

THE STORY OF MY JUNIORATE

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I arrived at Lembecq-lez-Hal on the 23 April 1923 together with three other English boys recruited like myself by Br. Lucien of the District of Nantes. We were easily absorbed by about 100 other juniors who had come from other Juniorates in all parts of Europe, Spain, Italy, Poland, France, Germany, Hungary etc. The lingua franca was French but we English boys soon let it be known that English was not a foreign language even if Spanish, Polish etc. were. As mentioned, these other juniors had come from other Juniorates and therefore had some notion of the kind of life to expect but we English boys came straight from home and were soon homesick; one, Charlie Dickens soon pulled out and another Pat Gill years later when he was evacuated from Rue de Sevres, Paris when the Germans overran that city in 1940. Two of us still remain, Br. Lawrence Foster, Bursar of Kensington, London and myself.

We English boys had a special teacher to give us French lessons. This was an Irish-American Brother who had come from the U.S.A. for the Second Novitiate in 1910 and at the request of the Superior General was still at Lembecq in 1923. He was known by all as 'le saint frere Clementian' and certainly his kindness and patience were admirable where we English boys were concerned for we used to muck up a treat. But he managed to teach us the first French we ever knew. It so happened that Br. MacNesius from Australia was then at Lembecq for his Second Novitiate and like most English-speaking Brothers at that time, he arrived for the Second Novitiate not knowing any French although everything was in that language. Some of them attended our French lessons with Br. Clementian. One day we boys had been playing up as usual and as the word dentist, cropped up in the vocabulary, up jumped Br MacNesius and said: 'Really now I must be off.' When he had gone Br. Clementian exclaimed: 'Now see what you have done, you've driven the poor man away.' Afterwards we discovered that the word dentist had reminded him of an appointment with the dentist. We discovered that he had a reputation for absent-mindedness. Later on we became great friends and he told us alot about Australia and wanted us to volunteer for that District. He told us that he was Director of Juniors, Novices and Scholastics which made him a very important man in our eyes. He did not tell us that at that time there were only one or two in each group. However we became very enthusiastic when he told us many thrilling stories and how we would be able to go shooting rabbits and kangaroos. Little did I think then that one day I, for one, would be a member of the Australian District, probably due in part to Br. Mac's stories. It was absolutely necessary to learn French and to speak French and only French. Everybody, Germans, Italians, Spanish and even the French boys who spoke patois for the most part, had to conform. Special coins circulated; there were six of them which were given to six culprits who had been heard speaking a foreign language. It was their job to get rid of them fast. The penalty for having one was to take your meals standing until you got rid of it, so you were on the alert for a possible victim and there were plenty of them. One day there were only five standing and the Director rang the bell and asked who had the other coin. Nobody stood up but all turned in the direction of the table where Charlie Dickens sat and soon he shouted in English: 'What the hell are you all looking at?' At this the Director told Charlie to stand up. Then, holding up one of the coins he said 'Have you one of these?' 'Yes, Br. Director' replied Dickens. 'What are they for?' the Director asked. 'For speaking in a foreign language' said Charlie. 'Then why haven't you been standing during the meal?' 'Well, Br. Director I wasn't speaking a foreign language I was speaking English.' So by hook or by crook you learned to speak French and even began to think in French. I remember when praying before the relics of the

Holy Founder I always prayed in French because I thought he wouldn't understand English being a Frenchman. Br. Clementian's lessons lasted only a short time and then we were assigned to the regular classes. Ours was the lowest class, the one with those who like ourselves hadn't much French. We had been but playing around up to date but now we found ourselves in the grip of a real martinet. Our teacher was a German who knew two words of English: I love, and so started teaching us J'aime, tu aimes etc.

As Juniors, our day began when the hand claps of Brother on duty woke us up at 5a.m. After ablutions and bed-making we went to the Grande Salle for morning prayers and reflection. After this we wended our way to the Grande Chapelle in two single files for Holy Mass at 6 O'clock. We left the chapel at 6.45 and made our way to the classroom for study of catechism. At 7.15 we had breakfast, a great bowl of cafe-au-lait into which we broke our bread. We sat six at a table and each table had a 'chef' who cut the big round loaf of excellent bread. With the arrival of the English boys a small amount of butter was placed on each table. The 'chef' divided it into very equal parts. The foreigners broke their bread, it was forbidden to cut it, slapped some butter on each piece and tossed it into the bowl; soon there was melted butter swimming on top of the coffee. The foreigner loved it. We English boys spread the butter on our slice of bread but we soon found that this was 'defendu' so we had to conform but not to the extent of tossing the pieces into the coffee. After breakfast we had the Pater Aeternaes and the three decades, then besides the washing up we had to perform various chores and be ready for classes at 8.30. We had a morning break at 10 a.m. during which we played 'bal a chasseur'. The ball resembles a handball even harder and the idea is to whack somebody with it and then it was his job to whack somebody else and so it was the thing to keep on the move or else. And that was the idea to keep everyone on the move. On half-days we played either soccer or croquet; this latter game was played with long-handled mallets and you had to send the wooden ball through a series of hoops. I often played against a German who was learning English. He was quite annoyed when he missed and I cried out 'manque' which sounded like 'monkey'. No wonder he took offence. On Wednesday afternoons we went for a walk, hail, rain or shine. We walked in threes, never in twos to prevent private friendships. I enjoyed these walks in the glorious countryside. We often played rounders at some stage of the walk. Our destination was usually some famous shrine to which we made a pilgrimage. At midday we had the Particular Examen and then dinner which like all the meals was invariably very good except that the soup was not more than hot water with pieces of bread floating in it. Dinner was followed by recreation, yes 'bal a chasseur'. Quicumque and three decades followed and then classes till 4 p.m. As a special concession we had 'le gouter' at 4. This consisted of warmed-up cafe-au-lait left from breakfast and a chunk of bread which you dipped into the coffee. On feast days a bar of chocolate was added. Then there was a break for 'bal a chasseur' and then study until spiritual reading time and visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Supper was at six O'clock with recreation afterwards. A further study or homework period followed and after night prayers and reflection at 8 p.m. we went to bed. Such was the typical day. Besides the weekly walk we had a monthly picnic. We went to various shrines and other places of importance such as Waterloo. I well remember the ten mile hike there but it was worth the effort and we came back by train. The battlefields of Waterloo were indeed interesting with the various war museums, indoor panoramic senarios of the battle, the great mound like a pyramid built by Flemish women. On top was a huge bronze lion with its face turned towards France and daring Napoleon ever to return. When the summer holidays came we went by train to Grand Halleux, a village in the Ardennes on the border of

Belgium and Germany. I must mention that there was no question of holidays at home. Consequently I did not see my family for the next five years. When my parents saw me last I was a boy of 14, I was a youth of 19 when they saw me again. We spent a glorious month at Grand Halleux where we stayed at the boarding school and as the 500 boarders had gone home we had the place to ourselves. Instead of dormitories, we slept each one in a cubicle, each with its own wardrobe and dressing-stand. We had the use of the magnificent swimming pool, gymnasium and concert hall. Every two or three days we went for an outing to spas and historic spots and of course we explored the incomparable Ardennes forests. All too soon our month's holiday came to an end and we trained it back to Lembecq passing through Liege, Malines, Ghent and Brussels.

This account of my Juniorate would not be complete without a record of the Church's festivals as celebrated at the Mother House at Lembecq-lez-Hal. In real French fashion feasts were kept as simple, semi-double, double, greater-double, double of the second class, double of the first class and first class with octaves. Special vestments, cruets, chalices, altar charts, altar boys' clothes and every else was used according to the various classes of feast. The chapel decorations from floor to ceiling for first class feasts was extraordinary and feasts like Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and Corpus Christi were celebrated with all the pomp and pagentry imaginable. The Crib at Christmas was a work of art. Work on it began at the beginning of Advent and only at Midnight Mass was it unveiled and the priest carried the statue of the Divine Babe to the manger and incensed it. The pagentry of the Corpus Christi processions is unforgettable with the carpets of flowers, decorations of all kinds and the huge altars of repose in various parts of the grounds. The singing and music accompanying all ceremonies was of the highest quality whether gregorian or polyphonic. The dinners following these celebrations were worthy of the best restaurants you can think of. The recreations afterwards were inter-community when superiors, Brothers, juniors, second-novices, all mingled and there were many reunions. This gave us English boys a chance to meet the English-speaking second-novices and we spoke English of course. No restrictions on such occasions.

Periodically, there were council meetings of the professors and the Br. Director to examine each Junior Novice's progress in studies, behaviour and piety. Often enough soon after these meetings, one or more Juniors would be sent home, others would be admonished. I don't remember having ever been admonished but Dickens was one of those who was packed off. Even I could see that he did not fit in. The most important of these meetings every six months was to decide what juniors would receive the 'petit' and the 'grand' crucifix. Juniors were grouped accordingly. Most juniors had the 'petit' crucifix, because if you were not found worthy you were sent home. The next step was the reception of the 'grand' crucifix, for without this there was not much chance of going to the 'grand noviciat'. Thus it was that I received both crucifixes and so after two and a half years in the Juniorate, I passed to the Novitiate on 5 August 1925. My stay in the Juniorate had been interesting and even thrilling and unforgettable.