

Chapter 16 – East London, Maris Stella

A Lodestar to Mary

East London was now a fast-growing seaport, as in 1899 Mother Euphemia Koffler decided to erect a new school on the sea-front in addition to the House already owned by the sisterhood in Albany Street.

Longfellow Street was the spot chosen to suit the convenience of children living in the Quigney. It was thought that this foundation might also serve as a seaside holiday house for Sisters in delicate health coming from inland branches of the Mother House and from Rhodesia where malaria was still rampant.

This building, planned by Father J Fitzhenry at a cost of two-thousand pounds, was double-storeyed with balconies and verandahs facing seaward, so it commanded an extensive view of the entire roadstead and Bat's Cave to the East. The harbour and its shipping was visible westwards. Thus was established a house very near the shore, dedicated to Christ's Mother under her title "Maris Stella".¹ The derivation of the name Mary – in Hebrew "Miryam" – is uncertain. Some interpreted it as "bitter" from her great sufferings when she saw her Son die. However, the bitterness in Our Lady's life was all her own. To her children, she became the Star that lights life's sea, leading men on to their glorious destiny. "Maris Stella" was to serve as a Primary School for day pupils only.

The nuns gladly made use of it as their holiday house. Formerly there were but few houses in the Quigney and none was very near the convent. That portion of the beach, too, was open, free and practically deserted. The Sisters, therefore, used to change into their sedate bathing suits which came well up to the neck and reached down to the elbows and knees. Their clothes they concealed in bushes on the shore while the owners took a dip in the sea. This went well for some years. One day, however, while the Sisters enjoyed their bath they saw to their horror a group of "naughty" boys running about on the beach in the nuns' habits and veils. The more the ladies called out in their discomfiture to the miscreants to take off the clothes, the more the little imps ran and pranced about. Modesty forbade the Sisters to leave the water, yet they were terrified lest the young rascals make off with their garments. When tired of their game the masqueraders replaced their costumes in the bower and departed. Little did these lads guess that their innocent prank deprived the nuns of their pleasant pastime, for never afterwards did they again dare to swim at their favourite spot.

The largest room in the convent was, here, also chosen for a chapel and again the Sisters threw open their oratory to the parish. Unfortunately it was not on the ground floor, yet it served its purpose until 1918 when the parochial church of the Holy Redeemer was built next door by Father Daniel O'Flanagan. Initially Mass was said at Maris Stella only on Sundays. During the week the nuns walked daily, in all weathers, to Albany Street to hear Mass...

In later years this site around the convent on the beach deteriorated and, instead of miles of sea view, one saw roofs of houses, the homes of East London's teeming population. Though no longer a desirable holiday resort for the Sisters, this institution, nevertheless, shone as a friendly star to its many pupils and the Sisters who staffed it. There was a serene, joyous atmosphere in this school which engendered happiness in the children as well as the teachers. In time it became a State-aided school and remained so until it was closed down.

Besides the usual mission work in this house, in the afternoons and evenings, private religious instruction was given to adults. This occupied a good deal of the chief catechist's time; but it has resulted in many converts to the Faith among the European and Chinese citizens of East London.

Another form of apostolate was practised at Maris Stella, namely mission work among domestic servants. The Coloured servant of the convent, faithful old Japie, asked to be instructed in the Faith. Taught

¹ St Jerome suggested Mary to mean "mar-yarn", a drop of the sea; in Latin "Stilla maris". This, by a happy fault of transcription became "stella maris", star of the sea.

through the medium of Afrikaans, he soon became an exemplary Catholic and was instrumental in bringing back to the Fold many of his lapsed Coloured friends.

In 1929 a heavy gale took the roof off the back verandah. The corrugated iron was blown over the convent and deposited in Rhodes Street. Guardian Angels must have been very busy for there were no casualties. How fervently the nuns prayed the Te Deum at their Office that night when they thought of how the falling sheets of metal might have cleaved a passer-by! For this repair hurricane-proof roofing was used to prevent a repetition of the near tragedy.

The Sisters were at Compline in their Oratory one Saturday evening when they heard a crash on the wooden stairs. Obviously someone had fallen; but who could it be for all the community was assembled in the chapel? In their alarm the priest was summoned by telephone from his house next door. On investigation a tramp was found at the foot of the dark stairs leading to the back yard. Passing the convent he had heard music and wanted to explore whence the beautiful singing came.

Fortunately the man was unhurt and the Priest, having escorted him to the street, remarked: "The poor chap is full of spirit, but not the right spirit..."

The people of East London were filled with regret to learn that, at the end of 1971, this convent was to be closed down. In the early days a community of sixteen nuns had staffed this school; at its closure there were only six. One Sister called this move from Maris Stella 'the great heart transplant' ... "The poor old body has succumbed to the wear and tear of nearly a century of use, but its sturdy heart stood up well to the vicissitudes of life and would beat on lustily in its new body at the Convent in Hudson Avenue..." All the teachers from the Quigney Convent were drafted over to the Sacred Heart School but, because of travelling problems, only about 60% of the scholars were to go with them. In the course of its 73 years, Maris Stella had guided 6257 pupils on to the ladder of life. The Principal said: "Although we will be sad to leave our old home which we loved, transfer to the beautiful new school will also be an advantage to our Maris Stella pupils..."