

Matt Talbot

The Holy Man of Dublin: The Wonder of Matt Talbot. (1858-1925)

By Eily MacAdam.

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[Since 1975, Matt Talbot is recognised as ‘Venerable Matt Talbot’.]

Since this booklet was first published, the fame of Matt Talbot, humble Dublin workman, has continued to spread far and wide. The crowds who visit the simple room in Rutland Street in which he lived for the last twenty-five years of his life, continue to grow and his vault in Glasnevin is a place of constant pilgrimage.

This is not the grave in which, in 1925, the body of an obscure Dublin workman was laid. That humble grave attracted many who heard of the holy life of Matt Talbot and came to seek his intercession.

Then, in 1952, with due ceremony, as part of the Apostolic Process in the Cause, the body was exhumed and laid in the O’Connell Circle, in a vault known as the Gentili Tomb, from the fact that the great Italian missionary of the Famine times, Fr. Aloysius Gentili, was buried there until the Fathers of Charity took the body to the mother-house in Omeath.

It is to the Gentili vault that the fervent pilgrims now make their way to seek Matt Talbot’s prayers and to pray that, if it is God’s will, the divine seal of miracle may be set on the Cause of the Servant of God.

Even in his life time, there were people who set great value on the prayers of the hardworking poor man, whose real work only became known to most people when Sir Joseph Glynn, (R.I.P.) heard the story of the charities and the fasts of the man who had collapsed and died in a city street – as many a worn-out old person has done before – and decided to write the life of Matt Talbot. The publication aroused great interest, which has never flagged.

Will it be ours to see the Church gratify the wishes of many by declaring Blessed the humble worker?

We know so little. We go down the stream of days so quickly to the end that is the beginning. Yet we are wise to try to know something of ourselves and our fellow-travellers as we go. There may be something to be learned that way, if we manage our voyage always with the end in view. That is not easy. It helps if we can observe the doing of it by another, especially if that other has met contrary winds and come through perils. We can follow and observe, notice how he steered by the stars God has hung out for our guidance, how he used every forwarding wave and evaded rocks and quicksands.

We will follow Matt Talbot because we think his voyage ended happily on the shore to which he steered. We are perhaps not such sturdy mariners but we can realise how hard the struggle was and learn what courage and a fatigue-watching of the Eternal Stars can accomplish.

The story of this voyage? – A simple story.

At Aldborough Court, off the North Circular Road, in Dublin, a son was born in 1856 to Charles Talbot and his wife Elizabeth (nee Bagnal). Both were Dublin people, Charles Talbot working as foreman in charge of bonded stores for the Port and Docks Board. His father and his grandfather had held the same position, and Charles Talbot had a pride in his job and in his family and in his Church. Both he and the girl he married were Confraternity members at Gardiner Street Jesuit Church. The son, who was born on May 2nd, 1856, was baptised at the Pro-Cathedral in Marlborough Street and given the name Matthew. That name was to be uttered in a mother's anguished prayers and later was to have a glow around it, be written in many languages and go to Rome as that of a candidate for sainthood.

But the pious young mother knew nothing of all these things when she held her baby in her arms. She began to find him a bit of a handful when schooldays came and he and a younger brother – two of a total family of twelve – made it their chief study to escape when she led them to school at North Richmond Street. Well, the best of boys don't love school but, alas, Matt was not to be the best of boys to that mother of his. Schooldays over – he was twelve-and-a-half – his father found him a job as messenger with a firm of wine merchants. It was probably a happy day in the Talbot home when Matt got his first job. It is not easy to keep a big family on thirty shillings a week, which was Charles Talbot's wage. It was probably difficult even in that older Dublin. Matt was to live on into the more modern Dublin and ultimately to earn twice his father's wages, but we shall come to those days.

Meanwhile we picture Matt as a boy carrying his basket to this house and that, learning to know his Dublin – a fact those people forget who write of him as if he saw no more of the city than lay within the compass of his walks from home to work and to church that were to be the limit of his travels in later days when the world had ceased to matter.

It is Matt Talbot's value that he lived in an Irish city of today, met the sort of people we all meet, saw what we see. To picture him otherwise is to remove him from us when we need him near at hand. Did he ever note the passing of the seasons? – Some writers ask the question and note that he saw nature's glories only dimly in the city streets. Did these same writers ever see the springtime come to Mountjoy Square? Ever see golden sunshine shaft between tall Georgian houses? Ever see the Custom House with snow on it and the river heavy with snow? Leave us, please, one touch of nature that makes us kin. On the last day of Matt Talbot's life, he probably crossed Mountjoy Square on his way to meet death in Granby Lane. It was June that morning. Was the sun shining golden on the wide peace of the Square as he went – slowly – for he had been ill and he was old and wore that heavy penitential chain about his waist and the lesser ones on his legs and arms. He had the kindly words of a neighbour in his ears, for a friend had spoken to him as he left the house, telling him he should not go out till he was rested a bit. That fact too holds the precious value of kinship with us. So might a kindly neighbour speak to any of us.

But we have been carried away from our story. We were to follow Matt Talbot as he went his way through life. We had, however, first to make sure we were not going to lose him in the cold mists of an inhuman aloofness. Now, having as it were, fallen into step again, let us return to the lad in his

first job and the first touch of tragedy. Young Matt, in the course of his work at the wine merchants, assisted at bottling stout. Somehow, Matt began to taste the stout and he liked it apparently. One night he was not sober when he came home to that good mother and the upright father. He was caned, removed from the job and a position found for him in the bonded stores of which his father had charge. It was soon evident that Matt was going to be a heartbreak. He began to drink whiskey and his poor father had the terrible knowledge that somehow that whiskey was coming out of the stores of which he was in charge. More canings followed. Matt got himself a new job, after four years in which his father had tried every means to keep him straight. Matt became a bricklayer's labourer. He was now seventeen and for several years, he worked for different building contractors, and ultimately got a permanent job with Messrs. T. & C. Martin at the North Wall where for the rest of his life he worked loading carts, unloading timber, et cetera, until ultimately he became storekeeper.

The wages of the seventeen-year-old boy would have been very useful in the home but they never got so far. He was a good worker, never late, but he drank what he earned. He had no other vices, no, not a trace. The friends who told so frankly to his biographers all this story of his degradation were one and all unanimous that drink was his only failing. In drink, the real man shows. Matt was never quarrelsome, never objectionable. He was simply wasting his life, working for money to drink and then home stupidly to bed. Poor Elizabeth Talbot, she must have suffered watching her son, and seeing too with added horror the younger boys follow in his footsteps.

Once Matt came home in his socks. He had sold his boots for drink. One week, too, the good workman in him failed. He stayed away from work. Payday came but there was no pay for Matt. That was bad, because he wanted a drink. Often before, he had been without a drink and had pledged his spare clothes to get one. There had been a merry evening too, once upon a time, when a fiddler had been of the drinking company and when funds ran short Matt and his pals had thought it the cream of the joke to pawn the fiddle and drink the proceeds, leaving the fiddler minus his means of livelihood. However, on this particular payday when there was no pay Matt wasn't worrying. He dressed himself and with a younger brother stood at a corner where the men coming out from the timber-yard would pass. Picture him there, a slight young man, neat and clean without being well-dressed, a young man who had spent many an evening and shilling with his pals and was counting on being included today even though he had no money. The men came out. One after another they passed. They greeted the brothers. That was all.

"I'm going home," said Matt.

"It's too early," said his brother.

He went home that day. His mother greeted him with a remark about his early return. "And you're sober," she added. He said nothing but when he had eaten his dinner, he dressed himself. He was going to take the pledge, he said. We know nothing of what was working in his soul that day. With a gentle smile, his mother bade him be sure he meant to keep it, before he took it.

He went out, up to Holy Cross College, Clonliffe Road, made the first Confession in three years and took the pledge for three months. He was not very sure of himself. He was twenty-eight now. He had been drinking for fifteen years, lost to all else. It was going to be hard. It was. But now we see strange things happening. On Monday morning, Matt Talbot is at 5 o'clock Mass and every morning after and the Church becomes his evening refuge to keep the enemy at bay. Oh, it was hard. "It's no use, mother," he said. "When the three months are up I'll drink again."

He was wrong. He never drank again. There is no further need to apologise for Matt Talbot. He is only twenty-eight. What remains of his youth is to be given to God and he is to soar beyond our following. But remember he is still young, still working in the timber-yard, still meeting the same work-mates, passing the public houses where they used to be merry. He remembers the one in which they seized the fiddle. In later years, he searches Dublin for that fiddler to make restitution. He never finds him, but he offers Masses and prayers for the man who had been wronged.

If we let ourselves forget that Matt Talbot was young when he entered on his fight, we miss the thrill of it. Old men pray more easily. The body is less fond of activity, more biddable. Matt had to fight and pray for forty years. It became easier because his first prayers were for the gift of prayer and it was later given him. How logical was this unlearned man who had left school at twelve-and-a-half. Prayer could save him but he could not pray, so he asked for the gift of prayer. How logical too in his subduing of the body that had led him astray with its craving for drink. It was to be severely disciplined indeed, until it became the eager servant of the soul, no longer dragging against the spirit but one with it in the service of God. That is surely how we see this man as he was in the later years of his life, so far as our human eyes can see. He fought. We think he won.

It was apparently one of Matt's sorrows that he had been a bad example to his brothers, and he spoke to them, trying to reclaim them. That was not like Matt, for he had no wish to set himself up as a paragon, even in the later years when he must have been very close to God. But he felt responsible for his brothers probably to some extent. They, it seems, would not listen, and Matt, possibly because it hurt to see them as he had once been, took a room and went to live in Gloucester Street, a drab Street that is not brighter for being re-named Sean MacDermott Street – not so far as the eye perceives – but possibly it helps, for there are dreamers even in drab streets, and lame Sean MacDermott went very happily to face the firing squad on that May morning in 1916. In that drab street that did not then bear the patriot name, Matt Talbot found that necessity of the saints, quiet. He lived alone, a sister coming in to prepare his food and tidy up. From that time forward, he was always to live alone, except for the last sixteen years of his mother's life. His father died in 1899 when Matt was forty-three, and, dutifully, he gave his mother a home. That was when he lived at 18 Upper Rutland Street, to which he removed from Gloucester Street and in which he resided for the last twenty-five years of his life.

He need not have lived alone. He was, from the day he stopped drinking, a steady man, in constant work, a neat, if shabby man, well enough looking, with fine eyes. There are plenty of good girls who would be glad of such a husband. Matt indeed met one of them. Those who related the story, as was proper, never told her name, but she was employed as a cook in a house to which Matt and other workmen were sent to carry out some repairs. She liked Matt, appreciated his quiet ways, and that she trusted him is evident from the fact that she told him of her liking and suggested marriage. She had money saved, she told him. We are grateful for that story. It gives us Matt as a woman saw him when he was still a vigorous man. It enshrines a picture of a shy man, a trustworthy man. Gravely Matt promised to consider the matter, and one can believe she accepted his answer with dignity. He had prayed, he told her, and he was not to marry. But her entrance had its value for us. Matt was not to marry. Nothing was to disturb the mode of life he had now settled, into. He was to continue the daily round of prayer and fasting, the austere days empty of comfort for body, filled with prayer, each day practically alike outwardly, but what of inward glory they brought is not known to us. Matt talked little of that life of his.

Let us, however, watch him live a day of it. We will begin when he knocks off work. There were twenty-four hours in Matt's day. In the timber-yard the whistle blows. Hastily Matt rushes to the little shed where he kept a change of clothes. He doffs his working garb quickly. He has an appointment with One whom he respects. He shows his respect. Out of the yard he goes and straight to the nearby Church of Saint Laurence O'Toole to pray. Then home to 18 Upper Rutland Street, taking, probably the short cuts through very drab streets indeed. His sister has cocoa prepared and perhaps a bit of fish, but if it is one of Matt's fasting times he takes nothing but cocoa and dry bread. That has already been his breakfast and his lunch.

He does not go straight to table as a hungry man does. He goes on his knees, having first removed his jacket and had a wash. He prays and then, still kneeling, eats his meal. His sister leaves. He is alone, yet not alone. In prayer, he converses with God. In books, he shares the thoughts of the saints. For Matt, uneducated though he is, reads books that would deter many a widely-read person. He prays for light to understand what he reads and on scraps of papers or in note-books, he roughly notes the things that strike him, writing them in schoolboy hand, in schoolboy spelling. They are a revelation to us of a mind in tune with the deeply spiritual. "In meditation, the mind labours, operating with its power, but in contemplation it is God Himself Who operates and the soul merely receives the infused gifts."

Did he recognise in those words a stage to which he had attained?

And other words are written too – words that are the workingman's reassurance of his place in the scheme of things. Nobody, he notes, has the right to starve the poor. We know he sought assurance of the justice of the workers' fight in 1913 against a terrible display of the employers' determination to break Trade Unionism. He got the assurance from a Jesuit priest. Thereafter he was not troubled by any doubt on that score.

On another scrap of paper, he writes words setting forth that true nobility derives from the Blood of Christ.

How much of justice, of dignity, was in the mind that chose these things to make note of. His reading comprised [Blessed John Henry] Newman, Frederick Faber, Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Alphonsus Liguori and many other religious writers whose names convey nothing to the ordinary person. Many books he bought himself. His store was great. But he borrowed a lot also, so we do not really know the extent of his reading. That he always had friends who understood him is evident from the fact of those borrowings, and some of them have told of conversations in that humble room in which time passed on enchanted wings while the poor unlettered man spoke of God. Yet on the whole, he talked little. He told an old friend of some of his early struggles of the first days of reform. He told of those days when he could not pray and of a Sunday morning when the demon of despair would not allow him to approach the altar but drove him out of Berkeley Road Church, out of Gardiner Street Church, to wander for three hours crazy with despair, and how at last he flung himself on the steps of Gardiner Street Church, with arms outstretched, caring nothing for people who stared. Peace came then and he went to receive his God. To people who forget that the mind is as real as the body the tragedy of that story will not be apparent, but tragic it is.

Every night at 10.30 Matt went to bed to his plank couch with the wooden pillow and single blanket. He rose again at 2.30. He prayed till 4 o'clock. Then he lay down again until it was time to prepare for 5 o'clock Mass. In later years Mass was changed to 6.15 but Matt still went to Gardiner Street at 5 a.m., kneeling on the Church or Convent steps till the door was opened. Then he went in

and, kneeling perfectly upright and unsupported, heard Mass and received Holy Communion. After his thanksgiving, he went home to his cocoa and then on to work, leaving a margin of time that he might visit Saint Laurence O'Toole's on the way. He worked all day, and when there was an interval between loads, he went into his shed to pray. If irreverent words were used, he blessed himself, and if religion came up for discussion, or any part of Christian duty, he took a fearless stand. If the topic happened, he told stories of the saints, but he never made himself conspicuous as a champion of good.

Two pins carelessly crossed on his sleeve were a reminder of days when his tongue was loose and he spoke sacred names without reverence. The pins were inconspicuous too – stuck there as if for use. Some of the men respected Matt's horror of bad language. Others delighted to shock him. Matt simply stole away to recite the Divine Praises. He never wore his heart on his sleeve. He apparently had no particular spiritual director. A Jesuit is said to have known most of him, but he died before Matt, and though the latter was a Franciscan Tertiary and member of several Confraternities in Gardiner Street and Saint Saviour's, Dominick Street, he never drew any notice to himself. His charities were endless. His wages rose as the years passed till at last he had 3 pounds, one and six per week. He spent the barest minimum on himself, the rest went to charity, always quietly, usually anonymously.

The Missions were his pet charity; to spread the word of God most important of all works. So he moved through life, shabbily dressed, fasting, praying. He kept black fast every day in Lent, every day in June, in honour of the Sacred Heart, and other times.

Nine months of his year was a fast time. He wore his chains, he slit the knees of his trousers lengthwise, so that it would not show, in order to kneel bare-kneed on the Church steps at morning.

Most wonderful of all. He kept it up, day in, day out, all the years. Sunday was his great day, and his joy was to attend every possible Mass, returning home only when he had received the Benediction after twelve o'clock Mass. Then he ate the first meal of the day, the eternal cocoa.

For sixteen years Elizabeth Talbot, widow, watched the manner of life of this son who had once been her cross. She woke at night sometimes in her bed in the corner of that humble room and fingering her beads watched quietly as Matt prayed, his arms outspread. At those times, she saw his face filled with a light that made it other than the face she knew. She was not talkative, this pious woman. Few knew what went on in that poor room. Only the sisters, Susan and Mary (Mrs. Fylan and Mrs. Andrews) knew how their brother lived, and they, one gathers, were somewhat in awe of him.

In 1915, Mrs. Talbot died, and here is a point worthy of notice. She was, as has been said, a member of a Confraternity in the Jesuit Church; that of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. After her death, the spiritual director spoke to the members of her life, quoting it as exemplary. There is pleasure in the thought.

Matt Talbot was to live alone once more, still carrying out his fixed programme of fasts and prayer, still distrustful of that body that had led him into drunkenness, still finding all his joy in God. Nineteen-sixteen came, Easter Week; while some men fought, others looted, there was turmoil; the world of Dublin was upside down. But God does not change. A quiet figure made its way from Rutland Street to Dominick Street or Gardiner Street, caring little for military barricades. The same figure made its way to work and to Mass through all the alarms from 1918 to 1923 and its civil war.

But the time was coming when the chain-laden body was to grow feeble, not perhaps because of its chains or its privations, but because man is mortal. The plank bed and the wooden pillow had led to partial deafness and one side of his face had become numb, when in 1923 he became ill and was admitted to the Mater Hospital in Eccles Street. He removed his chains before he went there. He had no wish to call attention to his fight with himself. He was very ill indeed and three days after admission received the Last Sacraments. His *via dolorosa* was not yet to end, however, for he recovered sufficiently to be allowed out of bed. At once, he went to the chapel, there to spend all the time available in thanking God that he was spared to suffer more. In the hospital, he never asked for any particular attention. When the priest came to give Holy Communion he received it, but he asked for no privileges – he whose life was the Sacrament of the Altar. No doubt, too, he accepted hospital diet without a word of his fasts, because even when in good health he took whatever was offered in the house of another, not caring to draw attention to himself. To eat what was given then became a sort of discipline in itself. Matt, in fact, was one of those gentlemen the working people of Dublin often produce. Are they producing less? You, young man, who possibly had a worthy father, where did you learn those words you use at the street-corner? And, child with the blue innocent eyes, who put on your lips those words that denote things too awful for you to realise? Alas, alas, fellow-citizens of Matt Talbot's city, you bring horror into his streets. But the worthy citizens are there too – young and old.

May all, worthy and unworthy, think at times of the quiet figure who kept his eyes to himself and possibly his ears as he went one June morning to keep a tryst with death. He had already heard Mass that Sunday morning and received Holy Communion, but, being now old and ill, he could no longer fast till 2 o'clock. He had therefore gone home to have his cocoa and had come out again at nine o'clock to attend further Masses. In Granby Lane, within sight of the Dominican Church of Saint Saviour, he fell to the ground. When people ran to assist him, he was dead.

It is not a very unusual occurrence in cities, but the people were of course full of pity for the poor old fellow. A Corporation ambulance came and the body of an old man was taken to the mortuary of Jervis Street Hospital. There the Sisters of Mercy are in charge at the mortuary, and where nuns are, there is respect for every temple of the Holy Ghost whatever its condition. The poor clothes made no difference. A nun, Sister Ignatius, prepared the body for burial. As she cut off the poor clothes of this man who had no wish for better, and who was identified as Matthew Talbot, her scissors encountered a hard substance. Cause for wonder; the chains were exposed. Poor Matt, his secret was out – in the designs of God. A heavy rosary around the neck and medal attached to the chains spoke of some holy motive. Wisely, the nun and her assistants decided that a statement of what they had found should be prepared and signed by two of them. It was done. The chains had worn into the flesh. The body was scrupulously clean.

Reverently the last offices were done and three days later, the funeral left Gardiner Street Church for Glasnevin.

The end had come. But it was the beginning. People had been silent out of deference to Matt's desire to be unknown. One of his friends, a man who had known him for a quarter of a century, happened to speak to Sir Joseph Glynn of the dead man. Sir Joseph was interested and became more so as the story unfolded. Matt Talbot's friend suggested that this workman's life, if written, might be productive of good. Sir Joseph Glynn wrote it, interviewing Matt's surviving sister and many of his workmates. The simple story was written and since then, we, of the scribbling fraternity, have been

interested, seeking new facts, striving to catch the full value of that life lived so humbly, so austere.

Now the scope of interest has widened. The great Catholic Church is thinking of that hidden life. Rome has heard of Matt Talbot and prayers go daily to heaven asking that if it be God's Will, Matt should one day wear the crown of sainthood. The most fervent of prayers go up in front of that room in 18 Rutland Street where visitors from many parts call to kneel before the crucifix there and pray that God may give this glory to the Irish working men, the glory of having produced a saint, and that, at least, we may all profit from the lesson he preached in his sixty-nine years of life, the lesson that to fall is human, to rise again a thing of divine grace, given only to those who strive and watch and pray.

Few of us may attain to the heights that Matt attained, but we can try to walk near him and watch his homely face grow radiant as his mother saw it when he spoke to God. It will be radiant surely, if that day comes when Mother Church hails her humble son as Blessed.

In 1931, the Ordinary or Informative Process was begun by Most Rev. Dr. Byrne, the then Archbishop of Dublin, when witnesses, who had known Matt Talbot were questioned, on oath, on all relevant matters.

In 1937, Rome having meantime examined the evidence tendered, a Papal Decree was signed formally introducing the Cause of Matt Talbot.

Ten years later, in 1947, His Holiness the Pope signed the Latin Decree announcing that the Cause had been officially opened by the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

In 1948 followed the next step, the opening of the Apostolic Process in Dublin and the examination, on oath, of forty witnesses. This evidence was also sent to Rome.

In 1952, as part of the Apostolic Process, the remains were exhumed, in the presence of His Grace the Archbishop and many distinguished people and then sealed in a special double coffin and re-interred in the Gentili Vault in Glasnevin Cemetery.

Now it remains for those many who desire to see Matt Talbot honoured by the Church to pray that Rome may declare him "of heroic virtue" and that God may grant miracles through his intercession. Let us pray.

PRAYER.

O Jesus, true friend of the humble worker, You have given us in Your servant, Matthew, a wonderful example of victory over vice, a model of penance and of love for Your Holy Eucharist, grant, we beseech You, that we, Your servants, may overcome all our wicked passions and sanctify our lives with penance and love like his.

And if it be in accordance with Your adorable designs that Your pious servant should be glorified by the Church, deign to manifest by Your heavenly favours the power he enjoys in Your sight, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

(The above prayer, issued and approved by the Archbishop of Dublin, carries with it an indulgence of 100 days for each time recited.) [Since Vatican II. This has been modified to a 'partial Indulgence'.]

PROTESTATION.

In obedience to the decree of Pope Urban VIII, the writer and publishers protest that all that is written in this book has no other authority or credit than such as is grounded on human evidence. Hence, no expression or statement is intended to assume or forestall the decision of the Church.

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