



Some Notes on Tinkers and Their "Cant"

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SOME NOTES ON TINKERS AND THEIR “CANT”¹

THE tinker's tent by the wayside is a familiar sight. A little more than half a century ago they were unknown. The very old tinkers tell of the days when they had no tents, but were dependent on the charity of the country people for shelter in a barn or outhouse. Often they were compelled to sleep by the roadside under the shelter of the hedge with no better bed than a bundle of hay or straw, and no covering save the stars. Some of them, when the opportunity offered, availed of the shelter of the workhouses, or, perhaps, of a low lodging house, if they could afford the few pence demanded for a bed, or portion of a bed. Here and there through the countryside, in houses of the very poor, they could get a night's shelter, and a bed of straw on the kitchen floor. I knew of two such houses where tinkers used to lodge, if the weather were very wet and cold. They were charged sixpence a night and slept around the fireplace.

I have questioned various families on the subject of tents, and they are all unanimous on the question of their origin. They give credit for their introduction to one Arthur MacDonough, long since dead. Tom Cauley (*c.* 78), a cousin of his, told me the story of the tents several times. He says that Arthur was in England some sixty years ago, and was sent to prison for fighting. After his release he joined a band of gipsies and lived some time with them. He returned to Ireland and, meeting some of his own people about Boyle, told them that he would never be dependent on anyone for shelter while he could have a roof of his own. He went into the town of Boyle, bought canvas, and returning to where the others were, proceeded to erect a tent as he had seen the gipsies do. Old Tom states that he was present on the occasion, now more than fifty years ago. From then on, the custom spread. All the members of the MacDonough, Joyce and Power families whom I have met, tell the same tale, that Arthur MacDonough was the first tinker to erect a tent.

It is not so long ago since tinkers had no carts. Few of them had carts before the Boer war. Many of them joined the army at that time, and when they returned from the war they bought carts. Before that time those who owned asses used them for

¹ See *Béaloides* III., 170, 290, 518.

transporting their belongings. They loaded them with two large bags, after the fashion in which panniers are used to-day. This manner of transport is rarely seen to-day. At the present time every family has a cart. True indeed, some of them are very ramshackle affairs, but some families are able to pay country carpenters to make a good cart, which they paint a vivid red or blue. They are very fond of bartering or "swopping" carts. To-day a tinker may have a new cart, to-morrow he may have an old one, having exchanged the new for the old, with perhaps a pony, a piece of harness, or a few shillings thrown in. Once, when I asked a young fellow how many years his new cart would last, he replied: "Till I want a few shillings. I mightn't have it this day week. I'd swop it for an old one and maybe get a pound 'boot.'" This exchange of articles is not confined to carts alone; tent-covers, harness, asses, horses, tools, and even clothes and boots are exchanged as the humour strikes them.

The desire for change is strong in them, both in regard to things and place. This exchange of articles, together with the constant movement from place to place, even though it be within a limited area, and from one already familiar scene to another is the colour in their lives. A casual visit to a distant place, while being something to talk about, leaves no longing to return. The area wherein the family and their relatives move is enough to satisfy their desires. Tinkers part with friends and relatives in a casual manner and meet again in an equally casual way, even after a long absence. On parting, the place and day of re-union are fixed, and always adhered to. It is surprising, when one considers their mode of life, how far ahead these re-unions are planned.

Family rows and dissensions are quite common, but rarely give rise to lasting bad feeling. Wounds and bruises received in fair fight may leave an outward mark, but afterwards, the participants meet as good friends. Last summer I saw two fine hardy six-footers have a battle royal by the roadside. When both grew tired their wives rushed in and dragged each to his tent. Neither wasted any sympathy on her husband, but soundly berated them; in fact one of them soundly thrashed her man, and abused him for making a "holy show" of himself! Next morning the combatants went to the nearest village and drank to each other and a renewed friendship! Why not? Were they not brothers-in-law and cousins, and "blood is thicker than water?"

The fierce encounters which take place now and then between large bodies of tinkers are the result of clan disputes. These clan disputes are lasting things and are somewhat in the nature of vendetti. In a fight of this nature, quarter is neither asked nor shown. Families concerned in a feud of this nature will not enter the territory of the other side. I once asked a tinker to come and

camp near my home so that I could record his stories. He told me that he dare not ; that his camp would be burned in the night and he himself safe enough if he escaped with his life. Needless to remark, his opponents could not enter his territory either. If they did, he would feel justified in burning their camp and chasing them out of the area. Not so very long ago, two brothers had their camp attacked in the middle of the night, their wagons wrecked and they themselves badly beaten into the bargain. They summarised the whole affair in a few words, adding, "Our turn will come some day."

It is not often that they invoke the aid of the law in cases of this sort. That would be somewhat like invoking the aid of an enemy, which would be bad taste. Still, the tinker will often try to get his enemy into the clutch of the law while he himself remains in the background. When a tinker falls foul of the law, his relatives prove their loyalty by employing a solicitor in his defence. What is more, they pay the solicitor without a grumble. Of course they only employ a solicitor when the charge is of a serious nature. They do not mind being sent to jail for a few months, but they do not crave a sentence running into years.

A word of explanation on that famous (or infamous) piece of mechanism known as a "gladar box." The "gladar box" is a dummy mould for coining. To the eye of the unsuspecting victim, the "gladar box" is a mould, but the tinker knows better! The "gladar box" is a small shallow box containing on either side a sheet of lead bearing the impress of a coin, generally a florin. On one of the outside edges is a small orifice leading, to all intents and purposes, to the mould inside. The operator usually approaches a countryman whom he knows to be fond of money, and not averse to getting it easily—so long as his neighbours don't find out! After a lot of beating about the bush, he insinuates that it is quite an easy thing to turn a little money into a lot—if only one knows how. Provided he is convinced that he has succeeded in creating the proper atmosphere he produces the "gladar box" and explains its mysteries. He then proceeds to give a demonstration. He produces a ladle and a quantity of solder. The solder is melted, the "gladar box" placed on a table, and everything is ready. Lifting the ladle, he prepares to pour the solder into the mould, but—"Get me water to cool the money," he says. While the victim turns to obey, a genuine florin is slipped into the mould, and the boiling metal poured into the box. The box is opened and the hot coin falls into the water. There it is! Take it out, see if it rings true! Yes, it does! Marvelling, the countryman examines the coin. He has already made up his mind to invest some of his earnings. It is not often he gets a chance like this ; twenty pounds for five. The tinker takes the money and promises to return on a

certain day. He never does! In some cases, when the money is not at hand, the client is instructed to leave it with some shop-keeper, saying it is to be given to the tinker in respect of a horse purchased.

The tinker and his friends have a jolly time while the money lasts, the countryman, a new and costly experience.

The number of tinkers who use the "gladar box" is small. I have heard much of his experiences from one man, who is noted for this trick. He holds that it is no harm! When I suggested to him that the game must be played out, he replied: "There's no day you go the road but you meet one fool anyway!"

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES OF SHELTA, OR TINKERS'
"CANT"

Good	... muñe [ñ = ng].
Spoon	... mústóg. ²
Pocket	... gópa
Fish	... scéiv.
Intoxicating drink	... sringan rílye. ³
A few potatoes	... sup cullions.
Boiled potatoes	.. chelp cullions ["ch" as in "chair."]
A quiet woman	... sucánti beór
The mind	... liart.
Clever	... sáirc [s = sh].
The hoop of a tin can	... luscan. ⁴
Urine	... ñiup [ñ = ng].
A week	... grastóg. ⁵
Months	.. srís.
A gate	... sluta. ⁶
A gun	... nuggle. ⁷
A room	... nomera
Work	... grubacht
Rain	... robbiniuc. ⁸
Running	... surrien. ⁹
Singing	... sorcán.
Daughter	... laidneach.

² *Béal*. III, 178 (3). ³ *ibid.* III 179 (5), 290 (4). ⁴ *ibid.* III 179 (5), *luscán*, a herring. ⁵ *ibid.* III 291 (11). ⁶ *ibid.* III 180 (6). ⁷ *ibid.* III 182 (15). ⁸ *ibid.* III 292 (12). ⁹ *ibid.* IV 1 (15), *lorc surrier*, a wheel.

PHRASES OR SAYINGS IN "CANT"

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. For nothing. | 1. For inoc a bheirt. |
| 2. I can smoke my pipe like the devil. | 2. I can laisk my steamer like the mfdil. |
| 3. Keep the box. | 3. Buiceád the merrigín. |
| 4. The days of the week. | 4. The tálosc of the grastóg. |
| 5. The months of the year. | 5. The srís of the límina. |
| 6. The pipe is filled. | 6. The steamer is tán'd. |
| 7. He can get it more quickly than by working. | 7. He can get it stoffier than greti'n any grubien. |
| 8. If we can remain here for the night we'll leave in the morning. | 8. If we get the dorahóig in áise we'll misli out of this aharum. |
| 9. Cutting tin. | 9. Searcin' stán. |
| 10. He is a quiet fellow. | 10. He is a grúnta gleoch. |
| 11. He is a clever fellow. | 11. He is a sairc gleoch. |
| 12. It would be a shame not to go to see him, when you knew he was ill. | 12. It would be an eifish not to misli to his jeel, when you grani'd he was gritch. |
| 13. They are out of their minds (<i>i.e.</i> , covetous) for money. | 13. They are mislien out of their liart for gairead. |
| 14. I didn't see you for a long time. | 14. I didn't súni your jeel in a stoffie túirisc. |
| 15. Wash your shirt. | 15. Nolsc your míltóg. |
| 16. Running like the devil. | 16. Shurrien like the mfdil. |
| 17. He is running now. | 17. He is shurrien anurt. |
| 18. Going home. | 18. Misli'n ahavra. |

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CÁSAMH AN TSEANCHUI

Mo shean-athair nuair a bhí sé dá thabhairt, agus é ana-chríonna an uair sin—os ceann 80 blian d'aois—dh'iarramuir air sgéal a dh'innsint. Duairt sé nárbh' fhéidir leis, agus dubhairt sé an véarsa so ; is dóigh liom gurab é féin a chúm é :

“ Tá mo cheann ag éadromú,
M'inntinn a' dul amú,
Mo chruí istig go dubhach,
Is mo chosa gan lúch (lúth).”

*Séamus Ó Caoimh, (44),
(ó phar. Cheapach Chuinn) i Ros gCré, 10 Noll. 1933.
S. Ó D.*