

# The War of the Saints

All of a sudden – while St Rocco was going quietly along the street, under his canopy, with all the dogs on leads, and a large number of candles lit all round, and the band, the procession, and the crowd of devotees – there was a turmoil, a stampede, a rumpus: priests dashing off with their cassocks in the air, and with trumpets and clarinets in their faces, women shrieking, blood flowing in streams, and blows from sticks raining down like overripe pears, right under the nose of the blessed St Rocco. The magistrate, the mayor, the *carabinieri* rushed to the spot. The broken bones were taken to hospital, the worst rioters went to spend the night in gaol, the saint returned to the church (at a run rather than at the slow pace of a procession), and the feast ended up like a Punch and Judy show.

That all came from the envy of those who lived in the parish of St Pascal. That year the devotees of St Rocco had spent an arm and a leg to do things in a big way. The band had come from the city, they had set off more than two thousand fire-crackers, and there was even a new banner, all embroidered with gold, weighing more than a hundred kilograms, so they said, and which in the middle of the crowd looked exactly like ‘a foam of gold’. All this must have annoyed the parishioners of St Pascal dreadfully, so that in the end one of them lost all patience and started to howl, turning deathly pale, ‘Long live St Pascal!’ And that was when the first blows were struck.

Because to go and say ‘Long live St Pascal!’ right in the face of St Rocco in person is a flagrant provocation. It is like spitting in someone’s house, or like someone amusing himself by pinching the woman whom you have on your arm. In such circumstances there are no Christs or devils any more, and

you trample underfoot what little respect you do have for other saints (since they are ultimately all related to one another). If you are in church, the benches go flying through the air, in processions bits of candles rain down like bats, and at home soup plates fly around.

‘Hell’s teeth!’ yelled Nino, black and blue all over. ‘I’d like to see who’s got the guts to shout “long live St Pascal” just once more!’

‘That’s me!’ was the furious reply from Turi, ‘the tanner’, who was shortly to be Nino’s brother-in-law, and was beside himself from a blow which had landed on him in the brawl and which had left him half-blind. ‘Long live St Pascal for ever!’

‘For the love of God! For the love of God!’ screamed Turi’s sister Saridda, rushing between her brother and her fiancé, for all three of them had been walking in love and friendship until that very moment.

Nino, the fiancé, was bawling mockingly, ‘Long live my boots! Long live St Boot!’

‘What the hell!’ yelled Turi, with foam round his mouth, and his eye swollen and livid like an aubergine. ‘To hell with St Rocco and you and your boots! Take that!’

So they exchanged blows that would have felled an ox, until their friends by dint of blows and kicks managed to separate them. Saridda, who had become angry too, was screaming ‘Long live St Pascal’, and it would not have taken much for the engaged pair to have started slapping each other, as if they were already man and wife.

On occasions like, this parents and children come to blows, and wives leave their husbands, if someone from the parish of St Pascal has had the misfortune to marry someone from the parish of St Rocco.

‘I don’t want to hear that fellow’s name ever again!’ yelled

Saridda, with her hands on her hips, to her neighbours who were asking her why her marriage had gone up in smoke. 'Not even if they give him to me dressed in gold and silver. No!'

'Saridda can rot as far as I'm concerned!' said Nino for his part, while they were at the inn washing his face which was covered in blood. 'They're a bunch of tramps and cowards in that parish of tanners! I must have been sozzled when it came into my head to go and look for a sweetheart there.'

'Since this is the way it is,' concluded the mayor, 'and you can't carry a saint through the square without coming to blows, till it's like a beargarden, I want no more feast-days, no more forty-hour devotions, and if they show me one little candle, I'll send them all to gaol.'

It had all come to this because the diocesan bishop had granted the privilege of wearing the mozzetta to the priests of St Pascal. The parishioners of St Rocco, whose priests did not have the mozzetta, had even gone to Rome to kick up a fuss at the feet of the Holy Father, with their hands full of documents on stamped paper, and all the rest. But it had all been in vain, because their adversaries in the lower parish, whom everybody could remember without any shoes on their feet, had become as rich as lords with the new tanning industry, and we all know that in this world justice is bought and sold like the soul of Judas.

At St Pascal's they were expecting the monsignor's delegate, who was a resolute man, with two silver buckles weighing half a pound each on his shoes (so they said who had seen him), and was coming to bring the mozzetta for the canons. So they, for their part, had brought along the band to go to meet the monsignor's delegate three miles outside the village, and it was said that in the evening there would be fireworks in the square, and the words 'Long live St Pascal' in big letters.

And so the parishioners of St Rocco were in a great ferment, and some of them, the most excited, were stripping the bark off cudgels of pear- and cherrywood, as big as poles, and muttering, 'If there has to be music, then you've got to carry something to beat the time with!'

The bishop's delegate ran a great risk of ending up after his triumphal entry with some broken bones. But the reverend gentleman, who was no fool, left the band waiting for him outside the village, and on foot, by various short cuts, he came quietly to the presbytery, where he called a meeting of the ringleaders of the two parties.

When those fine fellows found themselves face to face, after having been at odds for such a long time, they looked each other straight in the eye, as if they felt a great desire to tear those eyes out, and it took all the authority of the reverend gentleman, who was wearing a new cloth cape for the occasion, to get the ice-cream and the other refreshments served without causing any disturbance.

'This is how it should be!' said the mayor, with his nose buried in a glass. 'When they want me to help make peace, they'll always find me here.'

The delegate said that in fact he had come as a conciliator, bearing an olive branch, like Noah's dove, and he gave them a pep talk and went round distributing smiles and handshakes, and he kept on saying, 'You gentleman must do me the favour of drinking a glass of chocolate with me in the sacristy on the feast-day.'

'Let's leave the feast-day out of it,' said the assistant magistrate, 'or there'll be more trouble.'

'You get trouble when there's all this overbearing behaviour, and a fellow isn't allowed to make his own amusements any more, spending his own money!' exclaimed

Bruno the wheelwright.

‘I wash my hands of it. The orders from the government are precise. If you celebrate the feast, I’ll send for the *carabinieri*. I want everything in good order.’

‘I’ll answer for good order!’ announced the mayor, beating on the ground with his umbrella and casting his eyes round.

‘That’s great! As if we didn’t know that it’s your brother-in-law Bruno who tells you what to think!’ the assistant magistrate put in once more.

‘And you’re putting yourself into opposition out of spite, because you resent that fine for the washing which you just can’t stomach!’

‘Gentlemen! Gentlemen!’ the delegate kept on exhorting them. ‘We won’t achieve anything by this!’

‘We’ll have a revolution, we will!’ shouted Bruno, with his hands in the air.

Fortunately the parish priest had quickly put the cups and glasses in a safe place, and the sacristan had run off at breakneck speed to dismiss the band which, having learnt of the delegate’s arrival, were rushing up to welcome him, blowing their cornets and clarinets.

‘We won’t achieve anything by this!’ grumbled the delegate, annoyed because the harvest was already ripe in his part of the world, while he had to waste his time with Bruno and the assistant magistrate, who were at daggers drawn. ‘What’s all this business about a fine for washing?’

‘The usual bullying. You can’t hang a handkerchief out of the window to dry now, without them hitting you with a fine. The wife of the assistant magistrate, relying on her husband’s status (there always used to be some respect for authority), used to dry all her week’s washing on the terrace, you know... a little thing, for God’s sake... But now, with this new law, it’s a

mortal sin, and even dogs and hens are prohibited, and other animals which, with all due respect, up to now have kept the streets clean. And the first time it rains, it'll only be by the grace of God if we don't all drown in filth. The truth of the matter is that Councillor Bruno has it in for the assistant magistrate for giving a certain decision against him.'

The delegate, to reconcile these people, remained tied to the confessional, roosting like an owl, from morning to evening, and all the women wanted to be confessed by the bishop's representative, who had plenary absolution for every kind of sin, as if he had been the monsignor himself.

'Father!' said Saridda, with her nose pressed against the grille in the confessional. 'Every Sunday Nino makes me sin in church.'

'How, my child?'

'That fellow was going to be my husband, before all this talk in the village, but now that the engagement is broken off, he places himself by the high altar, to look at me and laugh with all his friends right through the Mass.'

And when the reverend tried to touch Nino's heart:

'She's the one who turns her back on me when she sees me, as if I was a beggar,' responded the peasant.

However, he was the one who, if Saridda was crossing over the square on a Sunday, pretended to be deep in conversation with the sergeant-major of the *carabinieri*, or some other big cheese, and not even to notice her. Or else Saridda was much occupied making little lanterns out of coloured paper, and arranging them along the window, right in front of his ugly mug, pretending she was putting them there to dry. On one occasion, when they found themselves together at a baptism, they did not even say hello, as if they had never seen each other before, and in fact Saridda flirted with the baby's godfather.

‘Lousy godfather!’ sneered Nino. ‘Godfather to a girl! When a girl is born even the rafters in the roof break up.’

And Saridda, pretending to be speaking to the new mother:

‘It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Sometimes, when you think you’ve lost a treasure, you find that you ought to thank God and St Pascal for it. Because you don’t really know anyone until it comes to the crunch.’

Or again:

‘You’ve got to take things as they come, and the worst thing is to get annoyed over things that aren’t worth the trouble. When one pope dies, we get another.’

Or again:

‘Babies are born just as destiny decides, just like marriages. Because it’s better to marry someone who truly loves you, and has no ulterior motive, even if he has nothing, no land, no mules, nothing.’

The drum sounded in the square, the muffled drum. ‘The mayor says there’ll be a feast-day,’ whispered the crowd.

‘I’ll fight till kingdom come! I’ll spend everything I’ve got till I’m left with nothing but my shirt like the blessed Job. But I will not pay that five-lire fine! Even if I have to leave the lawsuit in my will!’

‘Hell’s bells! What sort of a feast-day are we going to have if we all die of hunger this year!’ exclaimed Nino.

There had not been a drop of rain since March, and the yellow crops, which were crackling like tinder ‘were dying of thirst’. However, Bruno the wheelwright said that when St Pascal went in procession it would rain for certain. But what was rain to him, when he was a wheelwright? Or to all the others in his party, who were tanners? In fact they carried St Pascal in procession, to the east and to the west, and they put him on the hill facing the fields to bless them, one sultry

day in May, when the sky was overcast. It was one of those days when the peasants tear their hair out when they look at the burnt fields and the ears of corn whose heads droop as if they were dying.

‘Blast you, St Pascal!’ shouted Nino, spitting into the air and running like a madman through the crops. ‘You’ve ruined me, St Pascal! You’ve left me nothing but my sickle to cut my throat with!’

In the upper part of the village, St Rocco’s parish, there was a desolation, one of those long years when the famine starts in June, and the women stand in the doorways, dishevelled and doing nothing, with staring eyes. When Saridda heard that Nino was selling his mule in the square, to pay the rent for his land which had yielded nothing, she immediately felt her anger cool down, and she sent her brother Turi hotfoot with what little money they had saved up, to help him.

Nino was in one corner of the square, with an abstracted gaze and his hands in his pockets, while they were selling his mule in all its frills and with a new harness.

‘I don’t need anything,’ he replied grimly. ‘I’ve still got these hands, for as long as God pleases! A fine saint St Pascal has turned out to be!’

Turi turned his back on him to avoid trouble, and went away. The truth was that people were exasperated by now, now that they had carried St Pascal in procession to the east and to the west with this marvellous result. The worst of it was that many from St Rocco’s parish even had let themselves be persuaded to go in the procession, beating themselves like donkeys, and wearing a crown of thorns, for love of their crops. So now they were venting their feelings in insults, and it had come to the point that the monsignor’s delegate had had to clear off, on foot and without a band, just as he had come.



The assistant magistrate, to get his revenge on the wheelwright, telegraphed that people were excited and public order was threatened. And so one fine day they heard that the militia had arrived in the night, and anyone could go and see them in the stables.

However some people said, 'They've come because of the cholera. Down in the city people are dying like flies.'

The chemist padlocked his shop, and the doctor was the first to flee, so that they could not bash his brains in.

'It won't amount to anything,' said those few who stayed in the village because they had not been able to disperse throughout the countryside. 'Blessed St Rocco will protect his village, and we'll skin the first person we find wandering around at night.'

And even the people in the lower part of the village, St Pascal's parish, had run barefoot into St Rocco's church. However, shortly afterwards the dead began to fall in great numbers like those huge drops of rain that come before a thunderstorm, and they said of one dead man that he was a pig and he had deserved to die since he had stuffed himself with prickly pears, and of another that he had come in from the country after dark. In short, the cholera was well and truly there, despite the guard, and in defiance of St Rocco, and despite the fact that an old woman who lived in the odour of sanctity had dreamed that St Rocco had said to her in person:

'Don't be afraid of the cholera. I'm taking care of it, and I'm not like that good-for-nothing St Pascal.'

Nino and Turi had not seen each other since that affair of the mule. But as soon as the peasant heard that the brother and sister were both ill, he ran to their house, and he found Saridda black and disfigured, at the back of the poor room, by the side of her brother, who was himself recovering but tearing

his hair out because he did not know what to do.

‘Ah! You lousy St Rocco!’ Nino began to wail. ‘I didn’t expect this. Oh Saridda, don’t you know me any more? Nino, you remember Nino?’

Saridda looked at him with eyes so sunken that you needed a lantern to find them, and Nino’s eyes were like two fountains. ‘Oh, St Rocco!’ he said. ‘This is an even dirtier trick than St Pascal played on me!’

However, Saridda did get well, and while she was sitting in the doorway, with her head wrapped in a kerchief, and herself as yellow as pure beeswax, she kept on saying to him:

‘St Rocco has performed a miracle for me, and you must come too and bring him a candle on his feast-day.’

Nino, with a swelling heart, nodded in agreement. But meanwhile he had fallen sick, and seemed about to die. Then Saridda scratched her face, and said that she wanted to die with him, and that she would cut off her hair and put it in the coffin with him, so that no one would ever look her in the face again while she lived.

‘No! No!’ responded Nino, looking distraught. ‘Your hair will grow again. But I’ll be the one who won’t look at you again, because I’ll be dead.’

‘A fine miracle St Rocco’s performed for you!’ Turi said to him, to give him some comfort.

And when they were both getting better, and warming themselves in the sun with their backs against the wall, and both sulky, they went on throwing St Rocco and St Pascal in each other’s faces.

Once Bruno the wheelwright went by, coming in from the countryside now that the cholera was over, and he said:

‘We’re going to have a great celebration to thank St Pascal for saving us from the cholera. From now on there’ll be no

more troublemakers and no one to oppose us, now that that assistant magistrate is dead and has left his lawsuit in his will.'

'Oh yes, a celebration for those who've died!' sneered Nino.

'And you, do you think that St Rocco kept you alive?'

'Drop it!' Saridda interrupted. 'Or there'll have to be another bout of cholera to make peace again!'