

AN AFTERNOON AT THE SHOEMAKER'S

based on an incident from the life of Don Bosco

Abridged and adapted by

Fr. Kenneth Pereira SDB

Scene: The workshop of Signor Pautassio, a modest shoemaker from the Forta Platina, one of the poorer quarters in Turin. On the stage are two benches and a table proper to a shoemaker. Hammers, awls, lasts and a few other tools are also at hand.

A little further away is a shabby looking chair, kept for clients. When the play begins, there is an old clerical hat—Don Bosco's hat—on it. Upstage is the street entrance. On the left there is a door with a curtain drawn across, which is supposed to lead to a small back-room, and on the right, is another door which leads to the interior of the house.

Characters:

Pautassio	The shoemaker (a burly, rustic man)
Giovanni	His apprentice (about 14 years old)
Pepino	a blacksmith's apprentice (about 12 years old; Giovanni's friend)
Giacu	a coach driver
A Count	an aristocratic gentleman, dressed in formal attire
Two ruffians	

** As the curtain opens, Pautassio is seen in his working clothes and apron. He is holding a shoe in his hand, and seemingly listening to someone speaking to him from the next room.

Pautassio: If that suits you, amen. I'll try to work as quietly as possible so that you do not get disturbed... but you know, I'm a cobbler.... (Pause) Eh? (Pause)... It doesn't matter, you say? So much the better, then. Have a good sleep father. (Sound of a door closing.)

(Musing to himself) Such a thing has never happened here before... A priest comes in and asks for a chair to sleep in!

Giovanni: And fancy him coming to you! You *hate* the sight of priests.

Pautassio: I don't mind a priest if he has a hole in his shoe.... That's all the good he is to me.... Say, did you take a look at his? Did you notice them Giovanni?

Giovanni: (Confused) Did I take a look at his what?

Pautassio: His shoes, kid!

Giovanni: No!

Pautassio: You fat-head, how many times have I told you, that when you meet anyone, the first thing you must do, is take a squint at his boots.... "By their boots you shall know them." They tell a shoemaker everything he wants to know.

Giovanni: Well, there's his hat, anyway.... What does *that* tell you?

Pautassio: (Picking up the hat and examining it) A hat isn't the same thing as boots. Even so, a man like me, who has brains, can tell the look of the boots from the look of the hat.

Giovanni: Go ahead, then. I'm listening.

Pautassio: (While inspecting the hat) Good shoes, well worn. They've probably been soled twice or thrice, but I bet they're polished and well looked after. That priest hasn't got much money, and he spends even less. Why, it's as clear as daylight. (He tosses the hat to Giovanni)

Giovanni: Shall I take the hat to him?

Pautassio: Why would he need it just now? You don't usually go to sleep with your hat on, do you? (Suddenly becoming reflective) And you don't usually sleep with your boots on either... But that priest seems different from the rest.

** Enter Pepino, in his work clothes, covered with grime. He rushes in with the easy assurance of a boy.

Pepino: Signor Pautassio! Please let me know....

Pautassio: (Irritated) What do you want?

Pepino: (Seeing the hat in Giovanni's hand) Is he still here? That's *his* hat, isn't it?

Giovanni: It belongs to a priest who came in here.

Pepino: What do you mean 'to *a* priest'? It's *Don Bosco*! I came here all the way, only to see him. I saw him entering here a little while ago. Isn't that his hat?

Pautassio: So *he's* Don Bosco, eh? I seem to have heard that name before. Isn't he the guy who runs around with all the dirtiest and cheekiest rascals of Turin?

Pepino: Oh no. If that's how you describe him, then you don't really know Don Bosco. Giovanni, haven't *you* ever been to the oratory?

Giovanni: No, no. What would I want to go to the oratory for?

Pepino: Come and see. There's football, there's band-music, there's theatre! And sometimes Don Bosco even takes us for picnics... and we have a rollicking time.

Giovanni: If *that's* how it is, then I'm coming too. I'd be a fool if I didn't.

Pautassio: (Gingerly) Hey, just a minute. That priest may be a great guy for all I care... but you are here to work, my boy.

Pepino: So it is with me, too. I work for the blacksmith, but I go to the oratory on Sundays.

Giovanni: And on Sundays, I never know where to go. Can I come with you, Pepino?

Pepino: Why, sure. Don Bosco would be delighted to have you there.... But say, where is Don Bosco?

Giovanni: In there.

Pepino: What's he doing *there*?

Giovanni: Sleeping.

Pepino: Sleeping? (Incredulously) Let me see him.

Pautassio: No, you don't. At least leave a poor chap alone when he's sleeping. I can well imagine why on earth he chose to come *here*, of all places, to sleep. With all you young brats jostling around him, all the day long, how could he ever get even a wink of sleep at home?

** While Pautassio is talking away, Pepino whispers something in Giovanni's ear.

Giovanni: (Amazed) Is that true?

Pepino: I have heard it myself.

Giovanni: (To Pautassio) Did you hear what Pepino said? He says that *that* priest in there, dreams of what's going to happen in the future.

Pautassio: (Sarcastically) Bravo! And you are daft enough to believe a yarn like that?

Pepino: (Piqued) It's *not* a yarn. Lots of people have heard his predictions... and so have I... and I tell you, they *do* come true.

Pautassio: Oh really? ... Could he, in that case, dream up the number of the winning lottery ticket?

Pepino: I expect he could.

Pautassio: Why, bless my soul, then! If he could co-operate with me, I'd be a rich man. (Resolutely) Look, we can't let this opportunity slip by.

Giovanni: But he's already asleep. You should have told him your plans before.

Pautassio: (Dejected) Of all the luck.... Why did I not know all this before?

Pepino: But, Signor Pautassio, as far as I remember, he has never spoken of dreaming up lottery numbers. His dreams are of a very different nature.

Pautassio: For example?

Pepino: He has often dreamed that some boys were going to die very soon.

Pautassio: And then did they die?

Pepino: Oh yes... just as he said they would.

Pautassio: (Skeptically) Mmmmmm...

Giovanni: (To Pautassio) Well, ask him about yourself, then.

Pautassio: Shut up, you young devil. I want to know the winning lottery ticket number. I don't want to know the date of my funeral.

Giovanni: But suppose you were going to die this month... the lottery ticket would not be of much use to you, would it? Wouldn't it be better to know when you are going to die?

Pautassio: (Sarcastically) Oh, much better...a great comfort! (Then angrily) Damn it.

Pepino: You would be able to make a good Confession, and die a happy death. Don Bosco would even help you. He's ever so good at that, you know!

Pautassio: (Roaring) Be quiet, will you? If I want a sermon, I will go to the church. And as for you, lad, if you came here to preach to me, you can clear out quicker than you came in. (He picks up a stick)

Pepino: I came here to see Don Bosco.

Pautassio: (Slowly and deliberately) Don Bosco is asleep.... And when you are asleep, you can't see anybody.

Pepino: (Cajolingly) Oh, it doesn't matter if he can't see me... as long as I can see him... Please?

Giovanni: He is here. (Opening the door) Look, Pepino, he is still asleep.

Pepino: (Peering in) Oh Don Bosco.... How sweetly he sleeps. He must be so tired! Every day he goes out looking for jobs for his boys. He even got *me* my job.

Pautassio: That's all right... But it seems to me that all decent people work by day and sleep during the night. And they sleep in their own beds... not in someone else's.

Pepino: But Don Bosco is a saint.

Pautassio: So what?

Pepino: Saints work by day and pray at night... and even when they sleep, they pray.

Pautassio: (Sarcastically) That's when they're not trying to dream about other people dying.... Go on, clear off now.

Pepino: All right, I'm going. At least I got a chance to gaze on Don Bosco.... and Giovanni, you will come to the oratory this Sunday, won't you?

Giovanni: Yes, of course.

Pautassio: (Impatiently) Clear out, darn you. (He almost chases Pepino out)

Pepino: Cheerio. (He exits)

Pautassio: Gone at last. (To Giovanni) And the priest? Is he still asleep? (Goes up to the door and peers in) Let him sleep, so long as he doesn't wake up and come to tell me...

Giovanni: The lottery numbers?

Pautassio: You're teasing me!... Hey! May be I could whisper the very suggestion into his ears while he sleeps. Who knows? His dream may take a favourable turn for me. (Exits into the next room on tip toe)

** While Giovanni stands at the door watching what is going on, a Count enters. He is a typical aristocrat, prim and proper in his manners, but rather short tempered.

Count: Is this the Shoemaker's workshop?

Giovanni: (Turning to him, surprised) Oh, a gentleman!

Count: They tell me that there's a priest in here.

Giovanni: Don Bosco? Yes, he's in there.

Count: Call him then, and tell him that a count—no....a gentleman—wishes to see him.

Giovanni: (To himself) A count! (Looks at him starry eyed)

Count: What are you waiting for, blockhead? You are looking at my shoes? If you don't hurry, you will *feel* them on your butt.

** At this moment, Pautassio enters, and Giovanni, falling silent, gets on with his work.

Pautassio: Oh, good afternoon sir.

Count: Good afternoon. But who the devil are you? Surely not Don Bosco.

Pautassio: (Flustered, and speaking nervously) Yes, your lordship, that is to say... your highness. I am Lorenzo Pautassio, shoemaker, at your service.

Count: (Impatiently) I am looking for a priest, not a shoemaker.

Pautassio: Oh, Don Bosco? He's sleeping in there.

Count: But why *here*, of all places?

Pautassio: I don't know! ... or rather, I'm not too sure, my lord. Perhaps it's because he's very tired from wandering about, begging for money for his young urchins. ... You know this priest, my lord?

Count: Of course. Who does not know Don Bosco?

Pautassio: I, for one, didn't know him until a little while ago. And then the first thing I learn about him, is that he is the special priest of ragamuffins.

Count: I can tell you, that not only do urchins and tramps know Don Bosco, but so do many statesmen, members of parliament and even the king himself. That priest has friends and admirers everywhere!

Pautassio: (Incredulously) Is that so, my lord?

Count: I'm telling you so. Can't you believe me? He comes knocking at my door every other week, asking for money.

Pautassio: Ah, I should know that. The blacksmith's boy had just been saying so.

Count: (Alarmed) What did he say?

Pautassio: The same as what *you* said: that he goes around looking for money for his poor boys.

Count: But that's not the only thing he collects, you know.

Pautassio: I'm sorry, but I don't quite understand you.

Count: If you knew me better, you would. You see, I am a man with a rather short temper... and unfortunately it was during one of these bad moments that this unfortunate priest came to me for money.

Pautassio: I suppose he didn't realise it.

Count: He *ought* to have realised. I made him wait for half an hour. He ought to have understood that he must go away. But no, he stayed on, until eventually my rude words drove him away.

Pautassio: Well, what did he do?

Count: (Shrugging his shoulders) He begged my pardon as if it was *he* who had been rude to me... and then he went quietly away. That made me feel worse. It's been playing on my conscience ever since. That's why I'm here... to make amends.

Pautassio: I expect he has forgotten all about the incident. He couldn't possibly sleep so soundly, if he were upset about it.

Count: But in the meantime, he's paying me back. I made *him* wait, but now he's making *me* wait.

Pautassio: He will wake up any moment now, my lord.

Count: (As if dismissing that fact) Oh, let him sleep. I'll come back later. When he wakes up, tell him that....

Pautassio: That you had been here, and that you will come back.

Count: (Changing his mind) No, don't tell him anything. I don't want anyone to know that I, a Count, have been waiting at the behest of a priest... and one who is asleep, at that! I will send for him later.

Pautassio: Very well sir.

Count: That's all right. Good bye.

Pautassio: Good afternoon, my lord.

** Pautassio accompanies the Count out. Giovanni, curious, follows the two, and also goes out. (All through the scene, he has been at the table, working and following the conversation of the two.) A few moments later, enter Giovanni and Pautassio, with a coin in his hand

Pautassio: Look at that! Fifty lire, just because I opened the door of his carriage. That's the sort of gentleman I'd like to meet.

Giovanni: Yes, and I did what you told me to do: I looked at his shoes.

Pautassio: Never mind that. Do you know what I shall do with this money? I have a splendid idea. I'll give it to you...

Giovanni: Gee, thanks.

Pautassio: Wait, you nitwit. You always get hold of the wrong end of the stick. You will have to go to the wine shop down the street, and ask for a bottle of the best wine they've got.

Giovanni: I see. And am I to tell them that it's for Don Bosco?

Pautassio: No, fat-head. If you told them that it's for a priest, they would give you vinegar, if not poison. Listen, just tell them that it's for a Count.

Giovanni: But the Count is gone.

Pautassio: You have the brains of an imbecile flea, my boy. What's the point in explaining things to you? Just go and do as you're told!

Giovanni: All right, I'm going.

Pautassio: So remember, a bottle of good red wine for a Count. (Accompanies Giovanni to the door, and then calls aloud, after he has gone): And don't hang around the street. Get a move on.

** Enter Giacu, a coach driver, suddenly thrusting himself on Pautassio's attention, in the doorway itself.

Giacu: Ah, here you are!

Pautassio: Giacu! What good wind brings you this way? Come in man, come in. (Accompanies Giacu into his workshop)

Giacu: (Holding up a broken harness) There! That's what brings me here.

Pautassio: I see. Your horses have managed to break their reins again. Well, sit down. I'll mend them for you in a jiffy.

Giacu: (About to sit down, finds himself with Don Bosco's hat in his hands, and inspects it curiously). Holy smokes, what have we here?

Pautassio: Oh, that's a priest's hat.

Giacu: (Surprised) I see! Since when have *you* begun to get involved in *their* business?

Pautassio: Oh-oh, don't you get me wrong. I'd rather have nothing to do with priests. They're all a very odd and stuck-up bunch of characters.

Giacu: Not all of them, though. Why, just the other day, I met a very unusual priest. You wouldn't believe me, if I told you what transpired between him and me.

Pautassio: (Cajolingly) Oh, go on. Tell me your story. After that, I will tell you mine: I will tell you the story behind that hat.

Giacu: Well then, listen. The other evening, I was coming home from Venaria with my stage-coach. My horses were in a particularly stubborn mood that day. I lashed them, cursed them, swore at them, ... but nothing happened.

Pautassio: Oh yeah. You certainly know how to swear.

Giacu: Yes, but listen. Just while all this was going on, I felt somebody pulling my sleeve. I looked behind: it was a priest.

Pautassio: Aw, poor old Giacu.

Giacu: Don't think I am afraid of priests. Oh no. He spoke to me, but I just shrugged my shoulders... But imagine his cheek! At the next stop, he coolly got onto the box at the side of me.

Pautassio: Perhaps there wasn't sufficient room inside.

Giacu: Nonsense. There was plenty of it. He said he wanted some fresh air... But I knew jolly well what he wanted.

Pautassio: He wanted to preach you a sermon, I bet.

Giacu: That's it. But what a sermon it was! Why, if only you had heard it...

Pautassio: I suppose you think he would have converted me?

Giacu: Easily! Why, he had *me* converted... on the spot.

Pautassio: (Skeptically) Hmmmmmm...

Giacu: Listen here. How would you feel if someone told you, that you might die at any moment... that there could be a traffic accident that seals your fate? Well, that's what he told me... and it all made pretty good sense. After all, what's the good of blaspheming?... Besides, it wouldn't cost anyone a farthing to put his conscience straight. As the priest kept bombarding me with these ideas, every thought of my obstinate horses had receded into the background. All I could see, was hell, and me in it!

Pautassio: Ah well, after all, it's a priest's *job* to preach.

Giacu: Just a minute. He did something more. He impressed me so much, that I even decided to go for confession.

Pautassio: (Incredulously) What? You drove off to church?

Giacu: Church? What church?! There and then, I made my confession... while the horses were trotting along and the people inside the coach were snoring away.

Pautassio: But how did you manage that?

Giacu: He took the reins, and I told him my sins, one after another.... There were enough of them to last till the bridge.

Pautassio: You must be joking.

Giacu: There! I knew that you wouldn't believe me. But I swear I'm telling you the truth. Even the horses seemed to understand. They trotted on as quietly as lambs.

Pautassio: But this is incredible!

Giacu: I know. But if only you could see how much better I felt after that... I felt two stones lighter. When you throw away your sins...

Pautassio: What do you mean 'throw away'? That sort of thing has to be done in Church. Otherwise it doesn't work.

Giacu: Say what you want. There's no messing about with that priest. He seemed to read my heart through and through, and afterwards when he said that I was all right with God, I knew that he had spoken the truth.

** Enter Giovanni with a bottle of wine.

Giovanni: Here's the wine.

Pautassio: Put it down there.

Giovanni: He said that it's the best wine he has in his cellar.

Giacu: Wow! A glass of wine! Just the right thing for the occasion... It's not often that we meet, and a glass of wine would sure go a long way to strengthen our friendship.

Pautassio: (Teasingly) It's not for you, man. It's for Don Bosco.

Giacu: (Amazed) Don Bosco!? Where is he?

Pautassio: He is in there.

Giacu: (Roaring) And you didn't tell me? What's he doing in there?

Pautassio: Take it easy, man; there's no need to get so excited.

Giovanni: (Butting in) He's asleep.

Giacu: My dear fellow, how can I *not* get excited? He's the one whom I went to, for confession. Haven't I been telling you about him for the past half an hour? Darn it! I would never have thought of finding him here.

Giovanni: Shall I take the bottle in for him?

Pautassio: No. Can't you see that he is asleep?

Giacu: So that wine is for Don Bosco, eh? What made you think of that?

Pautassio: Well, I heard that this Don Bosco is a big shot... a priest known by everybody... and so I thought it wouldn't be a bad thing for me, if I made a bit of fuss over him.

Giacu: Ah, you are a crafty old fellow. You want to make a friend of him, eh?

Pautassio: You never know. I might need him some day.

Giacu: Yeah, to go to for Confession, perhaps.

Pautassio: No fears. I don't intend to trouble any priest with my list of sins.

Giacu: But that priest is different, Pautassio, and unless you want to die like an animal, and drop down through the devil's stoke-hole, you had better...

Pautassio: Oh, shut up, Giacu. Let's talk of something else.

Giacu: All right. I say, shouldn't we test that bottle and see if it's really worthy of Don Bosco?

Pautassio: (Sportingly) All right. (Noticing that there are no glasses) But where are the glasses? (To Giovanni) Oh you fat-head, how do you expect Don Bosco to drink this stuff?

Giovanni: I'm terribly sorry, sir. I didn't know.

Pautassio: (With a sigh) Come upstairs with me. I'll show you a couple of glasses up there. You'll have to wash them, and bring them along.

Giacu: Three glasses are enough.

Pautassio: You wait here, Giacu. If I don't go along, this fool won't find anything.

Giacu: Righto, I shall stay here.

Pautassio: And if Don Bosco wakes up...

Giacu: (Reassuringly) I will tell him to wait a couple of minutes for a glass of wine.

** Exit Pautassio and Giovanni. When they are gone, Giacu tiptoes across to the door leading to Don Bosco's room.

Giacu: (Coming away, after having peeped in) He won't wake up. He's sleeping as soundly as a babe. (He enters into that room again)

** Enter two ruffians. They stand on the threshold and talk.

R.1: He didn't have the dog with him this time. I made sure of that when he turned around the corner and came in here.

R.2: Yes, it was the same, the other evening. And yet, when we attacked, he just called, and the dog pounced on us.

R.1: Where the hell is he, anyway? Didn't we notice him enter this place?

R.2: (Noticing the hat) Hey! That's a priest's hat there. He must be here.

** With his back to the two ruffians, Giacu exits from the room in which Don Bosco is sleeping, and closes the door softly behind him.

R.1: (Taken by surprise) Hey...

Giacu: Oh crikey! What an ugly couple of faces! (To the ruffians) What do you want?

R.2: (Hesitantly) We saw a priest come in here. Is he still here?

Giacu: What's that got to do with you?

R.1: (Aggressively) Look here, mister, we'll ask the questions. You just answer them, all right?

R.2: (In a whisper, to his companion) Take it easy buddy; there's no need to get excited. (to Giacu) Ahem... We want to go for confession.

Giacu: (Scoffing at them) Hah! With faces like that, you want to go for confession?! You've come to the wrong door.

R.2: We don't like going to church, because everybody will see us.

Giacu: Then go to the police station, or better still, to the jail... Go on, why are you waiting? Beat it, I say, just beat it.

R.2: (To his companion) Hard luck, buddy. This guy's a tough character. We'll have to look for some other occasion to accomplish our job. Let's quit. (Exit the two ruffians)

Giacu: (Rushing to the doorway, and calling aloud after them) You blackguards, you found the right priest for your confession, all right. You'd better not let me find you around, or you'll have the works.

** Pautassio and Giovanni enter, with two glasses.

Pautassio: Here are two glasses. There should be another in the cupboard over there.

Giovanni: I'll fetch it.

Pautassio: Quietly... and don't wake Don Bosco. (Giovanni goes into the room).

Giacu: If I hadn't been here, someone else would have woken up Don Bosco. Two ruffians came in here just a little while ago, you know?

Pautassio: What did they want?

Giacu: They wanted to go for confession, to Don Bosco, if you please!

Pautassio: Here?

Giacu: Yes, but I was here. I helped them change their minds... Crooks paid by someone to attack poor Don Bosco.

Pautassio: But what do they have against that priest?

Giacu: Well you see, Don Bosco is a saint; and the devil can't bear the sight of saints. His job is to give them a rough time. I bet you, those two cut-throats were hired by Satan himself... Coming to think of it, it's a pity I let them off so lightly. (Resolutely) Listen, I'm going out to look for them.

** Exit Giacu, as Pautassio wipes the glasses and shrugs his shoulders.

Giovanni: (Rushing in by the small door) Don Bosco is awake.

Pautassio: Oh no! I'm not yet ready. Tell him that I... no, tell him that you...

Giovanni: He spoke to me. He guessed! Don Bosco guessed!

Pautassio: What? the lottery numbers? I'm going to meet him. And you, wait here. If anyone comes, tell him... (On seeing Don Bosco inside, his tone changes at once) Oh, Don Bosco.

** Giovanni peers in, curious as ever. Just then Pepino rushes in through the opposite door, diverting Giovanni's attention.

Giovanni: (Excitedly) Pepino, Pepino! He read my mind. Before I could even utter a word to Don Bosco, he said to me “So I’ll be seeing you next Sunday at Valdocco.”

Pepino: I told you... Don Bosco knows everything. Let me have a look at him now.
(Looks into the room, through the half-open door) Oh my gosh!

Giovanni: What’s he doing?

Pepino: He’s hearing your master’s confession.

Giovanni: Signor Pautassio? But he never goes to Church. (They both stand there, looking on, bewildered.)

** Enter Giacu, followed by the Count.

Giacu: Come in sir, come in. Don Bosco must be awake by now.

Pepino: (Turning) Shhhh!

Giacu: What’s the matter?

Count: What’s happening inside?

Giovanni: Come sir, see for yourself!

** Together, Giacu and the Count peer into Don Bosco’s room.

Count: What is Don Bosco doing?

Giacu: Can’t you see? Don Bosco is hearing his confession.

Count: Hearing confessions here? ‘Ever heard of anything like that before?

Giacu: I told you... Don Bosco is different from all other priests.

Count: And I didn’t understand it! (He takes off his hat and kneels.)

Giacu: What are you doing, my Lord? Put on your hat, please. This is only the shoemaker’s workshop.

Count: No. The shoemaker’s workshop has become a church. Don Bosco is a saint.

* CURTAIN *

P.S. A Marathi translation of this play is also available (in manuscript form) with Fr. Kenneth Pereira.