

5. 'We Call Him The Saint, Mum'

The years 1907 to 1919 were spent by Father Sullivan at Clongowes, with an interval of one year when he returned to Tullabeg for his tertianship, a year of spiritual renovation made by all Jesuit priests shortly after ordination. His work at Clongowes fell into three categories. He taught, mainly Classics and Religious Knowledge, he was Spiritual Father to the boys, and he worked in the small public church attached to the college. Something will be said later about all of these activities.

It is a common experience that good scholars are often not good teachers and this was, to a considerable extent, true of Father Sullivan. He found it hard to understand the difficulty that his beloved Latin authors presented to mediocre boys and was inclined to let his enthusiasm outrun the ability of his class to follow. But he was most devoted and hard-working and had the reputation of being able to pull even the most backward candidate through his matriculation. The boys attributed his success more to his prayers than to his powers as a teacher, perhaps with justice.

He was fortunately blessed with a quick sense of humour, which saved him from taking too seriously the lack of response with which his enthusiasm for classical learning occasionally met. On one occasion he gave a dramatic description of the death of Shelley and wound up with the finding of a volume of Sophocles in the drowned poet's pocket. One of the class, later a distinguished Dublin surgeon, was heard to growl, 'Served him right!' alluding, it would appear, less to Shelley's other short-

comings than to the crowning folly of carrying Greek plays about in his pocket. A quick smile came to Father John's face.

In his capacity as Spiritual Father, the word veneration is hardly too strong to use of the sentiments entertained towards him by every generation of Clongownians since 1909. It is, perhaps, the most accurate word, too, for it indicates the natural shortcomings which he had as a boys' man, and over which his holiness triumphed. Veneration does not involve intimacy, rather it excludes it. Father John probably never understood boys perfectly. He took the keenest interest in them, an interest which could only have been prompted by a sincere affection. He was always at their disposal. He corresponded with, and helped many of them in later life. Yet one felt, when hearing him talking of them, that his vision of them, though clear, was from without. He was somewhat severe in his judgment of them, characterizing as 'audacious' - a favourite adjective of his what others would accept as the normal failings of healthy boyhood. But if his judgment sounded at times severe, he was never severe in heart or action. On the contrary, boys flocked to him for consolation in their troubles. His confessional was always crowded and usually by the least law-abiding citizens of the little world of school.

It was a striking example of the conquering power of true holiness. There is in the hearts of Irish boys a peculiarly responsive chord that throbs in answer to the call of the supernatural, and there was such a call in the very sight of that familiar figure, the head ever bent in prayer as he walked, the worn, emaciated face and hands, the threadbare garments, the low hurried voice that took on a peculiar ring when it spoke of God. The boys of every

generation took it for granted, in their speech and letters, that he was a saint. During his last illness, one of them wrote home to his mother: 'Father Sullivan (we call him the Saint, Mum) is dying. By the time this letter arrives, he will probably be in heaven'. And the day after his death another remarked to a master, 'Sir, isn't it a great thing to be able to say that you were taught by a saint? And the funny thing is that we knew it even when we pulled his leg a bit'.

Many of his former pupils have put on record their impressions of him at different periods of his career as a schoolmaster. A few excerpts may be quoted from the reminiscences of Captain Sidney B. Minch, who was captain of Clongowes in 1911-12.

'The many visits which I paid to his room involved a certain amount of suffering for me. I lost my play-hour and in winter I knew that I had to face a cold and chilly room. Once I arrived a little before him, and did my best with the fire, which seemed to consist of a little smoke in the centre of a grate half-filled with slack. It was hopeless, and always the same. I found out also how little covering he had on his bed. It was run on the same lines as the grate half-filled with slack.

'I found Father John at best on his walks. With his hat crushed any old way under his arm, he started in a half-run, head well forward, praising everything that nature had to show. How he talked! He found out what you were interested in and then brought God or some saint right into the middle of it so naturally that even our young minds became aware of his constant preoccupation with the things of God. Every now and again he would slip aside to visit some poor folk living in a humble cottage. We would see him kneeling at the feet of the invalid. As a matter of fact, he always knelt with us to hear our confessions also.

'I knew him even better when I left Clongowes, during the Great War, and afterwards when I fetched him from Rathfarnham to help my father during his last moments on earth. I remember him well, kneeling at the bedside, his socks, which were badly shrunk, just slightly above his boots - you could actually see his shins. Before he left I realized for the first time how happy an event death could be. In the same old clothes which he always wore, he assisted at my marriage and disappeared immediately it was over.

'His memory is always vividly before me. I had a tremendous affection for him, and I know how easy it would be to exaggerate in writing about him, and how much he would hate it. I have, therefore, kept accurately to what I remember of him. There is one thought which today I still carry with me and which he alone gave me. It is this, "You'll never have to fight alone in this world, although we leave our Divine Saviour to fight alone constantly".'

The long hours which Father Sullivan spent in prayer and his constant visits to the sick and suffering did not prevent him from playing his part fully in the life of the community. He was always at the disposal of the Prefect of Studies for extra work and would cheerfully step into a gap and take any class, no mean test of virtue even for one who is not a septuagenarian. On a wet half-holiday, rather than leave the boys on their prefect's hands, he would volunteer to take a couple of classes for a walk.

His unflinching good humour made him a most pleasant companion in spite of his retiring nature. He had a highly developed sense of humour and a fund of witty anecdotes connected with the Bench and the Bar. A favourite story of his was that of a charming young lady who found herself placed beside a very serious judge at a banquet.

She tried to engage him in conversation, but could find no congenial topic. At length she played her trump-card - the great man must be musical, she thought. 'Has your Lordship heard Madam Cavallcani sing *The Voice of the Zephyr*?' 'No, thank God,' was the gruff response.

Nor was Father John's humour confined to anecdotes. On one occasion a fellow-Jesuit referred to a certain lady as Miss So-and-so. Father John, running his hand through his hair and giving his friend one of his half-shy, half-humorous looks, remarked, 'Would you call her "Miss"?' She was married three times'.

It was remarkable that although Father Sullivan was so seriously-minded, and although his conversation often ran on not over-cheerful topics such as death-bed scenes and painful illnesses, he always gave the impression of being perfectly cheerful and even light-hearted. He had a quaint way of saying, 'Cheer up, cheer up, cheer up,' and his eyes would light up in a kindly fashion contrasting markedly with his rugged ascetical face. He did indeed himself give the impression of possessing that happy equanimity which comes from undiluted goodness and indifference to the things of the world.