

## Ciotógs and Lefties and the Like

In Ireland every village has “characters” who, through their idiosyncratic behavior, generate comic stories. Kitty Ahern was one such character, living near enough to us in Mayfield. She was a “widda woman” (widow) in her late seventies and had a household of cats who lived, slept, mated and defecated in her house, on her bed, and atop her dining table. The place was filthy and the crockery and cutlery hadn’t seen a lick of water since before Jesus was barmitzvahed. Nobody wanted to visit her, because reverse hospitality required that you not refuse food in any body's house.

A new parish priest was appointed to our church, and duty demanded that he pay a house call on all his charges. He had been briefed on Kitty, and was dreading the visit. Finally, he could no longer postpone it, so mustering all his courage he knocked on the half door and said “Bail ó Dhia anseo isteach!” (the blessings of God precede me in here!) This is the normal greeting on entering an Irish house. In the case of the pastor, it was probably more like a despairing plea for divine protection. “Fáilte ‘gus fiche romhat, a athair!” (A welcome and twenty welcomes to you, father!) replied Kitty. She shooshed a half a dozen cats off the sofa, brushed the seat a few times with her palm and invited him to “lig do scíth” (take your ease). He gingerly lowered himself between the arms of the chair, already aware that his black suit would never be the same again. Cat hairs wafted their way to his great nostrils and he began to sneeze violently. It was the signal for instant retaliation. Great clouds of dander answered his expulsion of the first wave of missionaries and his proboscis shuddered and snorted and shivered. Kitty may as well have been in a sanitized bubble for all the harm it seemed to have been doing her. She crouched on her own chair, solicitously watching him and chanting “Dia linn! Dia linn!” (God be with us, God be with us!) to his every sneeze. In the periodic lulls between bouts, he managed to enquire after the state of her immortal soul. She assured him that all was well and that

she was happy to go any time the good Lord beckoned. Right now, the pastor feared that he himself was a more likely candidate for the call.

And then when it seemed that things couldn't possibly get any worse, his good luck broke and she invited him to have "*a mug a' tay and a cut a' bread*" with her. Since the invitation was a mere formality, given that no guest could honorably decline, particularly a new pastor with ultimate responsibility for the state of her immortal soul, she didn't even wait for an answer. The kettle was already "singing" on the hob. She reprimanded several of the cats who were grooming themselves on the dining table, and got particularly annoyed with one big tom cat who was drinking from the milk jug "*Cat out of dat! Are ye goin' to lave us a drop at all for de tay!*" And she pulled his big head out of the jug and threw him onto the floor. The pastor's stomach did somersaults.

She threw some slops out of the big mug and took a fistful of tealeaves from the tea canister. She threw half of these into the mug and the other half into a glass jam jar. She took the heavy black kettle off the crane and poured the boiling water into the two containers. He could see the tea leaves swirling around inside the jam jar. Then she poured milk from the recently rescued jug and wiping a spoon in her voluminous black skirts measured out two overflowing heaps of sugar into the mug. "*I'm off sugar, meself, for Lent, father*" she added virtuously. She plunked the steaming, grimy, filthy mug down on the arm of his seat. He crossed himself and intoned despairingly "*Bless us, Oh Lord and these thy gifts which of thy bounty we are about to receive, through Christ our Lord - -.*" "*Amen!*" she responded triumphantly.

His mind was in turmoil. There was no way he could avoid drinking the tea, but was there any way he could minimize the damage? He knew with an infallibility, which the pope in Rome would envy, that this mug was her normal drinking vessel, now offered in love to her esteemed guest, while she made humbly do with a glass jam jar. She was grinning toothlessly at him, like a mother watching her favorite child consume a special tidbit that she had heroically acquired at enormous personal sacrifice. He figured there was only one tiny

victory that might marginally reduce the possibility of typhoid, cholera and yellow fever - he would hold the mug in his left hand and drink from it that way. He closed his eyes and took a draught. Kitty clapped enthusiastically and with all the joy of a stranger in foreign places serendipitously meeting a native of one's own country, she exclaimed, *"Ah father, I see you're a ciotóg, (left-hander) just like meself!!"*