

DOGGY CROSS

by Jim Kemmy

One of the best-known of Limerick's many characters of fifty years ago was James "Doggy" Cross. The leading member of the Arch-Confraternity of his day, Doggy was renowned for his passionate — and sometimes violent — love of the Pope and the Redemptorists Fathers. His ebullient exploits and the colourful stories still told about him are now a familiar part of Limerick folklore.

Of burly physique, measuring six feet in height and weighing around the 18-stone mark, he was known throughout the city by almost every man, woman and child by the cognomen, "Doggy" — not that he bred, loved, trained or even walked a dog; on the contrary, second only to his wife, his next best friend was his horse. He was a simple, hard-working man, with an impetuous nature and a gruff, direct method of speaking. His lot in his early life was not an easy one, when he earned a precarious living as a hired carman at the docks and doing the odd job that came his way. In later life he became a contractor and amassed a sizeable fortune by supplying vegetables to the military barracks, hospitals and other such institutions.

Doggy's dress was as impressive as his physique. He was rarely seen in a coat of any kind. In season, and out, he would appear in the same rig-out: a grey-black shirt (British Army-type issue), dark trousers, with a 54-inch waistband, worn high up near chest level, striped braces, 2 inches wide, nailed boots and, to crown it all, a yellow straw hat, with an extra wide rim, reminiscent of that worn in banana plantations in South America.

The big stone on the bank of the canal, near the Railway Bridge, was more than just another stone to Doggie. He used to sit on it for a rest during his frequent rambles along the canal bank. It was here, too, that he sat and sweated out the clashes between his favourite hurling team, Cloughaun, and their many adversaries from the city and county. When these games were played in the Markets' Field he kept in touch with the fortunes of his team through the exertions of a number of boys, whom he employed to make several sallies to the sportsground to keep him in touch with the score as the game progressed. So great was his regard for his team and so intense his interest in their fortunes, that he felt unable to endure the tension of the game as a spectator. He was obsessed with the fear of defeat and, believed that his distance from such a tragedy would help to minimise his great disappointment. So Doggy was forced to sit out his desperate agony on the great stone, biting his moustache with passion and anxiety, feverishly waiting for the good or bad tidings, as each game ebbed and flowed to its final whistle.

Though he was a "pillar" of the Confraternity and religious to the point of being fanatical, Doggy could be unconsciously entertaining and amusing when going about his workday duties. He frequently failed to realise the implications of what he said and so he rarely knew when someone was offended by his blunt and direct way of speaking.

Many stories, some of them apocryphal, are told about the big carman. One of Doggy's jobs entailed delivering gravel to various parts of the city. When a doctor asked him to bring a load to his house, to be spread on the passageway leading to the building, the Parkman promptly complied. In the early afternoon of the following day he duly arrived at the doctor's door with the gravel. He rang the bell and immediately the door was opened by a nurse. "What is it you want?" she enquired.

"I have the gravel", Doggy gruffly replied. (Gravel also means a collection of small gall stones in the kidneys or bladder). "Come in and get ready for the doctor", said the nurse, showing the carman into the surgery. "Take off your trousers and the doctor will be with you in a minute", the nurse ordered. "What do you mean?", asked the bemused man. "Haven't you got the gravel?" came the nurse's impatient ripost. "I have", said Doggy, "but surely you don't think I have it in the arse of my trousers!"

The best stories told about him all have a religious flavour. An old-time, fire-and-brimstone, blood-and-thunder mission was building up to its closing crescendo at the "Fathers". For two weeks the innocent, hard-working Parkmen, who could hardly keep their eyes open long enough to say the Rosary, were lectured and hectorated on the evils of their sinful lives and urged to desist from the Seven Deadly Sins — sins that they had not the time, money or energy to commit. The closing of the mission came and, as each man fervently clasped his lighted candle, the black-robed figure in the pulpit held aloft his crucifix and, in a voice like a fog-horn, roared to the captive congregation: "Do you renounce the Devil?" "We do", replied the men in unison. The priest warmed to his task and, increasing the volume and content of his question, again asked: "Do you renounce the Devil and all his works and all his pomps?" "We do" came the well-conditioned chorus. But the Redemptorist was far from satisfied. Working himself up to a paroxysm bordering on hysteria, the sweating priest asked his question for the third time and added: "Louder! Louder! Let them hear you even in the depths of Hell! Before the congregation could get time to respond Doggy bawled out in a mad frenzy of religious intoxication: "We do, **THE HOOR, WE DO!**"

But the highest point of Doggy's fervour was his pilgrimage to Rome to see his beloved Pope. Dressed in his Sunday best, the Parkman waited in the middle of his fellow pilgrims for the pontiff to enter the room for the group audience. When the Pope duly appeared, Doggy was beside himself with excitement. Surging spontaneously forward, the burly carter bullocked his way through the closely-packed crowd until he reached the great man. Grasping the hand of the startled Pope in his huge fist, Doggy solemnly assured him: "Jasus, Holy Father, we'd die for you in Park!"

Yet another story involves the Limerick-born Father Creagh, the Director of the Confraternity during the 1904 pogrom in the city. After the members had been stirred up by an anti-Semitic sermon, Doggy was making his way home by way of Colloony Street, the "Little Jerusalem" of Limerick. As an old, bearded Jew trotted along the footpath, Doggy lashed out and capsized him. "Why did you do that to me? I did nothing to you", queried the plaintive victim. "Ye crucified Christ", shouted the enraged Doggy. "But that happened two thousand years ago", protested the flattened Jew. "Makes no difference", replied his towering protagonist, "I only heard about it tonight!"

Such a man was James Doggy Cross.