the existence of such a house would be a secret to all but a select ring of addicts who are resolute in their vice and will get it in all circumstances. That house would be unknown to the ordinary man, and thus would not constitute a challenging temptation to him. Also, the bait of unlicensed non-stop drinking would not be dangling openly to lure to the main traffic, and to complicate the latter with frenzy, with robbery, and with other things.

To sum up, we are convinced that the closing down of the Bentley Place traffic would – without risk, and at a price which is relatively inappreciable – eliminate the greatest corrupting influence in the land, and incidentally rid our fair city of the world-wide opprobrium which that plague-spot has brought upon it. (Fair city? Yes, not worse but unquestionably more moral than any other in the world. That is no less a fact than its plague-spot. To state the one fact and to omit the other would be to break the full circle of the truth.)

The following are the names of the girls. To each one we attach our estimation as to her probable course in the event of a suppression of the area.

Then follow the names. I notice that in the case of some of those who we anticipated would go to the lodging-houses, we actually specified the particular lodging-houses. This peculiar effort after complete exactitude was based on the fact that those girls had at some time previously stayed there and could reasonably be expected to swing back to there. Of course those bold estimatings of ours would not work out precisely as on paper. When do estimates behave so obediently? But there would be compensating errors. Hoped-for gains turn out to be losses, but estimated losses show up as gains; the net result may prove to be the same.

Such was our letter. I have said it was not sent. What effect would it have had, if sent? Possibly none; possibly an unhappy one; it forms at least an interesting speculation. But at that juncture God stepped in to direct things otherwise – And how! (if one may be permitted to use that expressive Americanism which saves the use of fifty superlatives!) For surely what ensued can fairly be described as one of the most remarkable pages in religious history. If there be a more sparkling one, its historians have not done justice to it, or else I have not read sufficiently. Here is what happened.

Readers of the earlier pages of this narrative will recall the name of Father Richard Devane as intimately associated with the events which culminated in our First and Classic Retreat at Baldoyle. In the time which elapsed from then to the present stage of our story, that brilliant man continued to follow the work with keen interest, and he conducted a couple of the periodic Retreats in Sancta Maria. During all of that time he was in charge of the big men's Retreat House at Rathfarnham Castle. In the beginning of 1925 he was transferred from that duty to the mission staff, that is, his future work would lie in the giving of missions throughout the country. This was to prove a happy circumstance, though Father Devane viewed the change with distaste. So it is always! God mostly makes up His best pills in very sour-tasting jackets.

Now in that year of 1925, it fell to the lot of the Jesuits to give the annual Lenten Mission in the Marlborough Street, or Pro-Cathedral parish. Each of the Religious Orders got this engagement in turn. The primacy of this parish rendered it advisable to circulate the privilege. Three priests were assigned to the Mission, which would last three weeks and was due to begin on Quinquagesima Sunday. Father Devane was one of these; he would not have been if he were still attached to the Rathfarnham Retreat House. The other two were Father Ernest Mackey and Father Daniel Roche, who were not personally known to us. Father Mackey's name is now gone far and wide. Fearless, single-visioned, and utterly spiritual – that is he in tabloid form. Father Roche had been a distinguished soldier, serving during the Great War with the French and British Forces, and decorated by both of them. Certainly that three represented a providential (using the word in its true sense and not in its customary bloodless one of "fortunate") selection for a job that was to be delicate and hazardous beyond compare. For note! Bentley Place was in that parish though it could hardly be said to be of it.

As soon as this Mission had been arranged, Father Devane discussed the matter with us. He declared that he would regard the Mission as a gigantic fiasco if it did not strike a blow at Bentley Place. You may comment: "Then why not stike that blow?" Nothing on earth more difficult! For no Mission had ever toughed the area or even mentioned it. Such was part of the universal historic taboo, of the bogy of "doing harm" ... of *scattering the evil!* Furthermore, what view would his two confreres take? Perhaps the old-time one? And not Father Devane but Father Mackey would be in charge. In fancy one could almost hear the

consultation which would in due course take place between the three: “No one ever has! ... Sir John Ross ... disaster! ... scatter the evil! ... madness! ... better not!” – with “better not!” figuring as the fatal last word. Ah no! God knew his men ... had picked them.

But that obstacle was only the first of a mountain-chain of them towering and stretching in endless perspective.

20. Quinquagesima

Quinquagesima, on which was to begin the great Mission, is the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. That day came near and actually arrived without its being settled whether the Mission was to play any part in the history of the bad area. Father Devane had gotten no chance of discussing the matter, as he intended to do, with his fellow-Jesuits. I must explain why this should be. The three of them had not been working together. Each had his separate program. They would only come together on the eve of the Mission – perhaps assembling from north, west and south or even from the east. Then when that work was done, they would go their several ways again.

At 8 p.m. the Mission opened. At about 8:30 we turned into the Pro-Cathedral. Father Devane was in the pulpit giving the opening lecture. The church was nothing more than sparsely filled. This was not so good when taken in conjunction with the facts that the parish was the largest in the city – about 60,000 souls, and that the church itself was not capacious. In more recent years, an ingenious structural alteration has considerably augmented the accommodation.

When Father Devane left the pulpit we went around to the sacristy and met him there. Then later we proceeded to the Belvedere Hotel, North Great George's Street. That hotel was to be the headquarters of the three Missioners. Normally, Belvedere College, situated not a stone's throw off, would have put them up, but had not room for them. That was a gain, for the midnight conferences which were to be a valuable feature of the next three weeks, might not have been possible in the College. At the hotel we met for the first time the other two priests, Father Mackey and Father Roche. Not knowing them, we had more than doubted that they would take on the risks of a Bentley Place campaign. But our first impressions were favorable, and we became more and more reassured as we got down to business. Why, what had we been fearing? Well, you know the way a body of men so often face up to any ticklish problem. Some of them think that to be practical they must act "hard-boiled"; and there is always the one whose pervert-prudence frightens himself and everybody else into immobility. Usual result: inaction, or the next thing to it. But here in the Belvedere there was not a trace of such a divided or squinting outlook. Those three Missioners were on the job for souls and were prepared to pay the price. The whole position was discussed minutely. As things took shape we found that all of us were of one mind – *an attack on Bentley Place should form part of the Mission*. Then the method of campaign was debated at considerable length, and at last a novel plan emerged. It was big. It was audacious. But it forgot no detail. It covered everyone in the Marlborough Street Parish from saint to devil. It mobilized everything from pure faith to metaphorical fireworks. Then, as at many a previous crisis, people looked at each other. It was fine; but would it work? Or would it just blow up under us? Then Father Mackey crystallized the thought of

all, and incidentally expressed our real formula of action. "A proper act of faith is all we need to march right through with it." But *our* unanimity did not mean automatic action. Action would depend on the view which would be taken of the proposition by the Administrator of the Pro-Cathedral, Father John Flanagan, who has already been mentioned in the course of this narrative. It was arranged that the Missioners would see Father Flanagan the following morning and seek to win him over to the forward policy. As to the prospects: well, reviewing all the circumstances, I am astonished when I look back and see that we almost counted on his consent – even, as I have said, to the point of drawing up a detailed plan.

At about 11 o'clock the next morning a telephone rang. It was from the presbytery in Marlborough Street. Father Flanagan had decided on a conference and it was now about to open. We were to come along to it at once. You will realize no time was lost in getting there. Present, in addition to the three Missioners, we found Father Flanagan and Father P.J. Carton. The latter was in charge of the district in which Bentley Place formed a sort of island. He was a zealous, kindly young priest.

A really momentous discussion ensued. All freely expressed their views, and the plan sketched out the preceding night was put forward. Soon it was apparent that Father Carton was sympathetic, and Father Flanagan extremely so. Would that sympathy prevail against tradition? At last everything had been said. Then every face turned towards the Administrator, as in a court everyone turns to the judge when pleading is done. Every eye searched Father Flanagan's face for indication as to his judgment. There occurred one of those dreadful moments when people are silent and you do not know what is going to happen in regard to something vital. Then came the verdict. It was for action; and he approved of the details of the plan. That was a decision of great virtue. Nobody in his position could have made it unless he had great virtue and uncommon strength. He was openly breaking with a long, long tradition, and also with current popular opinion which held by the tradition. Moreover, Father Flanagan's own opinions on the subject of Bentley Place had always been tinged with pessimism. But two years before, he had not let those opinions stand (as far too many would have) in the way of effort. Nor did he now, despite the fact that he must have realized that if what was being attempted ended badly, there would be a vacancy for a scapegoat; and full well he knew that he was now electing himself to that potential role. But likewise in his mind, no doubt, was the thought which more than once he had expressed in words, that to the operations of the area were due the demoralization and to some extent the corruption of about 20,000 people living in close proximity around it. So regardless of history, and of everything else, he said: "Go ahead."

After all these years, with a new order and with everything different, there is little use in attempting to bring home to you the fine courage of that word of command. This I feel sure of, that of all the things he did in life, the one of which

Father Flanagan is rightly proudest in eternity is that “go ahead” decision of his the morning after Quinquagesima, the date of which, as I reckon now, was the 23rd February, 1925. It was a moment of grace, which was reflected in our feelings. These were of cheerful confidence. At once we took up item No. 1 of the plan. This was to go straight away to Bentley Place and enter there in force – a sort of invasion. The immediate aim was the creation of “atmosphere,” but not as a piece of mere sensationalism. It had a more substantial foundation, which was that this Mission *must not be* passed off casually. It must agitate the parish to its utmost confines, and to its depths – down to that poisonous slime-stratum which was Bentley Place. It must set *everybody* thinking and talking, so that they will go to the Mission, or at the very least feel a sense of reproach because they do not go. It must have them wondering and even worrying, so that the grip of evil routine be shaken and thereby a way opened up for grace. Furthermore, it was intended to concentrate on Bentley Place whatever spiritual forces could be worked up over the whole parish. As part of this process, Bentley Place must from the first be made to feel that it was being singled out – in fact that it was the focus-point of the Mission. That is what I mean by the creation of “atmosphere.”

Father Flanagan did not come along. The rest of us left the presbytery and walked rapidly towards Bentley Place. As we approached it people surmised that it was the objective, and an excitement arose. This was natural enough, for never before had Missioners touched the area. Yet here they were coming in a body and others with them. What did that portend? The excitement grew, and a rumor ran that the party was on its way to “curse” the locality. Our very appearance suggested something very serious; no smile for anyone, just curt nods from those some of us knew so well.

At the same corner where, nearly two years before, two Legionaries had paused briefly before entering Bentley Place for the first time, our party now stopped and stood for many minutes. Clustered in conversation, we presented the appearance of a council of war; which was just the impression we desired to convey. Father Devane produced a notebook, and in it, between our surveys of the Place, entries were made. Nowadays, I cannot say whether those entries were made. Nowadays, I cannot say whether those entries were real ones or not. Then the party proceeded down Bentley Place itself. At the end, where it is crossed by Parry Street, another of the three infected streets, we stopped once again, and re-entered into council; and again the notebook was produced. By this time the excitement was at boiling-point. It hardly represents an exaggeration to say that there was not a window overlooking the scene that did not have a couple of heads poked out in mystified observation of our tactics. Then we moved down Parry Street to a cluster of dwellings called Halma Cottages. Then Father Mackey entered into conversation with one of those who lived there, a woman of peculiarly repellent type. I describe her, one must have recourse to that hard-worked adjective “sinister.” Her background was dark. One story told about her was enough to make you shudder for a lifetime. She would produce a decidedly unpleasant effect on anyone meeting her for the first

time. She did on Father Mackey! He also talked with that woman's daughter whom he graded as the most depraved looking child he had ever encountered. I have his striking note on that transaction. Here it is. I would only spoil things by describing it myself.

The Halma Cottage Girl: intelligent girl of about 15. She had never been to Confession or to Holy Communion. Her Baptism I would like to investigate closely. For her age she was normally developed in stature, rather thickly set, poorly clad, her boots laced with twine. Features clear and well defined, hair black and matted, eyes dark and luminous, and full of malice. True to the influence of such a mother, this awful girl seemed to have inherited a legacy of vice. Her reaction to the Crucifix which I put into her hand was at the least peculiar. Had she dashed it on the ground and blasphemed, it would have come as no surprise.

After that, which represented our only conversation – and they were not according to our schedule – we reassembled and walked along Trusty Place, the other tainted street. There we did more surveying and held discussion, all under the eyes of watching groups and window-galleries. When the entire district had thus been walked over and inspected so that not a person living in it was unaware that something was on foot, we marched out of the place leaving it a seething-pot of talk and imagining. Very definitely we had succeeded in our object of administering a thorough shaking to that vice-dazed locality. Though nothing had actually happened their minds held on to the idea of a “cursing.” The general impression was that it would take place from the pulpit that night; and from *that* sort of fame they modestly shrank.

For a moment I must break away from Bentley Place itself for the purpose of completing the description of the Mission Plan. Though it was the idea to utilize the total dynamism of the Mission for an attack on Bentley Place, still the Mission – on its own account as well as for the other reason – must be made a prime, an unprecedented success. I have said above that the Mission had opened half-heartedly. That must needs be remedied, so a second part of the plan was put into force. We summoned emergency meetings of all the Legionaries in the world! How formidable this sounds! But do not imagine that all the large halls had to be requisitioned for the purpose. No, as yet the Legion was confined to the city of its birth. It was still a comparatively little flock, some hundreds only, and the two St. Vincent de Paul houses, Myra House on the south side and Ozanam House on the north, had not to strain to accommodate them all. At those meetings it was decreed that all were to drop their customary work. Instead, the Marlborough Street Parish was parcelled out, and to each pair of Legionaries a number of houses were assigned. In the case of the immense tenements (formerly the mansions of the Georgian nobility and gentry) that allocation was four houses. It was the duty of these emergency squads to enter every home – usually a room meant a home – therein interview every person,

and in the hands of each one place a copy of the little Mission leaflet, and to endeavor to secure a promise to attend the Mission.

It is a special point of interest that Mary Duffy, our American Envoy, joined the Legion at that time, so that the first work assigned to her was this very one.

Simultaneously, the St. Vincent de Paul Brothers, who were visiting the lodging-houses of the city, were also brought together and addressed by the Missioners. They were given a roving commission through the streets to get at those loitering at the corners, those in the pubs, in the clubs, and standing in the doorways.

This mighty roundup was swiftly and efficiently carried through. Within the week everybody in that immense parish had been approached in the name of the Mission and had given some sort of answer to the individual appeal addressed to him or her. These enterprising, if unorthodox, methods gained the success they merited. The smouldering Mission burst into flame. Not only was the church packed to suffocation every night, but it was necessary to come well before the time to secure admittance. Not only was there crowding, but the crowd was ardent. The canvass had stirred up the people, and imparted an air of the unique, the urgent, to the Mission. So much was this the case that the non-attenders constituted almost an extra gallery, attentive to everything that was said and hearing of it through others. Add to all this the fact that three outstanding priests were on the job, character and fervor manifest in every word they spoke. Never before had Bentley Place been spoken of from the pulpit. It had been counted too impossible for that – and besides what use? It was just one of those things about which nothing could be done. Now that was to be changed. The third part of the Plan came into force. It was that at every session in the pulpit, Bentley Place was to receive dishonorable mention. This was not done by way of denunciation, but in sorrow at the infinite hurt to souls. Then, as a secondary point, was stressed the shameful blot entailed to parish and to city. To those listening this was new light on an old situation, one taken as much for granted as any other local landmark. They glowed with interest, and they took up the reiterated appeals for prayers for the extirpation of the great local evil – that was the phrase harped on. The responsiveness was so evident that it stirred a brain-wave in the Missioners. This was to incorporate in the Mission a novena to the Sacred Heart, in reparation for the Great Local Evil, and in petition for its extirpation. The novena represented an addition to the original plan, but a natural one sprouting from success. It meant the moving on of Bentley Place from being a cloaked objective, and the setting of it in a ring of limelight as the main objective of the Mission.

On a day which custom earmarks as a half-day for the Missioners (i.e., it set them free from noon till 6 p.m.), Father Mackey approached Father Flanagan for permission for the novena. That gained, he went off to Bull's to seek the loan of a big statue of the Sacred Heart. While he was so engaged, the rest of us hied ourselves off to the Scalp, a mountainous beauty-spot in County Wicklow, in the

effort to clear Bentley Place out of our minds for a few hours. In this latter, as you may imagine, we did not succeed; we talked of nothing else the whole trip through.

Bull's made available an attractive statue. This was prominently placed in the sanctuary, charmingly adorned with flowers and lights, and the novena was inaugurated. All were implored to throw themselves wholeheartedly into it. Communions were appealed for. Everyone was to pray, and pray as he or she had never prayed before. The response was like that of fire to petrol, except that the ardor lasted. The devotion was remarkable; but perhaps I indicate that sufficiently when I specify that during those nine days no less than 20,000 Communions were received. And that was only part of the great outpouring of prayer that characterized the second and third weeks of the Mission, and which was in its way as much in evidence in the streets and in the homes as in the church. People were really moved. The best was brought out in everybody. Nowhere was this process more to be sensed than in the bad area itself. Few from there actually attended the Mission, but its influence was palpable in their attitude and dispositions.

Here I must stop, for in the forgoing I have greatly anticipated. Between the Monday of the "invasion" and the Monday of that strenuous tramp of ours through the Scalp intervened a whole adventurous week, a week thrilling with strange happenings for Bentley Place. I will go back to that first Monday, and take up the thread of Bentley Place at the point where I broke it for the purpose of showing the way in which the Mission was fanned to flame. We had walked out of the area leaving it agog behind us. After that, the priests did not re-enter it until the memorable end. It was possible that their presence there, as things grew tenser, might produce criticism, excitement and even disorder – and that was no part of our policy. From that point on we acted as their intermediaries to the area.

Without delay the Plan developed. That very Monday afternoon, while Bentley Place was still in ferment, one of us marched in. His reception may be described as complex. Though engaged in the Legionary warfare against the place, he had by force of long association come to be regarded as a universal friend. Now, with disconcerting suddenness, he had taken on a new and unpleasant character. He had become the ally of formidable forces appearing from nowhere and wearing a decidedly hostile aspect. Without ado, he went straight to No. 1 Trusty Place, already mentioned. There lived Betty Gray, who owner-managed three of the "houses" of the area. In normal circumstances of living, she would have been an amiable-enough type; but her sordid occupation had soured her and otherwise left its marks. But let this be recorded to her credit. She had invariably been polite and considerate towards us, despite the fact that her livelihood was being menaced by our operations.

She was at home in No. 1. She received the visitor with open apprehension, understanding that his advent was an outcome of the sensational "invasion."

When the envoy told her that the Missioners desired to interview her, she nearly fainted. She demanded weakly why was she being picked on. In no circumstances would she enter into any discussion of the kind. In reply, she was assured that it was a compliment to her; that we who were her friends had suggested it; that it was a matter of a friendly talk. There was no question of attacking her or abusing her. The intention was to see if there was any means whereby she could be helped to a happier way of living. For some time she demurred in nervousness of what she could not look on as other than an ordeal. But, eventually, by dint of gentle reasonings, she was convinced that no harm was meditated against her. Then she made an appointment for that evening at six o'clock. It was to be in the home of a married daughter of hers who lived in Carpenter Street – outside the area but not far off. That arranged, our envoy took his leave with thanks.

A little before the appointed time, the three Missioners and ourselves were at the Carpenter Street address. We made the acquaintance of Betty's daughter and the latter's husband. They were nice people. They were not well-off, but their home was clean and cared for. We talked to them with growing apprehension, for the time was passing, and Betty had not put in an appearance. The daughter, however, assured us that it was her mother's intention to come, and at about a quarter past the hour she suggested she should go and hurry her up. She left, and with her went our fervent prayers. For we had hoped that this would be but the first of a series of interviews with all the bigger figures of the traffic. Inevitably it would set a headline. If Betty Gray did not attend, it would most likely lead to the adoption of a similar attitude by those others whom we desired to interview. And if our idea of individual appeal to the personages of the place was frustrated, it would simply knock the stuffing out of our ambitious plan, which depended altogether on methods of persuasion and religious appeal. Just imagine our reflections while we waited. The time slipped by, but like the raven which was dispatched from the Ark, Betty's daughter did not come back. Neither did the husband who later volunteered to go to see what had gone wrong. That left the home in our possession. Our feeling of suspense was painful. Our attack was collapsing even before it had developed. Then in pursuit of the others was sent our original emissary to find out what had happened to them all. The sequel in the circumstances was a relief. Betty Gray had not after all decided to defy us; she had been honestly intent on keeping that appointment. The waiting put her nerves on tension; so she had resorted to the old, old process of "bracing up." Applied not wisely but too well, this left her in a zero state when zero hour arrived; and that was how her daughter found her – and the daughter's husband too. Recriminations followed and were in course when No. 3 of the search party came along. Nothing could be done about it. Betty was not in shape for a discussion of the type we had in mind. She was tearfully apologetic – for making a fool of the Fathers, as she said. But she would go along next day, for certain this time. She was sincere and seemed determined, so the new appointment was arranged – same time, same place – for the next evening. With that one had to be content. Then with a final, urgent admonition to her not to fail us once

again, our emissary hastened back to Carpenter Street to reassure the waiting Missioners.

All things considered, the news was reckoned excellent. Betty Gray was shaping up to schedule far better than we had dared to hope. That amply compensated for the evening's misfire. And there was more to it. In past chapters I have spoken of the tides of grace which set in at crucial junctures to bear us irresistibly on to such perfect finales as only God could give. Somehow we hoped that now another one was gathering for flood. That was a luxurious speculation! But we had little time to give to it. Eight o'clock was now in sight. That was the hour when the devotions of the Mission would begin and the priests must be in attendance in the church. We broke up; but late that night, when the last of the innumerable Confessions had been heard, and other duties of the Mission were concluded, we met again – this time at the Belvedere Hotel. We talked and talked about the next day's plans, and cast around for new ideas. These conferences in their tone were reminiscent of those earlier ones which, a couple of years before in Baldoyle Convent and in Sancta Maria, were destined in time to shape religious history in every city. Would the present conferences prove to be of kindred calibre? And so to bed! – there to gain strength for the critical morrow.

The next evening, six o'clock found us punctual, and to spare, at the home in Carpenter Street. Betty Gray was already there. She was spic, span, and scrupulously sober, but nervous. The kindly greetings she received and the first few minutes of actual conversation scattered her misgivings. As she had been assured, she was not going to be subjected to a barrage of bullying or mere rebuke. What one did see was the Christlike approach of three holy priests to the soul of one whom circumstances (in part outside her own control and in part her grievous fault) had led into a course so tangled that it was impossible to discern where personal responsibility began and ended.

One of us acted as secretary and inconspicuously took notes of the proceedings of this most unique of conferences – where a brothel-keeper told her story and debated all the whys and wherefores which were put to her on the subject of the past and of her future life. I assure you that grace was in the air; and by this I do not mean that we were in any exalted or emotional mood. No, not a trace of that. The atmosphere was quite different. Try to imagine the scene. See that poor creature, come straight from her awful profession of organizing great numbers of people into sin, her name known far and wide – even outside the confines of the country. There she sat heavily, the focus-point of that little circle round the table, slowly turning her head to left or right according to the angle from which remarks proceeded to her. The line of the old song “fat, fair, and forty-four” would, so far as my recollection supplies, describe her well enough. There was no tendency towards truculence. Her manner was natural. She talked in a business-way about the most appalling things when they came up. Her attitude was one of good will.

We interrogated her very fully concerning the area and particularly in regard to her own “houses” and every little detail about them. All our discussion worked down to and hinged on one point: “Will you not close down those places which cause such ruin to your own soul and to the souls of others?” Her reply was that she would like to close down and get right out of the business. She had often thought of it. “But how else was I to live?” (That was the ever-echoing and dreadful cry down there in the bad area!) She was worried – she continued – over her daughters living down there with her. They were good. She wanted to keep them good; but they were now coming into the twenties. That meant danger. She would welcome an opportunity of getting out. Of late she had got another little business going, partly as a sideline, partly with the idea of switching over to it altogether. It was struggling along. It might be able to keep her going, but she was in debt herself. People owed her plenty, which she would never get if she closed down; but she would be required to pay her way.

That utterly amazing discussion lasted for two hours. During it, the only argument used was the moral one, the appeal to grace ... and she responded. In the end, she had given us an absolute promise that she would shut down her houses when called upon to do so; and on that happy note our deliberations terminated. We could hardly believe that things could go so well – but even better fortune was figuratively knocking at the door. We got up to go. Thus far we had not settled whom we would interview next. Here came an agreeable surprise. Waiting outside for the conclusion of our conference was the married daughter of Mrs. Curley, another of the bosses. Mrs. Curley has already been referred to as the largest owner in the area. Her estate comprised eight “houses,” each with a manageress in charge. Now, through her daughter, she sought an appointment with us. Evidently it had already come to be understood that our sort of “Tribunal of Public Safety” was bent on operating mildly and helpfully. We arranged to see Mrs. Curley the following evening at 6 p.m. at the home of the aforesaid daughter in Somerset Street – a fair distance from the bad area. Then at once the priest rushed off to their night’s duties in connection with the Mission.

21. Parleys

The following evening, six o'clock found the "Tribunal of Public Safety"¹ assembled in No. 26 Somerset Street. We were due to meet Mrs. Curley there. I might say that punctuality was our prime characteristic during those historical three weeks. In no circumstances would we be a second late for an appointment for fear that in that second the other party would "get fed up with waiting" and depart, glad to be able to blame it off on us. In regard to Mrs. Curley we need not have feared. She was there before us. The home, like the one at which we had met the evening before, was that of a workingman. It was well kept. Its mistress, Mrs. Curley's daughter, soon got out of the way and left the principals to themselves.

We looked to this as our key interview. For the woman who sat in that circle round the table was so much the largest interest in Bentley Place as to more than equal all the other "keepers" put together. The Missioners had never seen her before. They eyed her intently. It is an experience to see for the first time a person who has been the subject of one's anxious discussions, whose name and fame – if ill – have nevertheless been widely spread, and on whose decision great things hinge. Mrs. Curley was a study in contradictions. In all the weird array of personalities who combined to make Bentley Place the fantastic spot it was, she topped the bill. She was a stout woman, of the same build as Mrs. Gray whom we had already interviewed, but much older and possessing far more force of character. She had the look of the successful small-businesswoman. There was no evil or dissipation in her face. Pleasant enough in the ordinary way, even gentle – as she was tonight – Mrs. Curley could go into decided reverse. She ruled her eight manageresses and her throng of "girls" and "bullies" with the proverbial rod of iron. She had occasionally taken in hand herself the punishment of a girl credited with holding back on the management, or other equally heinous offence. Such punishment was physical; it was drastic; it was terrific. Once I saw the aftermath of one – not Mrs. Curley's handiwork though. The girl had been terribly beaten up; as well as her clothes were torn off and ripped into small pieces.

In addition to her business cares, Mrs. Curley had her own family of seven or eight children whom she had brought up not badly – a marvel, considering that only technically (i.e., across the street) did she live outside the bad area itself. She ruled them, too, though now grown up.

Mrs. Curley was wrapped up in this awful way of getting a living for herself and her family; yet in a sense she was in rebellion against it the whole time. Now and

¹ This and similar titles are not meant to imply any usurpation of public authority by private persons, but are simply used to express in imaginative and picturesque ways the serious, conscientious concern for the common good which is so characteristic of Mr. Duff and the Legion of Mary. – Ed.

then she would go to Confession, but she did not get Absolution. For of course every priest would impose the condition that she shut down her houses, and that condition she was not willing to concede. I suppose her reply each time would be that ever-echoing cry of woe: "How am I to live?"

She had been more or less "let in" for this mess which then held her like birdlime. She had inherited the industry from her husband, "Dicker" Curley, when he died. Concerning his death, a curious story is told. In a way it is necessary to the complete picture of the outlandish situation down there, so I give it to you for what it is worth. Dicker became very ill. The priest was sent for, but when it came to the point of giving a promise to close the houses, Dicker demurred. There is reason to believe that he changed his mind soon after, but not soon enough. He died without receiving the Sacraments. As befitted the passing of him who was virtually the Tsar of the district, the wake was a great wake. Of course everyone in the area would have spent some or much time at the function. During the night, at a time when the mournful festivities were at their height, a very distinguished-looking gentleman in evening clothes entered the packed room. That fact in itself did not cause notice, for visitors of that type were not uncommon down there. But what did eventually attract notice was the demeanor of the visitor. It is alleged that his was strange in the extreme. Standing rigidly at the foot of the bed, with an air of overhanging it, he kept his gaze fixed on the face of the corpse, not removing it even to cast a solitary glance over the company present. The peculiarity of his attitude presently drew the attention of all, and the babel of voices died down as they watched him. At this stage (the story goes) a terror-stricken girl pointed to his feet. A number who were so placed as to be able to follow that pointing, saw that one of those feet was a cloven hoof. A scene of terrible confusion and hysteria ensued, in the midst of which the queer stranger evaporated.

The tale is odd, but it was current through and around the area when, years after, we entered there. The sensational climax of the episode could most likely be explained away by reference to the fact that drink would be gushing plentifully at a big occasion like that one; and that most or all of those present would have had some. On the other hand, there is the fact that the next morning five of the girls, alleged eye-witnesses of the event, entered the Magdalen Asylum in Gloucester Street. Such a step – and least of all a concerted move like that one – is not usually taken as the result of people thinking they see things in a drunken bout. If it were, the public-houses would be the best Missions.

After Dicker Curley's death, the widow took over the property and kept it going as efficiently as had Dicker himself.

Now perhaps you have some sort of mental picture of the woman who confronts us in 26 Somerset Street. As long as life, we will retain the memory of the momentous conference that followed. Bound up with it in my mind, so that the thought of the one automatically evokes the other, is the Gospel narrative of the

conversion of Zacchaeus.² But do not smile! – read on a little. You remember how the little chief of the tax-gatherers, being suddenly converted, cried out to Our Lord: “Behold, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have wronged any man of anything, I restore him fourfold.” Then Jesus said to him: “This day is salvation come to this house.”

There was much more than a touch of that Gospel incident in the encounter of the Lord, through His representatives, with Mrs. Curley, the chief of the brothel-keepers of Bentley Place. Like Zacchaeus, she could be said to have been converted at a glance. Our long conference with her was rather an arranging of things with her than a winning of her over. It lasted for more than two hours. Everything was touched on: herself, her children, her husband (which caused a poignant moment), the “business” with all its ghastly details, its avenues of income and its apportionment of profits, its laws and conventions. To any but those who were listening, that session would have been as compressed with horror as a nightmare. But fortunately – or unfortunately – our ears and minds were toughened by previous knowing. We went into everything again for what we knew we had only picked up around the place from Tom, Dick, and Helen, so to speak. Never before had the opportunity offered itself of cross-examining for hours on end the big-noise herself, and of getting from her the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth on Bentley Place. And even we learned something new.

The Zacchaeus-like consummation had come early. She told of her anxiety to lead a good life, her frustrated attempts to return to the Sacraments, her inability to screw her courage up to the point of sacrificing her business, her prayers for the grace to do the right thing – quite recently a novena for that intention! But now she was going to do it. She would fit into any arrangement which would be made for a closing down. She would forgive all debts owing to her by the “girls.” She would plead with them to go to Sancta Maria. Anyone of them who would do so, she would clothe from head to foot. “Thank God this thing is ended,” was the splendid sentence with which she closed the tragic chapter of her life entitled “Bentley Place.” “Now, I’ll be able to get back to the Sacraments.”

The result of that interview and its predecessor seemed to place the prospects of the campaign in a favorable light, inasmuch as the bulk of the houses were now covered by “closing-down” promises. But that did not mean that Bentley Place was finished. The residue might not join the “Pact”; in which case they would menace the whole scheme by constituting temptation to the virtuous majority to relapse – either at once or in process of time. Sufficient, however, for the day was the success thereof. With feelings which verged perilously near to imprudent exultation, we took leave of Mrs. Curley and hastened off to divergent engagements. One of these led to Bentley Place for an important purpose. It was to line up some other of the bigger figures for interview. That did not prove difficult, for reports of our Tribunal’s “real gentlemanly attitude” were not trickling

² St. Luke, xix, 1-10.

everywhere through our underworld.

Each evening held such an interview. I single out a few more noteworthy ones. The pity is that those unique episodes can be but feebly represented to you. Even were verbatim reports available, the living figures would be lacking, and also the distinctive atmosphere. So, as you read, let your imagination strain to give life to the anemic written word.

Maggie Carr, better known as the “Kitten,” was another of the chain-proprietors – she owned or rather rented two houses which she managed herself. She was a very mysterious little body indeed – one that in all our two years of Bentley Place campaigning we had never succeeded in sizing up. Supposed to be a Catholic she exhibited no evidence of faith, and in fact left one wondering. She was peculiar in appearance. In particular, her complexion was decidedly odd. The whole effect conveyed by her was far from pleasant. But in the past she had not impeded us or done us any harm. She had readily agreed to the suggestion of a conference – and now she was present at it. She was self-possessed, almost icy; that was her invariable manner. But no fault could be found with her attitude towards us during the protracted discussion. She professed herself willing to fall in with our plans and to shut down, if all the others did the same.

Like Betty Gray, she said she was in debt. She ascribed this to the exorbitant rents payable to her overlord – such, she claimed, as could only be met by a “bad house.” Closing down would not free her from those debts. They would remain faithful to her, whereas her livelihood would have flown. We believed her, for she did not make “a poor mouth” over it. Moreover, debt seemed to be an inevitable part of the system, almost its backbone – much like the permanent overdraft on which so many firms keep going. We casually inquired as to what she owed, and took careful mental note of the detail supplied by her, but made no comment. The item was almost identical with that of Betty Gray. The total debt of each was slightly under £40. These were small figures, yet they constituted a difficulty for us. If those people could not pay them by reason of closing down at our request, they would have a claim on our bounty. The “Kitten” was even in a worse position than was Betty; for the latter had a substitute livelihood which was not apparent in the case of the “Kitten.”

On the other hand, we dare not make promises of compensation; for at once the purely spiritual note, which thus far was dominant, would crack. The howl would go up that we were buying people out. The local cupidities would be stirred up, and our fine symphony of souls, which promised so well, would only terminate in failure and in cat-calls. So not a sign was given that the question of their debt had received a second thought. But forthwith we moved around among our friends and readily got promises amounting to more than the £80 in question. This sum it was decided to keep in secret reserve until Betty and the “Kitten” had redeemed their promises to close down. Then we would rescue from their

embarrassments those who had behaved so creditably. In the meantime “mum” was definitely the word.

Interviews, interviews, interviews! One every evening, each of them the peak-point of a dizzy day. Our Tribunal was like a court on circuit – each session was in a different place. Do not let the word “court” give you the idea that there was anything of the calm majesty of the law about our general movements those times. Far from it. Life had much more of the tone of the battlefield, with its ordered confusion, its fluctuating fortunes, its seething excitement. A hundred jobs jostled and overlapped each other, but had to be seen to somehow. Every day some of our members were down through the houses in Bentley Place, arguing, pleading, explaining. Twice daily, morning and night, the great Mission churned away, supplying the spiritual pressure, and also the tense “atmosphere” which played its minor but important part. Simultaneously, the gigantic canvass of the homes of the parish had gathered full momentum and was sending the Mission attendance bounding to “sardine” pitch. But as yet the wonder-novena, previously mentioned, was not so much as thought of.

The highlight among our interviews was unquestionably the one with Pink Leroy, the “flaunting extravagant queen” of former days, of whom some description has already been given. You will remember her as the lady who had made a success of the ancient trade – starting, so to speak, before the mast and finishing up on the bridge; then becoming the costumer and usurer of Bentley Place. She was the first personage of that world with whom we had got in touch. During the course of the two years’ visitation of the area which followed, we encountered her now and then. We gained plenty of information about her, but little that was to her credit. Generally she presented a smooth exterior to us, but she was a secret enemy who would do us as much harm as she conveniently could. Though she was not now concerned with the traffic in as immediate a sense as running a “house,” her interests lay in the maintenance of the evil order in Bentley Place. She sympathized with it, and so far as we could make her out, she saw no real harm in it. She claimed that it was a legitimate business – one in fact with a philanthropic aspect. Yet that puzzle of a woman asserted that she was going to the Sacraments! Her gospel was a short one: men were incorrigibly bad, and everything must be regulated so as to make their badness easy and safe.

A nasty gospel that! – which strikes at everything good in life professed by many who would shudder to be classed with Pink Leroy – and yet who have not the excuse of her background. Those soulmates of hers hold, chapter and verse, by that “Pink” philosophy, though they may have the decency to veneer it with phrases. In practice they are found to be conceding little if any part to the operation of grace or to free will. No effort is made by them to interrupt the vicious circle of temptation and yielding. They ignore the fact that in vice, as in commerce, supply creates demand, and organization stimulates. However little

they may realize it, those Pink Leroy's are nothing but rebels in the empire of grace.

However, that is only by the way. Pink Leroy was of course in the queue for the Tribunal. Her interview was fixed for the Belvedere Hotel. She drove up to that place in an opulent-looking equipage, an affair like a brougham, with a high-stepping horse and a liveried driver. She did not own such an outfit, so presumably it was hired for the occasion. She descended from it, a commanding figure – she was about six feet in height, expensively yet quietly and tastefully dressed. At that time she could not have been too far off 70 years of age.

Once I had seen that impressive dignity transformed into maniacal fury. Privately, we had notified some of the charities, to which she used to send the proceeds of her collecting among the girls, as to the source and circumstances of those collecting. The result was a refusal to accept the moneys from her. One day we were entering Bentley Place, when from the far end Pink espied us. Immediately, she roared like a bull from one end of the street to the other for us to come down to her. It being part of our policy to be nice to everybody and reasonably deferential to the local magnates, we went to her. She then produced a check for £20 which had been returned to her bearing the inscription across its face: "Declined with thanks." If she had sense, she would have burned that check and said not a word to anyone about it. Thus she would not "lose face" before the multitude to whom she used to exhibit proudly the cordial letters of acknowledgment she had received. But you know the saying that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. She could not bottle up hers. She waved the check frantically in the air while she told of its unhappy bounce back to her. Finally, practically foaming at the mouth and with contorted face, she went down on her knees in the middle of the road to curse everybody in a formal manner, and to register her threat or promise that she would "open up every brothel in Dublin again." Strange, it did not occur to her that we were to blame for the return of the check. If she had known, she would *most certainly* have fallen on us there and then and exacted vengeance with her own two hands and feet – and perhaps with her teeth as well.

Such was the altogether unique personage who drove up in her carriage for her interview in the Belvedere. The venue was the front lounge. After the usual polite preliminaries, she seated herself and at once proceeded to monopolize the show. From the first we lost our grip. She was so smiling and gracious and worldly-wise that she got the atmosphere her own way, so that the sort of things we wanted to say felt silly even to ourselves. She was perfect mistress of the whole situation, and we were powerless to wrest it from her. She treated us to a whole course of Bentley Place ethics. She dilated on the evil in all its aspects. She told us that men were men as they had been from the beginning, and that we were very foolish to imagine that we could do anything about it. Early on, one of us had made an attempt to cut in on her with some contrary statement. She turned to him, just like you would to your little child, and swept him away with an

imperious gesture: “Young man, what do *you* know about these things?” Other attempts to steer the discussion into the religious channel were airily brushed aside in like fashion. She had the bit well between her teeth and she simply overwhelmed us by her farm-yard sophistries. She took it for granted that there could be no other rational line of conduct but that which she and her tribe catered for and lived by: “You know men, Fathers, and you know what they want,” etc., etc. And in that vein she rippled along. It was her everlasting topic to everyone. Her mind ran on it. We who listened to her knew the essential fallacy of every word she uttered, yet we were powerless to counter her effectively. That made us realize how deadly such talk could be to stir up unreasoning terror and to make it seem as if the only safe action was inaction: “How would you like, Fathers, to have a brothel opened beside your presbytery? That’s what will happen if you interfere?” Cleverly then would she half-lift the curtain on the unspeakable consequences of having such a next-door neighbor. Of course the presbytery would become a convent, or a hotel, or a home according to the identity of the listener. That personal application of the horror was the perfect last straw which crushed.

A feature of her recital was her enumeration of a whole list of notabilities whose views, she claimed, coincided with her own.

On she went. We were treated like a lot of kids who did not know anything about the subject under discussion, but had to be humored. She did it with such an air of patient kindness as to leave us quite helpless. We were right up against our first defeat, and we knew it!

Well, the situation that evening was saved for us by Father Mackey, and saved in the only way possible. He stemmed the drift by an explosion. He took exception to a remark of hers that was little worse than any of her others, and he got insulted about it. He stood up at the table and barked at her. In irate tones he demanded if she knew what she was saying. Had she only come here for the purpose of insulting us? And so on, while she sat there speechless at the unexpectedness of it all. That counter-attack was artistically done, and it subdued her. When the sudden storm was over, the Pink had, metaphorically speaking, faded. Then it was her turn to listen while we talked, and a real good talking-to she got on the subject of her horrible business and her outrageous outlook.

The result of that lecture was a positively human person, with whom it was possible to discuss things on a Christian basis. The interests of her own soul and of her responsibility for the souls of others were placed before her; the enormity of Bentley Place and the seriousness of her position as one of its pillars; the necessity for ample reparation; the manner in which she could now help towards cleaning up that Satanic cesspool.

The Pink Leroy that finished up the session was a very chastened person from her who opened it. She who had entered like a supercilious lion went out "gentle as a lamb with mint sauce." She had consented to fall into line with everybody else, and had even agreed to forgive the debts of the girls who would do the right thing.

That had been our record session. It lasted about four hours. Since it was almost time for the Mission devotions, Father Devane had to leave to conduct them. Later on, Father Roche had to go to assist with the Confessions. When, in the end, Pink Leroy took her leave in her friendly way and sailed off to her coach (whose driver must then have been thoroughly refrigerated, having been waiting outside all that time), those that remained conversed a while about her. We agreed that we had never met anybody even remotely like her, and that it would be hard to imagine a more balling character.

"Can you make head or tail of her?" was the question put to Father Mackey.

"No," he replied.

"Will she save her soul?"

"I think she will," he said. "She has such an incredibly warped mind."

With all that to think about, we went home.

22. The Power Behind

I will bring the recounting of our interviews with the owners to a conclusion with just another one. Maybe you are tired of them. Reading through them, they may have seemed to you as like each other as a row of matches. If that has been your impression, it only shows how far the written account has fallen short of the diversified reality, and how much therefore you have missed. The only sameness lay in the general subject. Between those bosses was the bond of common interest; but that concord was (as the poet says) born of contraries.

That other interview was with Mrs. Crane. She lived in Carpenter Street, not far from the more humble abode of Betty Gray's daughter in which we had held our first conference. Mrs. Crane was very much an unknown quantity. During our two years' campaign in Bentley Place we had often heard her talked of, but it had not left us notably the wiser. Once upon a time she had been one of the major figures of the place. Before our advent she had cleared out of the first line and was living in a sort of retirement. However, it was hinted by many that she was the shadowy figure at the back of things, the power behind the bosses' thrones. The only thing definite was that she owned the houses in which Betty Gray and Kitten Carr carried on business. What other interest she had in the area we did not know at all. Unquestionably she was more in touch with happenings down there than seemed called for by her role of mere landlord.

Our session with her took place in her own house. It was the least colorful of the lot. It came last in the series, by which time she had diagnosed the way the wind was blowing. We found her a tall, well-dressed, well-preserved woman of about sixty-five. Her manner was distant. Probably she had been good-looking in her hey-day. Our long discussion with her brought us little that we did not already know about her and about the area. She insisted that she had nothing to do with actual business down there; she was merely the owner of five of the "houses"; she deprecated the disreputable purpose to which they were being put; she would be very glad indeed to be rid of them; she had frequently offered them to the Corporation, but it had refused them. I must explain that she had not offered them for *nothing*. Her proposal was that they should be taken over as part of a possible housing scheme – which in those days was reputed to be one way of becoming a millionaire overnight. Certainly such a deal afforded the only way in which she could reconcile the rival claims of virtue and of her pocket, of the spirit and of the flesh! As that ideal solution did not materialize, she had reluctantly to continue to accept the considerable rentals paid by Mrs. Gray and the Kitten.

As much as her manner would permit, her line with us was cordial. She reiterated her anxiety to get clear of the premises. She promised to stand in with whatever closing-down arrangements we would make, and on that note terminated what looked to be a completely satisfactory interview.

One regret I voice in connection with that series of interviews. We should have had at them a stenographer whose whole function would have been to take down every word that was spoken. The result of that would have been papers of historical value. As things were, one of us acted as secretary; but that duty had to be dovetailed in with questioning and with a critical listening attitude which is not compatible with the exact recording of sentences. So all that emerged by way of record of those unprecedented proceedings were some notes of a scrappy character. These only dealt with the main points, which have been sufficiently remembered without their help. As they seemed to buttress memory unnecessarily, they were not written up, nor cared for, and are not extant today ... which is a pity.

Next came what was probably the star-turn of our exciting holy program. It was a general meeting of the "girls" – an event reminiscent of that kindred one, held three years previously in the kitchen of 25 Low Street, which had set the spark to our whole explosive enterprise. When this idea of bringing together the girls of Bentley Place was first suggested and approved, the question of "where" bristled with difficulty. For the reasons already mentioned in an earlier chapter, the priests were keeping out of the actual purlieu so that the assembling could not take place there. Then where could it be held? Assuredly the bulk of the girls would not attend any meeting which would beckon them across their own frontiers. Of course the girls individually penetrated freely through the surrounding territory. Often you would find them as visitors in the homes of the ordinary people all around. But that was a different thing from having a mass meeting of them outside their own area. Such would be bound to cause public excitement and gather a crowd, and it was quite certain that the girls as a body would not court that. This real difficulty was got over by Mrs. "Zacchaeus" Curley's offer of her own big kitchen for the purpose. This was an ideal solution. Strictly speaking, Mrs. Curley's home was not in the bad area, inasmuch as the recognized boundary-line of the latter went down the opposite side of the street; and of course her home was never used for "trade" purposes. On the other hand the girls resorted there and were completely at home there. A still more important feature was that the back-entrance to the house was from a lane lying between Railway Street and Gloucester Street. The rear of the Magdalen Asylum in Gloucester Street also opened on to that lane. Thus the Missioners were able to pass through the Convent into Mrs. Curley's house, avoiding in this way the frontal approach which would have attracted public notice.

That arranged, the Legionaries in their movements through the area canvassed energetically for the meeting. The idea caught on. Here curiosity chimed in with the good-will which was stirring so plentifully in the girls. They were intrigued as to the line which would be taken with them.

I cannot fix exactly the day of that meeting. It was in the earlier part of the second week of the Mission, very probably on the Tuesday. It was timed for six o'clock. When at that hour precisely we arrived, only a few were present. It

looked as if our first failure had come where success was imperative, that is, with the girls. Evidently, however, they were lurking in the vicinity to see who would be coming on our side, and otherwise to guard against surprises. For soon after our arrival, they began to trickle in. In the end, there was a fair muster – nearly half the total number of the girls. We had not done badly. It would have been absurd to hope for all, and we might easily have had none. In such circumstances and among such people, mood is a big but intangible quantity, as full of changes as the flickering wind itself.

Several of the girls were slightly drunk and some were very drunk; but that did not amount to anything. Some of them were always on that border-line.

Mrs. Curley's kitchen, at all times neat, was brilliantly lit and in other ways resplendent. Pots, pans, coppers had all received that little extra touch that tells. Mrs. Curley herself was there; also one or two of her retainers. In the ordinary way the presence of a boss would be a damper; but not so in her case. It was one of the anomalies of the position that we found ourselves regarding this brothel-keeper as an ally and an asset.

For a while the proceedings resolved themselves into a sort of reception. We moved around among the girls, chatting to them singly or in little knots. A note of light cheerfulness veiled the seriousness of the issues, spiritual and even temporal, which were at stake. No less, it masked our own anxiety.

Try to conjure up that kitchen scene, crowded with its fiercely contrasting figures, dominant among them the priests aiming to have a word with each one. The whole effect was breath-taking. Those present represented every stage between trim ensemble and unkemptness, and likewise from sobriety to liquor; and the faces ranged from beauty to wild-eyed terribleness. Thus come together in a body in such a bright environment, the girls' peculiarities and defects (toned down when viewed individually and in their normal setting) showed up in startling fashion. Oh! if only someone had been there with talent to reduce that scene to canvas!

Then each of us gave a little talk, centering of course on the religious appeal. Our miscellaneous audience listened with intentness. We gained a sort of confidence. That was not simply because of the fair attendance, nor because our words seemed to be going home; for humanly speaking their effect was about to be obliterated. Several of the girls were half-drunk, and most or all of them we realized would soon be caught up almost in spite of themselves in the ghastly whirl of the Bentley Place night.

Still it was a marvel that we should be able to hold such a meeting at all. The eye of faith could see in it the course of the great river of Grace which had now for three years rushed along, with the crazy (in every sense) craft of our desperate enterprise set well in the middle of the torrent; so that if we did not

forsake the wheel in panic, we would manage to thread through rocks and rapids to a supernatural success.

Here the keyword is “supernatural.” At the expense of wearying, I must stress and superstress that fact. The crushing of Bentley Place would constitute a moral revolution of the grandest kind – in plainer words a miracle. That miracle would not be worked by what we did at that meeting or elsewhere in the area; though each and every effort of ours formed a necessary contribution. We realized that ultimately all depended on the wonder-working grace of God. But that grace is, so to speak, on tap for worthy faith and effort to draw upon. Our part was to believe unshakingly and to act with all our powers. The girls were cooperating too. The worldly eye surveying them might not see that. But gleaming through the welter of sin and degradation, there was a sturdy faith and a real element of goodwill. Granted all these things, no word shall be impossible. Bentley Place is a classic demonstration of that formula, and thus its filthy facts – otherwise fit only for relegation to the limbo of forgotten sores – are found transformed by heavenly alchemy into pure and edifying gold.

All that, however, was ahead. At the moment, despite our faith-based hope, we were a prey to tortured thoughts.

23. Our Faithful Garrison

Our attack had gone far (too far to permit of any backing out had we so wished), and had exceeded expectation. If it prevailed, that *would be* good! But if it did not? Well, we simply would be *pulverized*. The prevailing atmosphere of criticism, partly friendly but mostly the reverse, would on the second whip itself into a devastating blast. Ridicule, discredit, even ostracism, would be our fate. The great Society of Jesus itself would shiver with the shock which its three wild men would have brought upon it. As for the poor little Legion of Mary, just beginning what it fondly hoped would be a world-career – why, it would perish off the face of the earth! It was the harm which would accrue to others, rather than the purely personal angle, that tormented us. However, as I have said, we were committed – not that we had a glimmer of a notion of recoiling.

A special event marked this week. Father John Flanagan, the Administrator, was appointed Parish Priest of Fairview. His successor was Father John O'Reilly. That news came as a shock. No more awkward circumstance could have occurred – it meant for us a perilous changing of horses in midstream! That change came into force immediately. Would the new Administrator continue the permission for our operations? It was far from certain that he would. We had been lucky to secure the consent of Father Flanagan. Perhaps Father O'Reilly would hold by the old policy of "leave alone," in spite of the success which had been won. Yet to stop now would be sheer disaster from any point of view. A time of tension – anguish rather – ensued. Then an interview. Then reassurance: Full speed ahead!

Our special worry was that the time was speeding. Here we were, well on in the second week of the Mission, and yet a host of things remained to be done. We would never fit them into the three weeks of the Mission! Why, what's the hurry about three weeks? The hurry was this: A Missioner is a kind of king in a parish while the Mission is on, but on the day that the Mission finishes he is a deposed king. It is not etiquette for him to continue visiting there, even people whom he may have contacted during the Mission. Whatever the three Missioners wanted to do had to be done during their brief reign, the days of which were ebbing fast in their one-way tide.

Some days later, a second general meeting of the girls was called in the effort to get those who had not attended the first one. It too was held in Mrs. Curley's kitchen. I think the evening would have been Friday. About the same number came along, but somewhat differently composed, and what has been written in description of the former meeting would apply to this one. A majority of the girls had now attended. The fact that many had come a second time was evidence of solid intention in them. The new arrivals too were so many signs that a good impression was current concerning the first meeting. And if we wanted all-around consolation, we could find excuses for the non-attenders more probable

than that of sheer obduracy, such as, for instance, a passing change of mood, “an engagement,” or just too drunk to come.

Notwithstanding our forebodings, the situation was falling nicely into shape. Most of the important conferences had now been held. The indications were distinctly favorable. Promises were pretty well one hundred percent. Of course we were far from sure of some of those who had made the promises. But if we were to score a fair success, *that* would make up those people’s minds for them.

By this time the Novena was in full swing, sending its thrill through the giant parish. Even the bad area tingled healthfully. There our drive, far from tending to exhaust itself, daily took firmer grip. In our various conferences we had been speaking vaguely of a future closing-down. Then our thoughts and private talks began to fine down towards the fixing of the day. We shrank from doing this until *every possible* preparation had been made, for a breakdown might occur at the very spot where a minor screw had been left loose, or where the traditional haporth of tar had been spared. On the other hand, the day could not be set so far ahead as to bring us up against the closing of the Mission. For latitude would have to be allowed for a partial misfire, and also for what we are topical today in terming “mopping-up operations.”

That planning drew in its train another anxious problem. Success would mean – we ventured to hope – the transfer of all the girls to Sancta Maria, leaving a vacant array of houses and rooms. But we dare not leave them vacant. Business, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Bentley Place, with its ancient immunity from police attention, held a uniquely privileged position. That property would not remain empty long – not if there were people in the city who wanted money and did not scruple how they got it. Those houses would be snapped up by some male or female harpy, and reopened “under new management.” Then the wheels of organization would gaily start re-spinning, dragging everyone into their fatal action, creating the evil while ministering to it, and perhaps giving it a new and deadlier lease on life.

That must not be! Therefore we must so contrive in regard to each house and each room (the latter being at the moment the nests of privateers) that no vice-monger was going to bob in and take over. More easily said than done, you will comment. Quite so; yet even as that difficulty took shape before our minds, we had an inspiration concerning it; or perhaps it was no more than normal mental sequence – just as for instance, the positive in electricity suggests the negative, or the bolt the nut!

That thought was of another great current problem which might be used to cancel out with Problem No. 1. There was a room-famine in the city. Vacant accommodations were hungrily competed for. People were prepared to pay any price even for basements, attics, and other sorts of primitive living-space. The Government had hurriedly stepped in with its Rent Restriction Act. That was

evaded wholesale. But in any case the Act did not create accommodations. The actual dearth of rooms was more serious than the profiteering. Hence the struggle for shelter in any shape and on any terms; hence the herding of unbelievable numbers into single rooms; hence the case of young married couples living apart with their respective parents; hence, finally, the misery of the “married-quarters” in the common lodging-houses.

In these latter, rooms were sometimes partitioned into three or four, each section to hold a family or any couple which would come along. If for no other reason than the limited space available the furniture consisted of three or four miserable items only. For this degraded nest the standard charge was 1s.6d. nightly. If more cubic capacity was required, as in the case of a large family, more had to be paid – 2s. to 3s. Some of these accommodations were used by transients or by “pick-ups.” But many people lived there semi-permanently. A few of these were of the respectable poor, genuine casualties of the room-famine. They were *doubly* to be pitied. Some had been in regular tenement rooms but had been evicted for non-payment. However, the bulk of them represented social driftwood who apparently had never enjoyed an ordinary tenancy, and most of these were without visible means of support. There was no home life, no vestige of comfort, hardly any scope for crudest decency. It was sort of outlaw-existence, calculated to strip its victims of every better instinct. It speaks volumes for those poor people that such did not happen. They were coarsened no doubt, made careless in regard to their duties towards God and man. But underneath that reckless crust they continued human and even lovable. What if they had got a proper chance? Submerged among them may have lain frustrated genius, spoiled heroes and saints.

Now you have a picture of Problem No. 2 which we thought to apply to our own pressing big Problem No. 1 in a joint solution. I say “we,” but here at last there was a departure from unanimity. It was the first time we had differed on policy. I hasten to specify that it was a very nice and truly parliamentary type of disagreement, with each side half-convinced by the other’s arguments.

One side said: “A family in each of those rooms would be an unassailable garrison, so let us draft in these poor miserable families from the Married Quarters. Incidentally the possession of a room will rebuild them.” The other side agreed to half of that proposition: “Yes, by all means import the roomless; but pick the best. Do not take them from the Married Quarters. By straining to help that pitiful fag-end of the housing problem, we may menace the solution of our own terrific problem, which is to safeguard the future of those rooms and thereby prevent the district from slipping back again. If those misfit types from the Married Quarters are brought in, they will only drift into the swim of things down there and end up as dupes or allies of the evil instead of as a bulwark of defense against it.” That was a telling argument. It was condensed into a slogan, which by itself was almost worth the victory: “Do not try to superimpose one charity on another; both will collapse.”

However, there were valid arguments on the other side as well: “The getting of the better types will take more time, and every minute may be vital. Would they be rugged enough for that locality, which will remain tough even though the main evil may be departed? Would the better types be sturdy enough to put up a real physical-force fight for their rooms in case of a determined squeeze to get them out? Unquestionably the emigrants from the Married Quarters would ‘have what it takes’ in that direction. Once in a room of their own, it would need the forces of the law to dislodge them. Ordinary rough tactics would be little more than recreation for them.”

At length the hesitating balance of our fears and hopes went down – against the slogan. The Married Quarters’ folk were “elected” to be our faithful garrison. Though we did not know it then, we could have saved our arguments, for in the end we were glad to find families who would agree to take those rooms. We had not calculated on the fact that Bentley Place was such a name of horror as even to put off the room-hungry. However, that is anticipating. As well, it is premature for us to be making bookings for those rooms, because at the moment they are so many fortresses of vice and our plans to capture them may fail. In the second place, we are promising premises which we do not own. This at least, we can put into order. Off we go on another round of interviews with the property owners. We asked that in the event of rooms under their control becoming vacant as the result of the events portending, they would accept as tenants only persons formally approved by us. To this proposal they readily assented. It formed an unimportant postscript to the Pact they had already concluded with us.

At once we dispatched our Legionaries on a grand tour of the various Married Quarters to spread the tidings that there was a chance of rooms at low rents in the immediate future. All were enthused at the prospect; but we were disconcerted to find how many – even of them – cooled off when the site of the rooms was disclosed. Bentley Place!! Oh, that was *different!* But plenty there were who would have waded through fire and flood for a room at the other side. The names of these were noted and a list compiled. In the main, of course, that list consisted of the married “down and outs.” But a number of more respectable families were provided by the operation of singular circumstances which I will tell of later in their due order.

For fear that events might develop with unexpected suddenness, rendering it necessary to summon the “great roomless” wholesale, we duplicated a circular and kept the copies by us in the way that mobilization notices are held ready when war impends. For it was our intention to let the minimum of interval elapse between the departure of the lady tenantry and the incoming of our ragged army of conquest. I only wish I had a copy of that amazing circular to reproduce here so as to give you the atmosphere of the time.

There was yet another difficulty. None of those poor people owned furniture. Such of it as was in their lodging belonged to the lodgings. Furniture would have

to be found for them. This particular defect had, we thought, its ready-made remedy. Each of those rooms in Bentley Place was furnished, some of them elaborately, and others less so – all the way down the scale to the rooms inhabited by the never-sober and the methylated fiends, which were as bare and as miserable as any of the cubicles in the Married Quarters. Presumably all that equipment, good and not so good, would be more or less going a-begging if the planned evacuation came to pass. If it were available, why not buy it in for the poor have-nots whom we were about to enlist in our service?

I happened to speak of this matter to one whose name has previously come in for mention at a main point in our fortunes, i.e., in connection with the acquiring of our Sancta Maria itself. He was E. P. McCarron, the Secretary of the Department of Local Government. To speak to him of any *need* has always been to set in motion the wheels of help and wisest counsel. So it was on this occasion. His response was characteristic. We were to buy whatever furniture was needed and he would meet the cost.

The settling of the garrison matter meant that we had advanced up to the final stage. Now things were opportune for demanding the Closing Down. The mountainous obstacles in the way had been leveled to the ground. Somehow the array of jobs confronting us had all got done, though in advance, they had not looked possible in the couple of weeks available. Everybody that could be deemed a key-person had been in lengthy session with our little "Tribunal of Public Safety." The lesser lights had been less formally interviewed.

24. The Old Order Passes

Our imprudent enterprise had developed in phenomenal conformity with the original design. The infinite tangle of Bentley Place had with disconcerted meekness submitted to the process of unravelling. The unruliest ends had been sorted out. Now everything lay in rough order, ready for the final drastic touches. Of these the first must be the naming of the day for closing down – on which day, according to the pledged words of all its notabilities, Bentley Place would go voluntarily and with a sort of glory out of business. For a week past we had been discussing what day it should be. I have said above that we were aiming at the golden mean between the too-early and the too-late. Now the margin of choice had narrowed. It was a case of the Monday or the Tuesday or the Wednesday in the third and final week of the mission. We felt that Monday was too soon. We feared Wednesday would be paring things too close. That left Tuesday. We fixed Tuesday as the day. At once through all our avenues of contact we broadcast that fact, notifying it individually to those chiefly concerned – the owners. No doubt it would be going too far to say that the intimation was accepted with enthusiasm; but it was taken in the spirit of the negotiations which had gone before, that is, a duty to be done. Better than that, I suppose, could hardly be expected in the circumstances.

The time which lay between that announcement and the day itself throbbed with fevered activity. Mostly, this meant the seeing of people, the keeping in touch with the girls and with everybody else in the area, in order to keep them in good heart and game for Tuesday's big step out of their old existence – which, though a magic one, was what they were accustomed to. Moreover, the new life would be more than new. It would be a losing business for them, one of doing without things. The prospect of hard ways is worse than the actuality. It can appall. They needed such encouragement as could be given.

At that moment however, our main preoccupation was the new tenantry. We were still looking around for "suitable" families. It did not prove necessary to issue the famous emergency circular to those whose names we had already noted as approved. For events were moving on towards Tuesday "according to plan," so that there was no need for an earlier, sudden mobilization of our garrison. One rather special spot of business had to be transacted. It was the purchase of furniture for the tenantry. The bulk of them had none. We went to the owners about it. Jack Curley proved helpful. He was Mrs. Curley's oldest son. He assisted her in the management of the property, and did business as a bookie "on the side." So comprehensive were the provisions made by Bentley Place for the comfort and convenience of its male patrons that they could even place their bets while there. Jack was tough, but far from being a bad sort. His attitude was in keeping with that taken by his mother. He met us more than half way in regard to our proposal to buy up the equipment of his "house." My memory on the score of price is not distinct. As far as I can recollect, the sum

was about £100. That was a decided bargain from our point of view added to which, of course, was the fact that Mr. McCarron had agreed to foot the bill!

I think it was on the Monday of the third week, that is the eve of Closing Day, that a remarkable event occurred – too remarkable indeed to be encompassed by the term “coincidence.” I had been making a grand tour by bicycle of the Married Quarters in the lodging-houses, for the purpose of interviewing some of those who had been reported as willing to take the “may be vacant” rooms in Bentley Place. I had just come from a lodging-house in Bridgefoot Street and was crossing the river by Winetavern Street Bridge, when I spotted the tall figure of Father Fidelis Griffin, O.F.M.,¹ heading towards his church, invariably but incorrectly called “Adam and Eve’s.” I was in the last stages of a hurry and did not want to stop for anyone or anything. But he was different so I turned and went in his direction. He was the Guardian of the Franciscans, and their services to us had been considerable. Readers will remember the way in which they had given us Father Philip at a minute’s notice for the first, hazardous and epoch-making Retreat which had been the fountain-head of the stream of wonders which for three years now had been flowing. Father Philip gave the first four retreats. Of those that followed, Father Antonine, O.F.M., and Father Fidelis himself had given out exaggeration. Such an attitude merited more than well. And now a fitting recompense came to them from us – or at least through us! Probably it was the thing they wanted most. It was this way. They were in grievous need of a site for the sacristy which formed a part of their rebuilding scheme – now completed. Some time before, they had bought that site on which, however, stood two tenement houses fully occupied. No doubt, in prospect it had seemed a simple matter to find alternative accommodations for the families comprised. But simple it was not. I have spoken previously of the room-famine!

I knew nothing of this situation when I drew up beside Father Fidelis and propped my bicycle against the curb. Greetings exchanged, we talked about the current happenings. He listened astounded. It was all news to him. Then the following exchange took place: “Do you know what I am doing at this moment, Father?” “I’m sure you’re up to no good.” “Well, you’ll be surprised. I am looking around for tenants.” “For tenants! Are you joking?” So I explained. When he took it in, he gulped a few times. Then he addressed me in the sort of tone in which you would plead for the life of your child: “Plainly, you do not realize that I am the authentic man who has tenants to give away – plenty of them – right over there in Rosemary Lane. I have lost all my hair looking for rooms for them and I cannot find any. I have almost lived on the steps of the City Hall begging accommodations but they say they cannot help me. Come along with me now, and I will give you two houses chock-full of families.”

This was amazing. We walked to Rosemary Lane – about a hundred yards

¹ He is now Spiritual Director of Sancta Maria, Brisbane. (June, 1942)

away, and we saw the people concerned. They had their doubts about the class of the accommodations which were being held out to them; but in the end they all agreed to go. I told them they could make immediate preparations for transferring, as their new rooms would be ready – at least we fervently hoped so – in a day or two. Through this train of circumstances the Rosemary Lane houses were vacated and demolished, and the new sacristy built. That forms an impressive case of “full circle,” inasmuch as the Franciscans had helped to start something which in the end came round again and helped them sensationally.

There were other important things to be seen to. Suppose that on Tuesday next the grand Close-Down took place, and Bentley Place became but a sour memory? The evil trade was the pivot upon which the life of the place revolved. That pivot overthrown, a wholesale economic dislocation would be effected. Some of the dwellers had side-line occupations which would enable them to struggle along; but there would be bound to be many cases of complete loss of income. The resulting distress must be provided for. We would have trouble enough on our hands to prevent the locality from slipping back, without having acute poverty added onto the scale against us. Nominally, the bad area formed part of the district of a Conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, but actually the locality constituted “no-man’s land.” The Society did not cross its borders; nor was there heretofore any special reason in the way of poverty for the Society’s doing so. Now, however, we reckoned that the Society was required. It could deal with the graver aspects of poverty arising, and generally would try to ease the economic transition. We saw its saintly President, Mr. M. R. Lalor. It was settled with him that a new Conference would be established to work exclusively inside that no-man’s land. Specially enterprising members were picked for this difficult task. The President of the branch was to be Mr. Peter Corbally, who afterwards became a Legionary. It was arranged that the Conference would be called St. Gerard’s and that it would come into existence if and when – as the official phrase goes – the closing-down took place.

Last, but not least, Sancta Maria had to be tuned up. If things went well, the hostel would sustain the severest tax so far on its accommodations. If Bentley Place broke down, it was to be presumed that the girls would for the most part come to Sancta Maria, though some might enter the Magdalen Asylum or go home. There was no room in Sancta Maria for such an influx. Yet there could be no question of turning anyone away. Realize the problem. You can imagine the anguished sort of “house-keeping talk” that the Sancta Maria Legionaries – remember they were women! – indulged in when faced with the fact that they might have to accommodate a possible sixty persons in a house too small for less than half that number. Where were the beds and bedding? Where were the tables and chairs? Where was the crockery? Where was everything? Above all, where was the space – except to put the girls out in the garden in tents? Yet the problem had to be solved. Eventually a “take in everybody” plan was put on paper. Bathroom, boxroom, landings, common room – all were made

subservient to necessity and appeared on the plan as potential bedrooms. Extra equipment was borrowed or bought.

That accomplished, the “spirituals” were considered. Provisional arrangements were made for a three-day Retreat to start in the Hostel on Tuesday night – that is if the girls presented themselves. The Franciscans agreed to conduct the Retreat.

In the foregoing preparations, and in the general routine of the Mission, and in an all-the-time ransacking of the territory those final days were consumed: Saturday, Sunday, Monday. And Monday was the eve of the Day of Closing-Down. I wonder if you can represent to yourselves our state of suspense just then? We were on high tension as we lived this amazing history – a tension which perhaps you share as you read. If not, it is a pity. But whether or not you get the feel of it, we *were* worried. I have previously tried to set out the many reasons why – from major ones to personal ones. Now on the verge of climax the strain became acute. Was it all real – those promises and arrangements? Or were those people only “stringing us along”? They seemed genuine enough; but in our spells of depression the circumstances seemed too favorable to be true. Soon enough we would know for certain.

Tuesday dawned ... but no use rushing down to Bentley Place with the sun! No one there could tell you anything at that time nor for long after. A visit betimes would gather no information in regard to what was going to happen. We let the morning ripen. Naturally we spent those hours in uneasy speculation. Perhaps nothing would happen. Perhaps it would only be a day like every other day there for a hundred years past. Perhaps Bentley Place would just carry on.

At about ten we went along. Things were happening. There was a move on all right. Our worst forebodings were not justified, but neither could one say that all was well. The air was thick with talk of closing down. That did not imply that doors were actually closed. They were open as usual. But that was because people had to go in and out as usual. The positive elements of the situation lay in the fact that the biggest owner, Mrs. Curley, had definitely announced that she had shut down. Moreover, one met several of the “girls” already dressed-up – not usual so early. They said they were going to Sancta Maria. It was rumored that some had already gone over there. If that was true, it was fine. Later a telephone call obtained the information that a couple of them had already arrived. But a couple of street girls, though a host in themselves and a sign as well, represented a long hail to a general closing down and to a complete migration of the Bentley Place girls to Sancta Maria.

The other owners could not be found; but some of their “girls” stated their intention of going over to Sancta Maria. They said they did not know what was going to happen in regard to the particular “houses” to which they belonged; they had heard that it was intended to shut down. However, nothing was known for

certain. We could not wait long enough to clarify the position further for more vital mission summoned us away. We had to mobilize our garrison. The closing down of Mrs. Curley meant that a large number of rooms would be vacated, or were so already; and there were others too. These rooms must be safeguarded in accordance with our plans for placing important tenants in them and that must be done at once. It was desirable – though possibly not practicable – that in every one of those vacated rooms a family should sleep that very night. Off we would have to go to notify our prospective tenants, and to endeavor to induce them to move in that very day. Before leaving, we saw Jack Curley who consented to try to make a list of all the rooms which would fall vacant in the course of the day. These we would equip from the £100 worth of furniture which we had bought; so that each incoming family would find a home ready and waiting for them. A sweep through the lodging-houses followed, and the tidings of the vacant rooms were widely spread. It was taking a large chance to do this, for at the moment our notion as to the total number of rooms available was vague in the extreme. It might be disastrous for many to come and suffer disappointment. Still, we had to run that risk in order to ensure that sufficient of them would come. For some of those who had agreed to come were out, and some had changed their minds. But we had the satisfaction of seeing several of them actually making their preparations to depart for Bentley Place.

Other commissions had to be performed. One was the notifying of the St. Vincent de Paul Society that the closing-down had at least been entered on and that their new Conference must now stand ready for action. Then a call to Sancta Maria. By this time some extra girls had entered into residence and it was alleged that others were on their way or “intending.” That was good – whatever else might happen. Word was sent to the Franciscans that the three-day Retreat, which had been tentatively arranged, would start that night for the incoming brigade.

Then back to Bentley Place in a fine flutter, for there was some disorder there, according to the talk in Sancta Maria which emanated from the newcomers. If that rumor were true, it might mark a perilous situation and the end of our hopes. There was only one way to ascertain the facts. That was to go and see.

25. The Day of Closing Down

I finished the last chapter on the note of rumored rioting in Bentley Place. That was the very thing we had always been in fear of during our two years down there. If it were happening now, it would not be for our good. People want order almost at any price. For over a century they had borne patiently with the terrible evil of Bentley Place, because there was the outward seeming of order. The fact was not faced that the calm represented an ignoble truce with evil, the sort of peace of which a man has finely said: "O God, save me from the calm of the desert, from the peace of cowards!" The populace does not reason that way. They would not be patient with us if we created even one day of holy turmoil. Note the anomaly: Not those who maintained the fortress of evil, but we who attacked it would be held to be in the wrong.

Spurred by these sharp thoughts, I got over to Bentley Place. There was an air of excitement all right, but nothing in the way of disorder. I saw no sign of broken windows which had been so noisily reported to us. Inquiry elicited the information that there had been some trouble of a minor character. A small party had demonstrated against Mrs. Curley. No more than six, according to my reckoning, took part in the foray.

A couple of stones had been thrown, and a window or two had been broken. Later I saw these. The naughty little storm had blown over without doing any other damage. That was a good sign. Feeling that could be satisfied by smashing two windows was not too deep. It looked as if we still had nearly all the people with us, and the remainder not very strong against us. Having made their gesture, even the red-hot party had simmered down and seemed to be in first-rate humor.

Do not assume, however, that all was well. Inspection of the place showed that though the great bulk of the "Houses" were closed down and many of their girls already departed to Sancta Maria, there were five houses still open. It was true that some of the girls from the latter had also gone. But their numbers had been more than made good by transfers from the closed-down houses. Discussion with the staffs drew non-committal answers of the kind; "We have not made up our minds yet." I then tried to see the owners of those houses. They were Betty Gray and "Kitten" Carr, already described in connection with the interviews with Owners. They were not in their houses, nor could anyone around the place be found to admit to knowledge of their whereabouts. A thorough search of the not-too-extensive locality was fruitless. That looked ominous. For the pair seldom left its precincts. It suggested that there was more at work than an undecided state of mind; that their decision was adverse; that the formal pledges given to us were in process of being broken.

That search – like the general ransacking of the area during that time and for the previous two years – was maintained by a couple of dozen women Legionaries. I should, as I have gone along, have touched more on that essential part of our operation. I am sorrowfully reminded of my omission by the untimely death of one of them, Mollie MacCarthy, which has just occurred.¹ She became the first Secretary of the Concilium when it was formed. May her gentle soul rest in peace.

My narrative would be incomplete without their names: Nell Owen, May Massey, Mary Stallard, Sally McNamara, Rose Donnelly, Celia Shaw, Josephine Plunkett, Rose Scratton, Estelle Condell, Mollie MacCary, Nora Moynihan, Kathleen Shannon, Josephine Ryan, Kathleen Hanvey, Helena Raleigh, Mary Molloy, Teenie McCleary, Teresa Cully, Mary Rowe, May Mohan.

Some of these were engaged on the work during all the period; some at special times only. Possibly I have slipped a name or two, for I do not write from comprehensive notes.

With the exception of Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton, all the others were young. With unexampled courage, they performed the missions to which they were assigned in that unbelievable spot. That work meant the conquering not only of physical fear but of the feeling of horror and revolt which settled down on one the moment the place was entered; yet not one of them ever faltered.

Now back to that unprofitable search for the mission owners. The hands of the clock moved on to three o'clock, at which hour I was due to meet the Missioners at lunch in the Belvedere Hotel. We sat down to a meal made tasteless by the topic of discussion. We were greatly upset by the turn of events. But why should we be? – you may ask. Had we not got most of our objectives? Was not some margin of failure inevitable, and therefore to be accepted philosophically? No, as we saw things, we had not largely succeeded; we had largely failed. Certainly, we had accomplished plenty, but in our analysis of the position we compared ourselves to a fire-brigade which extinguishes a fire in all but one room of a house. In a short time the flames spread back through the whole house, so that all the previous labor was in vain. We reasoned that if we did not succeed in closing ALL the dens, then like that fire the evil would tend to reestablish itself throughout the locality. It was expecting too much of ultra-weak human nature to suppose otherwise. The open houses would be reaping multiple harvests. They would become organizing points. A campaign of jeering and temptation would be launched against the owners and the girls who had done the right thing. If the decent owners held firm against that, then every effort would be made to secure ownership of the vacated premises and thus bring these back into the evil swim. Pressure of other kinds would be applied. All those whose livelihoods had been taken away (and whom we would have a job to handle in the best of circumstances) would be exploited in the interests of the campaign.

¹ September, 1942.

Then with desperate men and women glaring around and looking for trouble, trouble would not be long in coming.

That contemplation was painful. We turned from it to clutch at straws. One of these was the hope that really everything was all right; that the two owners would close down – for as yet the day was only middle-aged. We sought relief in the past. We reviewed our discussions with the owners. We were agreed as to the apparent sincerity of Betty Gray, who had been the first one interviewed. We had not felt so sure of that peculiar, elfish little body, Mrs. Carr. But when every idea was aired and debated, it was evident that for the moment no other course lay open but to try to find the missing pair and renew our consultations with them. Thus finished what must have been one of the most dismal meals we ever sat through. We then separated to our various employments. The many duties of the Mission had to be covered as attentively as if no such heart-scald as Bentley Place existed. My task was to try to establish touch with the fugitives. Several of our members spent the rest of the day scouting around for them; but that pair, ordinarily the most findable of people, could not be located. Manifestly they had gone into hiding – as being an easier way of telling us that they were standing out of the Pact.

Our emotions were so unhappy as to spoil for us what otherwise would have been a heartening as well as funny spectacle. That was the move-in of our tenantry which had already started and was gathering momentum. The more fortunate ones, such as those from Rosemary Lane, had simple but complete outfits of furniture. Others were “betwixt and between” in descending degree. Those poor folk had solved their transport problems in many ways. Their property arrived in every sort of minor vehicle, from horse and ass-drawn yokes to ludicrous little handcarts, without, so far as I recalled, one motor-van participating. As each new family arrived, it was directed to its new abode and helped to install itself. Those without adequate, or any furniture, were equipped from the common store provided as already described. It did not take long to arrange those simple households. Many of the colonists had led such vagabond or wandering existences that even on their first night in Bentley Place they could not have “felt strange.” Some of them were sleeping for the first time in their lives in a home that they could really call their own.

But over them – in our minds – hung the shadow of a menace, the possibility of attack being made on them by locals resentful of their coming. That troubled us, but less, I fear, than it should have. It was in fact the least of our worries just then.

As is so often the case, events took a turn at the darkest hour. At about 9:30 that night I met Ned Curran. He was a figure in the underworld. I suppose that you could describe him as a sort of sergeant-major of the bullies inasmuch as he would exercise an ascendancy over them. Moreover, he was living with one of the proprietresses; that gave him added status. He was an unsmiling,

determined man of medium build, clean shaven, sallow, already at that time (though I did not know it) in the grip of the deadly tubercular complaint which was soon to kill him.

The fact that I met him meant most likely that he wanted to see me. Otherwise, like the other two, he would have merged into his surroundings. I took it in that sense, and hailed it as a favorable sign. I said I wanted to talk to him about the position. He assented, and brought me to the front drawing room (actually it was a bedroom) of his unofficial home. Our discussion started badly. I was not in a placid mood and he was coldly truculent. Without putting it into any form of words, he adopted the role of representing the two ladies; which was of course the exact position. He did not beat about the bush but said bluntly that they were not going to shut down. I pointed to the solemn promises which they had given to the contrary. He swept that aside by saying that they had been going into things since, and they saw plainly that they could not carry out those promises, much as they would like to. To do so would leave them penniless and even hungry. Their creditors, big city business-houses, would take no account of the sacrifices they were making and would look for full payment; whereas their debtors, all Bentley Place people, would expect to be let off clear in the unique circumstances. That position would not be fair, and until they got a fair deal they could not see their way to close their premises.

At first his attitude was quite uncompromising. They were not going to close down. That was flat and we could do what we liked about it. In reply I spoke bitter words. These were directed especially to him. For, probably correctly, I believed him to be responsible for the change of front on the part of the women. Viewing things in that light – and seeing him there as our arch-enemy, the stumbling block of our whole scheme, the pivot figure between our anticipated cleanup and the unthinkable old order – I was consumed with rage. His coolness melted under what I said and for a while it looked as if our fierce exchanges would terminate in blows. It forms a serious reflection as to what the sequel should have been to a first blow on either side. It is certain that the two contestants would not have been allowed to fight alone. At the first sound of battle, Ned Curran's minions would have stormed into the room.

From all-round disaster such as that would have been, our cause was preserved by a happy providential word. It was a reference to his personal responsibility. It acted like a charm. Passion evaporated, and at once things flowed into a reasonable channel. Seeing that I had touched a tender spot, I concentrated on it. I stressed the serious responsibility of breaking up the Pact and perhaps indefinitely continuing Bentley Place in its filthy groove. That struck home with obvious force – perhaps because of his illness – then unsuspected by me. Ned Curran insisted that Mrs. Gray and Mrs. Carr were not unwilling to shut down, but unable. Their debts were the only obstacle.

Here I must cast back your minds to the time of the interviews. You will recall that those two women had then specified that very difficulty of their debts. They seemed to us to be completely truthful in their statements. We had requested them to specify the details of their liabilities. These had been given to us with every sign of candor. They totaled up to quite small amounts. One came to £38 or so; the other to £37. Therefore if they were magnifying their debts, they were not magnifying them to an extent worthwhile. It is to be remembered that though we were in a position to pay off these amounts, the Missioners had decided that the subject could not even be mentioned at that stage. It might be said that we were bribing people. Moreover, the moment that there was mention of money going a-begging, there would be many candidates, and only harm done in the end. But we always intended to pay off those debts if the pair kept faith with us. Now that the final act of the drama was on, it seemed the proper time to show our hand. I explained what our intentions had been; the fact that we had made a collection to cover the debts; and that we were willing to discharge respectively. His answer to that was unhesitating. He said, "I consider that a very generous offer, and I guarantee that it will be accepted. If you come round here at about 2 o'clock tomorrow, I will tell you definitely."

The sudden transition from disaster to full success was almost too much. As I had judged him to be dictating their policy, so now I regarded those words of his as ending the crisis. We took cordial leave of each other and I hurried off. It was then about 11:30 p.m. and still one most important job remained to be done. It was to rush like a speed-king to the Belvedere to tell my fellow-combatants, the Missioners, of the unforeseen and happy issue of our day's travailings. It was a great, a supreme moment, when I walked into that hotel room and threw my joyful bombshell at the three heroic but much depressed figures within.

We stayed on for awhile discussing the position. Blessed hour! – in which body and spirit found luxurious relief. Reluctantly, we tore ourselves away in order to get some sorely-needed sleep, for our nerves had suffered torture all that day.

Simultaneously, another vital section of the Bentley Place adventure had been busy. Girls from the bad area had been coming into Sancta Maria during the day. The Retreat arranged for them had begun at 7 p.m. Father Antonine, O.F.M. conducted it. As the evening's exercises proceeded, it was evident that the Lord had through His servant's words spoken once again the command of old: "Peace, be still," for a great calm came to the turbulent souls of the newcomers and the whirlwinds of tempestuous fire ceased to rave in them. Then that household, too, had sought needed rest and the Hostel was hushed in the slumber of exhaustion.

That was Tuesday night. God grant the morrow would bring forth all that we were hoping for from it!

26. Enter the Police

Now it is Wednesday. The principal item of the day was to be the appointment with Ned Curran at 2 o'clock. One wakened up thinking of it. The morning went on tenant business, that is, I had to rush about seeing "prospectives" and trying to screw up the courage of those who were shaky. But all the time my mental eye was on the hands of a clock moving on towards two.

Near two at last! I crossed the city to the bad area and entered it by Purdon Street. Curran was standing there waiting for me. Though one word, "yes" or "no", was all I wanted to hear, we did not converse even to that extent. For every eye was on us. All were aware that there was a crisis and the talks were proceeding. Possibly every detail was common property. Silently we walked down Purdon Street, down to the left, down Trusty Place, to his home where the previous night we had our fierce discussion. When inside, we faced each other. "What word have you for me, Mr. Curran?" He replied: "I am afraid I have bad news for you." That was a frightful shock! For, though naturally apprehensive in regard to a decision on which so much depended, we had not really felt that it would be unfavorable. But there it was. "No" was the word.

Desperately I probed for some loophole of hope;

"You mean that they refuse to close down?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Because you have not offered enough to clear their debts."

"But I offered the amount they told us that they owed, and you yourself said last night that it was a generous proposal."

"I said that all right, but now they say it is not enough, and that they owe ever so much more than that."

"How much do they claim they owe?"

"They say that between the two it comes to £1,500."

"So that's the game! £1,500! Why, that is preposterous. We wrote down every item that they said they owed – down to bills for a few pence, and the whole lot totalled only £76."

"You told me all that before. I am only telling you what they say. It's too bad. I'd like to help. But they stick to it that they owe £1,500. They are not in a position to shut down except they get it. That's absolutely final."

There was a pause. Thus confronted with disaster, I stood with feeling that could be described as tigerish. Not for a moment did I contemplate yielding to their vile demand – not even to the tune of one single shilling. If Ned Curran's talk was intended to initiate a bargaining session, he and those he acted for were calculating wrongly. Then I spoke, curbing myself as best I could to coldness: "I am sorry, Mr. Curran. We made them a decent offer to get them out of a fix; but

we are not prepared to buy them out of business. I am very sorry. Up to the present gentle measures have been used with them. They have failed. Now we will see what drastic steps will accomplish.

With that, I turned on my heel, and without another look in his direction I left the place. I rode straight over to the Belvedere Hotel, where the Missioners were anxiously awaiting the result of the interview with Curran. Incidentally we were to have lunch together, and we had intended this to be a sort of celebration. Instead, it was to be like a condemned man's meal. Since my 'triumph' with Ned Curran on Tuesday night, we had been living in a fool's paradise. Now our luxurious dreaming had come to its sad awakening.

Over the unhappy meal that was to have been a celebration, we faced up to the dismal reality. I suppose that we discussed every conceivable plan in relation to the situation. Much that was suggested was rather for the mutual stimulation of ideas than to afford a serious basis of action. On the other hand there were proposals that were practicable but that might not be wise. One such was that the rebels should be denounced in the street with a view to inflaming the populace against them. Another had at least the merit of boldness. It was that I would get together a group of men who would enter the area with a few tins of petrol, fight off opposition, and burn down the 'rebel' premises! That suggestion will horrify the law-and-order mind, and rightly so. But when one thinks a little, novel aspects are revealed.

In this desperate situation, every possibility must be explored and so we tried to reason our way through to some conclusion which would guide us to just and effective action. It was a painful labor, this weighing of pros and cons, this searching for light which perhaps would show us that, in the present crisis, we might be justified in taking the law into our own hands.

In the first place, why talk of law and order in connection with a place where law and order do not run? If one side in a war were armed with boxing-gloves only, that side would be defeated. More! It would be ridiculous! Secondly, the great majority of the Bentley Place people had now declared for virtue. They were weak but they were willing to try to live decent lives. All had been successfully set to enable them to do so for the future. Now a little gang of three had taken up the other line and were imperilling the whole fine plan and prospect. Their ultimatum was: "£1,500 – or else!"

Unfortunately, this was not the sort of case where you could let each party choose its course and go its own way on general principles of freedom. For the reasons given in my "analysis" of this very point in the previous chapter, there could be no margin of failure in our final settlement, no half-measures, no balancing of gains and losses. You may recall my analogy of the partly-extinguished fire which soon again takes full possession. That is not merely valid reasoning; it constitutes a self-evident fact. Therefore those five evil houses

have got to be dealt with. The matter is not one alone of common morality, but goes beyond that into the realm of public menace or scourge, in the same way that a mad dog running loose is much more than a veterinary problem. That dog is not content with merely being mad. It wants to bite and convey its deadly virus to all. Those rebel owners were like two mad dogs. To tolerate them would mean that soon their moral hydrophobia would be communicated back to the rest of the population of the area.

No! Bentley Place must get its chance. Anywhere else the Police would operate to see that such a chance was given; but not so in this case. Here, by a unique combination of historical circumstances, the Police had been maneuvered on to the wrong side of the law which sternly prohibited brothel-keeping. Which side stood for the right in the present juncture, the Statute Book or the Police? The latter's attitude of masterly inactivity, now sanctioned and hardened by the usage of over a century, might have been originally warranted. That policy could be argued for, and was argued for by wise and good people, and possibly might be justifiable in the absence of a supporting campaign like ours. But now that our campaign had been so sensationally successful, the position had no less sensationally changed. A continuance of the old "hands-off" policy was no longer defensible on any sort of grounds, moral, traditional, administrative or any other sort. Therefore was there not peremptory call for the drastic steps which I had promised to Ned Curran?

But as it turned out, Providence allowed us such desperate thoughts to work our way to the most logical of all possible conclusions. For here came a suggestion which thrilled us. It was that we enlist the Police on our side. Why on earth should that suggestion thrill us? Surely, it should have been the first suggestion to present itself. No! Read back through the story of Bentley Place and you will see why that idea came to us last and only as a counsel of despair. And, strange to say, we reached it by reverse. It was a reaction to our speculation into the legitimacy of using violent measures against the Curran gang. Why should we be assuming that the Police would not take cognizance of the radical change in conditions? Why suppose that they would take a line that would be nothing more nor less than the upholding of vice and the siding against morality? Why not explain everything to them, and appeal to them, in virtue of the new order of things, to assert the common law in Bentley Place?

That suggestion displaced all others. We debated it from every point of view. Our adventurous course had now brought us up against our final problem. This threatened to prove too much for us. The only solution that we could logically reason out was that of force. We were not effectively circumstanced to apply that solution; but the Police were. If they could be induced to intervene it would veritably mark "the end of a perfect day."

A glance back at Chapter 19 will show that a little before this there had been question of a like recourse to the Police. That idea did not materialize then, it

being eclipsed by the dazzling advent of the Great Mission. The thought at that time was to make a personal appeal to General Murphy, the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. We had heard that he was capable and enterprising. Now at this emergency our thoughts went back to him.

Adverting to the clock, we found that three hours had gone in our discussion. It was now 5:30. The General would hardly be in his office at that time. But we would try. We rang up Dublin Castle. We were told that though ordinarily he would have left at about 5 o'clock, he was this afternoon out on an inspection – I think it was in connection with election arrangements. He was expected back at the office soon. In haste we rang for a taxi, and Father Mackey and I proceeded to the Castle as the representatives of our party.

When we got there, the General had not returned, so we waited. We learned that Mrs. Murphy had also come in and was waiting for him. Shortly after he arrived and we were brought in to him. You will realize that this was an ideally unsuitable time to come to talk to any man on business, but it has to be admitted that the General merited full marks for patience. He settled down to listen to us. Then, discovering the magnitude of the matter, he let his wife go home alone, and gave us an absorbed attention.

Between us we gave him a detailed account of all that had been happening in Bentley Place in the two years preceding the Mission, and in the three weeks of the Mission. His manner showed how much he was stirred by our narration. But who would not be? And in his case there was the additional and acute interest that the matter related to the thorniest problem of his own department.

While we were talking, he interrupted now and then with question. Eventually, the considerable recital of events concluded. The Chief Commissioner's comment was brief: "That is a wonderful record of accomplishment – a regular saga. Is there any way in which you think I can help?"

"Yes, that is why we have come to you."

"What is your proposition?"

We stated how the position was affected by the backing out of the two proprietors from the Pact. We explained why we thought that the resulting situation could not be allowed to drift, but must receive drastic handling from some quarter. We even mentioned our wild notion on that point. Then we proceeded to urge our final consideration as to the necessity of police intervention. We interposed: "You don't have to argue that with me. I think this is a plain case for intervention, and I intend to help you with all the power at my disposal. Whatever in reason you want done, I will try to carry it through. I would like to hear your ideas as to method."

Well, that was a delightful shock! What a refreshing attitude! No hidebound business! Not an inch of official red-tape. No talk of conferences and next week. Just spontaneous humanity and Christianity, backed up by quick decision and determination.

Then we got down to the consideration of details. Of what precise nature was the intervention to be? Soon we were at one on this. We agreed that its prime element must be immediate, irresistible, completely decisive action, smashing the rebel remnants and forming a sort of echo to that promise of “drastic steps” which had been made to Curran and Co. – partaking of the quality of Nemesis upon them for their filthy tactics. That intervention should be some formal act, possessing the character of ceremonial (albeit a rude and violent one) which would mark the taking over of Bentley Place by the law, and the restoration of that outlaw territory to the City, *in which* it was but *of which* it was not. Likewise that demonstration by the law would endorse all that we had done and would add itself to it in a perfect continuity, dramatically warning all that the old shameful order had passed, yielding place to new.

How was all that to be accomplished? The answer that we worked down to was that of a police raid or round-up. And when? That minute if such were possible. But it was not possible. Innumerable details had to be arranged by the Commissioner, and not a few by us. And there must be no slip-up. For one thing, we had to continue marshalling our tenantry. You will remember all I have said before on the subject of their strategical importance. They were our garrison troops, occupying and holding the territory as we filched it, room by room, from evil. We regarded this as a vital part of the scheme, so we were not going to cease piling them in because there was going to be “trouble” in the area. But we must protect them, to such extent as was possible, against police action on the one hand, and on the other hand against die-hard reprisals. A few hours of intense disorder would give great scope for the latter. Accordingly it was arranged that we would furnish the Commissioner with a list of the rooms which at the critical moment would be in the occupation of our tenants. These would be taken count of by the raiding party. Of course in all other ways as well, effort would be made to limit the effects of the raid to the five operating houses and their respective teams of owners, girls and bullies.

The time of the raid – it was to be midnight of Thursday, that is, about thirty hours ahead. In the meantime the order of the day was to be; strictest secrecy.

That most agreeable and momentous interview at an end, our ways went off at tangents. The General proceeded home; Father Mackey to join his colleagues in the work of the Mission; I to Sancta Maria, where I was due with news of the latest developments.

What a haven of peace I found Sancta Maria! There the Retreat atmosphere reigned sweetly. What a contrast with the turbulence of the day! I met Father

Creedon and our other stalwarts. I had plenty to tell; but in pursuance of the secrecy order, I told no one but Father Creedon of the projected raid. Do not think that this meant that our crowd was a loose-tongued lot. They were far from being that. It has always been a subject of right pride to us, that Legionaries, without oaths or grim parade of hush-hush, could yet keep things quiet that were supposed to be kept quiet. But we had bound ourselves to restrict this particular matter to the absolute principals.

Thus finished Wednesday – another day that was like a year!

27. The Last Assault

Now Thursday: A beautiful spring day, full of the joy of living for most people. But for us it was only another stage in the campaign, top-heavy and painful with things to be done. This day would not finish at a comparatively respectable hour like 11. At that hour it would only be working towards its real importance; the police raid was not timed to explode until midnight. For three weeks now we have been ascending from climax to climax – in the way that mountaineers keep on discovering fresh heights as up they climb. Surely, tonight's doings will make our final peak! If not, one shivers to think. What but the abyss could be beyond that!

The body of the day was made up of the same sort of ingredients as the couple which had gone before it. The duties of the Mission, now nearing its close, absorbed the energies of Fathers Mackey, Devane and Roche.

Tenant business again claimed our attention; looking for them, moving them in, furnishing for them. This process of home-building would ordinarily have been exhilarating, but anxiety hung around us like a fog, making us see everything in tones of its grey misery. I have already sufficiently described the wretched plight of these poor people. Now, at last, they were getting homes of their own. Could they keep them? If our plans went awry, they would have to bear their share of the disastrous rebound. Almost to a certainty they would be frozen out – no, scorched out would be more likely it! – by the victorious bad folk. But we did not worry overmuch on their account. Does it sound callous to say “why should we”? For should they not be ready, like any other settlers in new and hostile territory, to suffer and struggle and take their chance for a new life? Moreover, it was part of the mentality of the moment that we could not help regarding them as our troops, our garrison.

Though the trail of that day's adventuring wound in and out of Bentley Place, neither I nor any of the other Legionaries saw trace of the arch-rebels. That meant that they were keeping out of our way; which in turn indicated that they were holding out – either on last-ditch principles or in the delightful expectation that we would eventually bargain with them. If their thoughts were in this latter groove, it was a perfect case of the fool's paradise – out of which they would be ejected at 12 that night. In any event we did not seek them; and, even when circulating in their territory, we did not mention their names.

On moved that trying day. You know the phrase about living or sitting on a volcano? That was how we felt, and the tense, intolerable feeling did not grow less as the gap between ourselves and midnight shrank. Towards night, round about 7 o'clock, something happened which made that feeling look like a justified premonition. We got the tip from a well-informed quarter that some of the police themselves were out of sympathy with what was taking place; were hostile

particularly to the idea of the raid, and were not going to put any “gizz” into it, so that it might only turn out to be a wet squib. That suggestion shook us, terrified us; it dovetailed so naturally into the historic police attitude of fatalism in regard to Bentley Place. It would be absolutely dreadful if the raid were to go astray. Ever afterwards it would be argued that our cause had failed in spite of everything that could be done for it, in spite of the two years of superhuman effort down there, culminating in the mighty enterprise of recent weeks, backed finally by alleged drastic police action. Failure in spite of everything! Therefore, let no one even be so foolish as to try again! Can you not hear the grand chorus of the doubting Thomases: “We told you so. You cannot throw back the tide of human nature!”

When that distressing piece of information reached me, I hurried off to Father Creedon and I told him of it. Obviously there was but a single thing to do. We must see General Murphy and put him on his guard. But he was not so easy to find. His trail led us on quite a round. Finally, we ran him to earth at about 10 p.m. He was at a boxing tournament in Kevin Street police barracks. We took him from a ringside seat in the middle of a contest and we told him what we had heard. Well, I have seldom seen a more infuriated man. He brought us into an office where there was a telephone. He rang up and demanded that Superintendent Ennis be brought to the other end of the wire. Then someone, presumably the Superintendent, answered, and General Murphy said:

“That you, Ennis?”

“Yes” (presumably).

“Regarding this business which you have in hand tonight.”

“Yes” (presumably).

“I have just heard a firm rumor that there may be a mistake. Now in case there may be something in it, just get a grip on this and pass it on for those concerned to digest. If anything goes wrong tonight, there is going to be a little bit of hell knocking around. Degradations, I mean – and worse. Have you got that? Spread it about and keep your eye on things. That is all.”

The receiver was slapped down. Then he turned to us and said that he thought we might be reassured. We were. We parted from him. He returned to the boxing match. We went over to Sancta Maria.

There, all the girls had gone to bed, no doubt well tired after the long Retreat-day. It was the last day of the Retreat which had begun on Tuesday, the day of the great Close-Down. It had gone splendidly. Now all had been to Confession and everything was in readiness for the final Mass and Holy Communion on the following morning. Father Antonine, who was conducting the Retreat, had gone home to the Friary in Merchants’ Quay. But the staff was still up. They were Miss Plunkett and Miss Scratton, who lived in the Hostel, and Miss Condell and Miss Stallard, who used to come to stay during most of these Retreats. Probably there was someone else, but I cannot recall. It was the first free time they had

had all day. We joined them in a cup of tea and we refought the day – ours and theirs.

There was something in the Hostel atmosphere that helped one at a time of mental stress like this. Perhaps it was the sense of being in a stout ship in a storm. Or perhaps it was those fine women we were talking to. They radiated confidence. Women see things more directly than men. In the present case, they looked clean through the storm to God and rested in Him. Whereas our vision tended to be absorbed by the shocks and noises and the details of our efforts and plannings.

How we enjoyed that spell in Sancta Maria – notwithstanding the impending zero-hour! But we did not mention one word on this latter subject, even though there was now no possibility of any leak-back. At midnight, exactly, Father Creedon and I left the Hostel. Our ways lay together for a short distance. As we walked along, we knew that the raid was in full swing. What sort of scenes were being enacted at that moment in Bentley Place? We would learn that in the morning. In the meantime there was no purpose to be served by hanging around. When we came to the Cuffe Street corner of St. Stephen's Green, we separated and in suspense proceeded home.

But our suspense need not be inflicted on you. I am going to tell you now what happened.

At 12, precisely the raid began. It was expertly organized and carried through. There was no hitch and no misfire. An immense fleet of lorries suddenly arrived on the scene and a close cordon was thrown round the entire bad area. At a signal, many parties set to work to ransack the place. By the way, some shots went off – one being hurt by gunfire. Every room was entered; and every person was made to account for himself or herself. It will be appreciated that time could not be thrown away. If a door was not opened in a reasonable interval after demand, it was just pushed off its hinges, and the forces of the law poured in, so to speak, over its dead body.

Truculent and fighting ones were overpowered and unceremoniously bundled off to the waiting lorries. Some furniture and ornaments (of which many of the better equipped rooms had plenty) got broken in these scuffles. In all, a certain amount of damage was inevitably wrought. Of course, it was not merely the turbulent who were laid hold of. There was a general seizure of all those who could be deemed to be currently participating in the traffic. For instance, all the "girls" were gathered in – not alone those belonging to the area itself, but also such girls as had come there for the night. It was part of the system that a room could be hired for 10s. by visitors. Altogether the number of girls arrested was 45.

In addition, the men identified as "bullies" were brought along to the count of about a dozen.

Also, “gentlemen visitors” to the place were taken to the number of about 50.

Also, the “chiefs” were captured: that is, Betty Gray, “the Kitten” Carr, and their spokesman, Ned Curran.

It is creditable to those who carried through this exciting and, in part, violent enterprise that even in the wild confusion no innocent party (e.g., our “tenantry,” or persons attached to the “surrendered” houses, etc.) was hooked by mistake.

Imagine to yourself that scene – just as I have had to picture it for myself from what I have been told. Dead of night in every sense of the word; for in that whole place there were only a few ordinary gas standards (tonight supplemented by the moving points of light that indicated raiding parties) to relieve what the novelist would call the stygian gloom. Shouts of command and other sorts of shouting;; soul-stirring screaming; the sounds of conflict; the pounding of many feet on the cobbles and paths; the rending of wood; the crash of glass and kindred materials; people running, some in aimless panic and some endeavoring to find a loophole of escape. Even in the lurid history of that hectic region, it must have been a real red-letter night! It had everything, except that few (if any) were asleep at that hour, so that they were spared that worst of thrills – the coming out of sleep into chaos all round.

Eventually the last room was searched, the last alley-way and out-building probed. The round-up was complete. The lorry-loads of guards and guarded were driven off to the Bridewell, the departing convoy being followed by the heartfelt curses of the entire locality. Hatred of the police formed common ground for everyone, the majority of our “tenantry” not excepted. These latter would have been leading the miscellaneous types of existence which would cause a quiet but permanent friction with “the law.” Perhaps it was this kinship of feeling which saved the settlers from unpleasant things that night. They were not molested when the police withdrew, leaving none of their men on the scene.

The big raid was over.

It was all in the papers in the morning. The event had scare headings, such as “Mystery Raid on City’s Black Spot.” The general view taken was that its purpose was political – i.e., an effort to capture prominent figures who were “on the run” and believed to be sheltering down there. Let me remind you that all this was in the “troubled” period. No one thought of taking the occurrence at its face and real value – that is, a simple clean-up.

Rumor ran absolutely riot on the subject of the gentlemen visitors who had been taken in the net. Word went round like lightning that some very well-known persons were involved. Every Tom, Dick and Harry in the train or at the street corner would tell you the names of at least a couple of notabilities who had been

trapped there. As a matter of fact, however, some of us went through the actual names, and there were no personages implicated at all.

We had previously arranged with the Chief Commissioner that we would go down to the Bridewell on Friday morning and be given every facility to see the girls. So, on that morning, Father Mackey and I presented ourselves at that grim building. We were at once admitted to the cells. We did not advertise the fact that we had any responsibility for the raid. In fact, the morning paper under Father Mackey's arm half-suggested that we had derived from it our first knowledge of the affair. But I am sure – in fact, I know – that in the minds of all we were given our full credit, or debit, for what had taken place.

We went from cell to cell, in each of which were a number of girls. There was great congestion. The Bridewell was evidently not meant to cope with such a haul. In each cell we spoke to the girls in bulk, and then had a few words with them individually. The appeal was renewed which had already been frequently addressed to most of them – hundreds of times to more than a few of them. Some declared outright that they were going to Sancta Maria when they were let out.

Among those in one cell was Betty Gray, and in another Mrs. Carr. The latter was her queer, sardonic self, quite unruffled by her ordeal. But Betty was in the lowest depths of woe, bedraggled and weeping. From her appearance one would judge that she had spent the night in tears. Probably she had. Despite her inhuman means of livelihood, Betty was a soft, good-natured woman.

As we went through, we told the girls that we would intercede for them and try to get them out. When we had finished all the cells, we went to a telephone, rang up General Murphy, and suggested that the girls might be let out at once. He recognized that this would help our position, and he gave orders for their immediate release. This was done. As each girl was being restored to liberty, the police gave her a letter of introduction to Sancta Maria. This was an idea of their own.

During that day 15 of those girls, in ones and twos, presented themselves at the Hostel. This was a large influx, equal in number to the party which had come in from Bentley Place on Tuesday, and which had that Friday morning concluded its Retreat. It had always been our practice to hold a Retreat whenever we could muster about a dozen newcomers. Now we had that quota, and in consequence a novel step was forced upon us. It was decided that a Retreat for those newcomers should begin that night and continue until Monday morning. Father Antonine, O.F.M., who had just finished up the first Retreat, volunteered to give this new one. This was more than generous; it was heroic. For, to conduct – or even to help in – one of those Retreats was an exhausting experience. This was due to the nervy condition of the girls, and also to the lack of grounds, and hence of fresh aid. To the normal problems this Retreat would add the abnormal one of

carrying through the program in due order for the fresh continent, with the balance of the population not on Retreat. We would not have thought it possible to do, but now we found ourselves tackling it.

That night the new party began their retreat. The supplementary team of Legionaries who had stayed in the Hostel to assist the “regulars” and who would ordinarily return home that day, had to reconcile themselves to a prolongation of their strenuous exertions.

28. Bentley Place Revisited

I must now go back, for things had been happening. Bentley Place had worked itself up into a boiling fury. At first, no doubt, the denizens were somewhat stunned by the vehemence and the utter unexpectedness of the police onslaught. Moreover, though not so many would have gone to be at all that night, the darkness rendered it difficult to get a complete picture of the effects of the raid, including the "missing." But a few hours of daylight and a general, enraged discussion had given Bentley Place a full conspectus of the catastrophe.

"Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."

- shriek the witches in their unholy chorus in "Macbeth." You could apply that to Bentley Place; though it is certain that "double, double" would not measure the intensity of the seething down there. They vowed vengeance, and they looked for a victim. And we were it! They realized their powerlessness against the Police (apart from the fact that the latter would not be there) and we would do for scapegoat. By the way, in saying "scapegoat," I do not mean to suggest that we were innocent. We were very guilty. We knew it. You know it. Bentley Place knew it and was in a fine rolling frenzy over it. All the sort of popularity which we had hitherto enjoyed down there had vanished, and in its place was nothing but the desire to do us harm.

We were not left long in ignorance of their intentions. Almost as soon as I got away from the Bridewell, I was sought out by a great friend of ours, Tom Greene. He had been asked by friendly people from the Bentley Place area to try to find me and to let me know what was brewing. What was reported looked ugly enough. To put it in the vernacular, they were going "to do us in" the next time we entered there. Tom Greene was a man of unusually affectionate nature. His likes were strong ones. He was quite pathetically upset at this prospect of our coming to grief.

Following on Mr. Greene, the same tidings trickled in by other channels. And in each case urgent appeal was made that we should not go down there while the present temper lasted.

But a special complication existed. Every Friday, for two years past, Bentley Place had been visited. In and around Retreat times we would go there frequently, even daily. But Friday nights and Sunday mornings were the standard and invariable occasions. To stay away at any other time would not cause comment. Absence on Friday would ... and this was Friday. What was to be done?

This provided a real problem, because the two courses which presented themselves to the choice were reasonable. It could be argued that the victory had been won; that now there was nothing to be gained by courting trouble; that it would be best from every point of view to stand away from the volcano until it would subside. A few days at most would effect this; violent storms are short. Then we could move back in, and see to the consolidation of our position.

Definitely a sensible way of acting: But was it the *most* sensible? Of course it is wise to stand off from a volcano, because one can do nothing to stop it. Was that the position in Bentley Place? Had not the outbreak there more the character of a conflagration, and the latter is not left to itself.

What is to be done? Obviously the settling of this vital issue should not be left to the mere ebb and flow of plausible arguments, but should, in the accepted Legionary fashion, be referred to the Commander of our enterprise, the Mother of all those souls who were implicated. And how referred to her? By considering it at an ordinary Praesidium meeting, if possible. If that is out of the question, then by an approximation to it, i.e., by bringing together as many as possible of the Legionaries concerned, and then looking at the question through Legionary glass.

This was done. Father Creedon, Father Toher, and some of the other chief Sancta Maria figures were hurriedly brought together and the situation was viewed in the light of Legionary principles. It forms an interesting commentary on the Legion method that the decision, which had eluded the more individual searchings, was practically instantaneous. It was of course an awful responsibility to plunge women Legionaries into that seething pot. But there was a great deal at stake. It was thought that never would the area need our attention and presence more than in the next few molten days; that these would be the time of moulding. If, during them, things went wrong, it might be impossible to give them right shape again. Moreover, the mainspring of the two-year campaign had been disregard of alleged danger. Why switch to caution at the time when courage is most needed? Much of the immunity enjoyed by the Legionaries was directly due to respect inspired by their confident bearing. If the denizens found that they had our measure, might they not be encouraged to exclude us for the future? Furthermore, what was happening to our poor garrison? They had a claim on us; we could not leave them to their fate. The decision was automatically come to. The usual Friday night visitation would take place.

The minimum team for the Friday was three, that is two women Legionaries and myself. It was judged well not to add to that number. If we were to give the impression that we were seeking to protect ourselves, it would exercise a provocative effect.

There was another important point. The Legionaries who would keep the appointment that night would know little or nothing of what they would be walking into. They would of course have seen the newspaper accounts of the raid, but they would not be aware of the fierce reaction which it had provoked, and which menaced *them*. Menace is the word. Let there be no mistake about it; those Legionaries would be entering into very real peril, perhaps of their lives. They had not originally volunteered for that, and perhaps they would not be in a position to run the risk. They or their families might have other ideas. Therefore they must be given the chance of backing out if they so desired.

I was commissioned to get together as many Legionaries as possible, to explain to them the situation as it stood, and to mobilize a new team if necessary. The opportunity of doing this was available. Every Friday night many of the Legionaries visiting in the Pro-Cathedral parish used to meet at 7:30 on the steps of the Church, drop in for a prayer, then form their teams and go off on their work. Our team would be in that group.

Before half-past seven, I was on the step and as each Legionary arrived I asked her to wait for the little consultation. They said their prayers and a substantial gathering took place on the portico. It numbered 16 and myself. Could anybody looking on have imagined the subject-matter of that conference? Nobody could.

I spoke to them and told them what had happened, and of the fury which was being directed at our heads. I did not seek to minimize the danger, for the object of the conference was to open everybody's eyes. It must not be said subsequently that Legionaries were launched into trouble without knowing what they were about. I made it plain how big that trouble was; that we were now up against nature in the raw, and that absolutely anything could happen. I insisted that those who went could count themselves as lucky if they escaped with a savage beating; and that it could happen that they would be killed. I also explained that all the aspects had been considered that afternoon and that it had been decided that the visitation must take place; that otherwise we ran the risk of losing all that we had struggled for. I then informed them that they had been assembled to produce two volunteers who would face those things.

Imagine the scene. Think of all those nice young girls presented with such a situation. It must have seemed appalling to them, a little like the end of the world! And note that in my presentation there was no emotional appeal. The facts were given to them, in dry words and their choice was not swayed.

The result? It was the unbelievable one that every girl there raised her hand in acceptance. It was the martyr's gesture, for that is what they thought they were taking on. I was aware of the material we had in the Legion and of the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in that material. Yet I stood breathless at the response of the sixteen. ALL OF THEM!

Quickly however came emphatic objection. It was from the two whose normal turn of duty it was to visit Bentley Place that Friday evening. They challenged the proceedings. No one was coming in on their work. They had been assigned to it. It was theirs and they were going to do it. That settled the matter!

The three of us moved off. As we drew close to the spot, we sensed the electricity in the air. People were eyeing us; they were expecting something to happen. Some brushed up against us and urged us not to “go down there”; “there was going to be trouble.” But we held on our course, and I have to say it: serenely enough.

We felt the tension, but I do not think that we could say we were afraid. This made you understand how strong you can be if the right array of motives grips you. The Legion undoubtedly marshals quite a force of substantial motives, and those bear down the weaker thoughts. There is little that cannot be assayed if the call be high enough and the Legionary system properly applied.

The very last warning we received had an element of the comic in it. It came just before we took the fatal right-hand turn which would bring us over the dividing line. A kindly woman begged us to go no further: “Mrs. Puzzler Hamilton was waiting round the corner to split us.” Let me explain that Mrs. Puzzler was inflamed because her husband, who was a “bully” had shown resistance to the police in the raid, had sustained some injuries, and had been “gathered in.” His loyal wife was thirsting for revenge.

Notwithstanding that, we went ahead. And there was the lady; she came to meet us in the manner of one screwing herself up to an unpleasant task which had to be done. She was not a bad creature. We had always been on sociable terms with her. It is to be wondered whether in any circumstances she would have proceeded to the promised “splitting” operation. But we anticipated that by joking her about her new-found freedom. She was pleased to be amused and that particular danger was tided over. From what quarter would it present itself next? Come it had to, as was only too plain from the attitude and resentful looks of the crowd which had converged on us. It only needed the throwing of a stone, or the showing up against us, to set off a discharge of hate which might end us. Do not think too badly of them for that. As they saw things, we had betrayed them.

We were not left waiting long. What happened was of an unexpected character. A young girl, of about twenty, came running up from the far end of the street. She was in a frenzy, and her long hair was unloosed and streaming about her. She was not a streetgirl. She was the eldest daughter of Betty Gray. She was an anomaly, for she was living in a brothel and yet was good. I have previously mentioned her mother’s anxiety on her account as forming a reason for Betty’s willingness to close down her “houses.”

Now that normally well-conducted girl was a fury. At first we thought she was going to throw herself upon us to rend us. But for the moment she contented herself by inhuman screaming and shaking her fists at us. She was like a possessed person. Suddenly she hurled herself upon her knees, and, raising her hands to Heaven, she invoked curses upon us for – as she said – taking away her mother from her children. A little of this went a long way. The episode was so unpleasant to look upon – even for Bentley Place which was used to everything – that almost at once people came over, took hold of her, and dragged her off home. She was literally foaming at the mouth like one in a fit.

The happening was extraordinary; it was Providential. That harmless ferment was a safety-valve averting the explosion of violence which was otherwise inevitable. Everybody had enough of that sort of performance. Destructiveness had released itself to mere sound. It is an interesting thought that our safety had come through one of the not many sinless elements living in that place. It looks as if our Blessed Protectress was working through the best that she could find there!

The transformation was complete. We were restored to favor. Having revoked their vow of vengeance the Bentley Place folk were back to normal. Thus close are the extremes, peace and war; a hair's breadth separates them!

From that moment we were on the job as usual, but conscious of victory and added power. We moved about in our customary way, chatting with everyone, soothing those who had been sufferers in the raid, seeking out the girls who had not yet made any move to Sancta Maria. We encountered a number of our "garrison." The more respectable ones had been badly shaken by their unexpected ordeal of the night; the less respectable ones were philosophic.

So strange are the contradictions in human nature that our evening was the most pleasant that we ever had there. Every trace of anger was gone and all gave signs of the softening effects of the tremendous spiritual onslaught to which they had been subjected for the last three weeks. A new spirit had entered into Bentley Place.

I do not suggest that the place looked like a bombardment, but all about were relics of the raid. Some doors and windows were broken, and inside some houses there was minor damage. It was evident that there had been a fair amount of resistance and scuffling. We found that No. 6 Bentley Place, one of the brothels, was still open and we urged that it be closed, which was done – amazing to relate.

We aimed at getting around rather than at our usual tactics of giving time to individuals, and I doubt if ever before we covered so much ground in a single evening there. We must have been through the entire area and have had at least a few words with a big proportion of the population. And we stayed there

much later than usual. It was 11:20 when we left, and then it was in joy and triumph. During our rounds we had found four of the girls willing to go to Sancta Maria. We got a taxi and the seven of us packed into it. Off we drove to the Hostel, the last sound in our ears being the expressions of goodwill voiced by that incredible place.

Our four captures were not in time for the beginning of Retreat No. 2 which had opened that evening, but they were there for the remainder of it. It will be recalled that Retreat No. 1 had opened on Tuesday; Retreat No. 2 on Friday for those who had presented themselves subsequently. Now near midnight, we brought in four more! And that was not the end. During Saturday and Sunday additional girls kept drifting in to the number of at least a dozen. The degree of compression which had to be effected to house all these was extreme and indescribable. Fifty persons were made to fit into accommodation which would normally be proper to about twenty-two. Mattresses were laid even on the landings. But the note of spiritual adventure was high and that made all the difference. There was no grumbling. Probably the grave inconvenience added to the effect of the Retreat.

To cater for the girls who came much too late for Retreat No. 2, the expedient was resorted to of starting a third one on the day the second one concluded. Father Fidelis, O.F.M. gave this Retreat, Father Antonine having reached the stage of physical exhaustion. It terminated on Thursday morning, and with it the greatest emergency period in the history of Sancta Maria. Every girl in the Hostel had now been to Confession and Holy Communion. Weariness was compensated by happiness.

In the meantime what was happening in regard to those who had been seized in the Raid? The girls, as said, were all released on Friday. The "gentlemen visitors" were held over for another day and then allowed out. The Bullies were discharged next. Then emerged Ned Curran whose status was indefinite.

There remained Betty Gray and Kitten Carr. The course to be followed seemed to be clear enough in their case and the State decided to prosecute on the charges of brothel-keeping. These cases helped to write history. They terminated the old order of an "intolerable situation" and ushered in a new, consistent one. A standing incitement to vice of every kind was removed. The system was abolished whereby the simple desire for a drink outside licensing hours sent multitudes of men down into that moral spider's web. All that hundred years of horror was now served legal notice to quit.

The outcome of the prosecutions was interesting. It almost, though not quite, amounted to the innocent being punished and the guilty going free. Poor Betty was misguided enough to enter the witness box and give evidence on her own behalf. She incriminated herself in every sentence she uttered, and she was sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

The Kitten was better advised. She kept far from the witness box. She left it to the lawyers to wrangle about her case. This was done so expertly that this notorious brothel-keeper got off on a technicality. So the better of the two went to prison; and that the other little personage, who was as inscrutable in character as she was peculiar in appearance, went free. It would have been better for her if she had sustained some punishment, which would have given us the chance of influencing her. But that was not to be. On her release, she vanished. It was believed she went to Belfast, but no one in our circle ever heard of her again. Her final history was in keeping with everything about her – a mystery!

Betty Gray spent her few months in prison where she frequented the Sacraments. She did the same when she came out. Her little shop did well enough to support her and her family. I wish I could complete the picture by telling you about her three daughters, including the eldest one, who, without intending it, saved us from disaster that Friday night. But I do not know their after-history. Having regard to the fact that they had kept themselves clean even in that cesspool, and to the further fact that Betty set herself to goodness in a satisfactory way, we can, I think, believe that they did very well.

I have previously likened Mrs. Curley to the exalted case of Zacchaeus. She provides a sensational case of conversion. She hurried to the Sacraments and was devotedly attentive to them ever afterwards. Years later, I went to see her about something. She gave me happy account of her circumstances. Incidentally she was regretful because her eldest son, Jack – already referred to – was not in the local Confraternity, as all her other children were. But this does not mean that Jack was bad; he was not. He followed up the racecourses, which was not so easy to fit in with Confraternity membership.

As for Ned Curran, the seeds of death were in him at that time. They grew rapidly after that. He had gone to the Sacraments as soon as he could, and his end was edifying. He received Holy Communion each day of the nine which preceded his death.

Truly, the Shepherd is Good! Think of all that ghastly whirlpool of iniquity that we have been describing, and see the untiring way in which through His agents and His sheep-dogs He has followed up those weak elements, and “from the mire in patient length of days, elaborated unto life a people to His praise.” The bosses, the bullies, the girls, the hangers-on: all of them the object of His unconquerable love, and all of them capitulating in the end of that love! Let us hope that He finally found out the one we missed – I mean the Kitten.

29. The Standard of Christ the King

I have to retrace my steps now. I have to get back to Sunday. That was the day of the closing of the Mission. It had been a surprising success. A multitude had been caught up in its life-giving operations. But great though it was, it was far less than the epochal event which paralleled it and to some extent formed part of it: the end of Bentley Place. Now each was to have its final ceremonies. In the Pro-Cathedral there would be the densely packed Masses and the vast numbers at Holy Communion; and in the evening the formal closing of the Mission.

And in Bentley Place? It too would celebrate its conversion. It had been arranged that a solemn blessing of the area would take place on Sunday forenoon. Word had been circulated to that effect, and the dwellers were exhorted to be present. They came – an immense throng, packing the actual streets and the approaches. Many must have come from outside.

The three Missioners proceeded to the central spot in due style, accompanied by a cross-bearer and other acolytes with candles and holy water. They made a procession through the special streets. Every house was blessed, and on the door of each one which had been a brothel, we nailed a picture of the Sacred Heart. Progress was difficult by reason of the crowding. At last the blessing was all done. We moved towards a conjunction of the streets, where many could see and hear. It was bordered by a very high wall which had separated that sad district from a neighboring housing scheme. A table was placed against that wall and on the table, a chair. It fell to my lot to climb up on that chair, to drive a spike into the wall as high as I could stretch, and on that spike to hang a huge Crucifix.

Then Father Mackey mounted the table and delivered to the crowd a most beautiful discourse on the Seven Last Words from the Cross. Then he added an appeal to the residents to preserve what had been accomplished, to keep the place clean for themselves and for their children. The simple ceremonial was impressive and deeply moved the weird multitude which witnessed it. Then the crowd relaxed and gradually dispersed.

The Crucifix was to hang on that wall for many years until the physical existence of those streets would be terminated by a building scheme. The crucifix itself we hold as a souvenir.

In the evening some of the Legionaries visited the area. It was totally different from what it had been. Here I do not refer to the moral transfiguration of the people there, but to the startling, unquestionable change in atmosphere of the place itself. Long ago in this narrative I spoke of the uncanny sense of darkness and of the sinister which always abided down there. It was not a matter of ordinary light-or-darkness, for the sun shone over Bentley Place as richly as it did elsewhere, and the houses were not high. Neither was it an effect of nerves

or acute imagining. For usually it takes but little time to accustom ourselves to anything. But not here. One did not become used to that place. Look into a hallway and it always seemed like a cavern to you, even though you knew every crevice of the house, and every person in it. You had the feeling of something lurking there. Suddenly all that disappeared. It went with the evil itself. That Sunday finished it. It was not felt that evening when we dropped in and did our circulating. Nor was it ever felt by us again.

During the ensuing week another thing that had been arranged for took effect. A new Conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society was established for the visiting and relieving of distress in the area. It was the first time in history that Bentley Place was visited by that Society. St. Gerard's Conference fulfilled a vital role, for naturally the departure of the old industry entailed plenty of financial complications for the residents. Most effectively did the Conference tide the neighborhood through the period of readjustment.

The operation of supplying tenants for the accommodation went on apace and within a day or two there was not an empty room. The store of furniture at our disposal proved sufficient. No other difficulty arose.

The newcomers acclimatized themselves with unexpected ease. But it was part of our plan to lavish intensive care on that territory, based on the idea of paying a little visit every week to everyone. Later on, the area had its own special Praesidium, called Porta Coeli, which did a magnificent job, and was so blessed in every way that in time it produced nearly a dozen Praesidia.

Legends do not die, or at least they die with prodigious difficulty. You will remember that slogan of despair: "Do not scatter the evil." Did we scatter the evil?

The following is typical of other episodes of the kind. Within a week a "solid citizen" approached me in reference to the happenings in Bentley Place. "In spite of incidental good," he said, "it was a fatal policy to do these things, because the effect has already been that of scattering the evil over the city." To me this was as the proverbial red rag is to the bull, and I demanded of him: "Where had it spread to?" "Oh, Drumcondra – it is up in Drumcondra." "Where in Drumcondra?" "Well, I am not exactly sure." In actual fact he had not even the remotest idea. He was simply repeating what he had heard from the lips of someone else as well informed as he.

At that stage I spoke to him as kindly as I could and besought him not to be the carrier of lethal statements of the kind until he had personally satisfied himself as to their accuracy. I assured him that he would be unable to produce a single case of a brothel started by anyone from that area, or even the case of one girl transferring to other than the street girls' lodging-houses. There were a few girls whom we did not get in the clearing-up and who went to those lodging-houses.

That sort of irresponsible talk was quite common for a little while, and then it faded and was heard no more. That legend was one which had to die for want of breath to sustain it! You see, we were not in the position of people dealing with an undefined situation. At an earlier stage than the final one, we had come to know our problem down to its ultimate detail. In fact we knew every person who composed that problem. We knew each individual girl in that citadel, and we were able to account for her after its breakdown. Those who did not come to Sancta Maria drifted to the low lodging-houses which were all being visited by the Legionaries. Transfer from Bentley Place only exempted a girl from the attentions of one lot of Legionaries to put her into the hands of another lot.

Another variant of the cry was that the neighborhood continued on just as bad as ever it had been. One disproof of this was the entry of the St. Vincent de Paul Society into the area; it would not have gone in if the evil had remained there. Our own detailed visitation, which brought the Legionaries into every house weekly, was another assurance to the contrary. The fact was that the place got better instead of worse as time went on; there was a growth in spirituality.

But the final rebuttal of that suggestion lies in the following. Years after the clean-up, we saw a Corporation advertisement of a forthcoming housing scheme clearance, and we noted that Bentley Place came into its scope. That got our minds working. So long as the area was in existence, one could always refute that allegation of continued corruption by bringing responsible persons methodically through the houses and establishing the behavior of each individual. But once the houses were physically gone, that could not be done, and the door was open for the possible recreation of the legend.

Therefore it was important that something should immediately be done to determine the true position and to put it on record in an unassailable way. We wrote to General Murphy drawing his attention to the Corporation scheme and explained the misgivings which had come to us in connection with it. We suggested that no one was so favorably placed as he for the ascertaining and the permanent safeguarding of the truth. By a police enquiry he could establish the present status of the locality. Then the facts would be officially recorded and would be there forever.

That fine man saw the logic of this and ordered the investigation. In due course we were sent a certificate giving the place a clean bill of health. It stated that the only items of defect were (a) that a couple of the former residents were making efforts to find a lodging there which could be dangerous; and (b) that there was a small amount of shebeening (which is the unlicensed sale of liquor).

As to those defects which, it will be seen, are minor ones: (a) no girl succeeded in establishing herself in that locality; (b) the police report specified Becky Cooper of 9 Railway Street as the arch-culprit of the shebeening, and it is to be noted that Railway Street lay outside the territorial limits of Bentley Place as I have

defined them in this narrative. Beckey Cooper was an ancient institution and was destined to continue as such until the Lord called her.

Soon after the investigation, the demolition of the area took place. Not all the levelled surface was devoted to the building of new flats. You will recall the Good Shepherd Convent which lay close to Bentley Place, so close that the Missioners came through the Convent into Mrs. Curley's house for the holding of the two mass-meetings of the girls. The grounds available for its large population were hardly better than a big yard. The Corporation therefore assigned some of the adjacent space to the Convent, probably half of the territory occupied by Bentley Place. What a significant spoilation of the Devil is represented by that Providential maneuver. It forms what we may call a "structural" fulfillment of one of the Legionary aims as expressed in the Handbook, i.e., "to destroy the empire of sin, uproot its foundations, and plant on its ruins the standard of Christ the King."

On that ground taken over by the Convent stood Mrs. Curley's modest three-storied house. The Nuns' Contractor took the leveled site in hand and proceeded to the task of incorporating it in the Convent. Soon he reported to the Nuns that the under-structure of the house was extraordinary formidable, completely out of keeping with the house itself. He wanted to know if there was originally an extensive range of wine or other cellars!! This was only told to me by the Nuns at a time considerably later. In sorrow I exclaimed to them that they should have thought of sending for me; that this discovery was a primary one, something for which I had been looking unsuccessfully during the whole period of our campaign. Let me explain.

Early after our entry into the area, we had become convinced that somewhere there must be a system of underground passages and secret rooms. In the past the place had the reputation of receiving distinguished persons as "visitors." These would never show themselves in the ordinary rooms and streets of the place. They would too easily lay themselves open to blackmail and to being trapped in a police raid. There *must be* some hidden accommodation and way of escape. As I say, I was always looking for it, but could never discern any trace.

It does look as if the contractor turned up the shattered remains of such a system. It would have completed the writing of a strange chapter to have photographed those remains, but that was not to be.

Epilogue

Now I must conclude the epic of Bentley Place. I do so by setting it in what appears to me to be its due perspective, that is, among the classic manifestations of the Christian era.

I say that it may fairly be accounted a total success. Kitten Carr and a few of the girls escaped us. But overwhelming impact must have been made on them by the spiritual siege of those two years. So wholesale, moreover, was the conquest of souls that one feels that no one there could in the end escape the Lord's healing touch. That passage in Scripture comes to the mind where it is told that the sick were brought to Jesus and that He healed every one of them.

And what of that other Biblical cameo where the Apostolic net was so filled with great fishes that it could not hold another one?

The doings of the Mystical Body reproduce Our Lord's earthly actions. Why then, cannot we expect that each new day will project into our midst some stupendous replica of those earthly wonders done by him?

Could it not be that He wished to show what could be done in a desperate situation by people, weak in themselves, who take Him at His word in regard to the value of souls, who believe strongly and are not afraid, and who work in union with His Mother and under her name? Perhaps He wanted, through the actions of those persons, to write a veritable religious romance which would stir pulses and make people turn to Him. If that was His idea, He would necessarily have to do it on a noble scale, in an ultra-striking way, leaving no loop-hole which could be exploited by the doubting Thomases to the point of reducing the romance to tatters. In that supposition, Jesus, Our Love, and Mary, our Mother, would have to cause the tide of events in Bentley Place to run such as it did run.