

XI

OWENEEN THE SPRAT

I WAS labouring in the slough of Christmas letters and bills, when my wife came in and asked me if I would take her to the Workhouse.

“My dear,” I replied, ponderously, but, I think, excusably, “you have, as usual, anticipated my intention, but I think we can hold out until after Christmas.”

Philippa declined to pay the jost the respect to, which its age entitled it, and replied inconsequently that I knew perfectly well that she could not drive the outside car with the children and the Christmas tree. I assented that they would make an awkward team, and offered, as a substitute for my services, those of Denis, the stopgap.

Those who live in Ireland best know the staying powers of stopgaps. Denis, uncle of Michael Leary the Whip, had been imported into the kennels during my ministry, to bridge a hiatus in the long dynasty of the kennel-boys, and had remained for eighteen months, a notable instance of the survival of what might, primarily

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

have been considered the un ttest. That Denis should so long have endured his nephew's rule was due not so much to the tie of blood, as to the



MY WIFE CAME AND ASKED ME IF I WOULD TAKE HER TO THE
WORKHOUSE

privileged irresponsibility of a stopgap. Nothing was expected of him, and he pursued an unmolested course, until the return of Flurry Knox from South Africa changed the general conditions. He then remained submerged until he drifted

Oweneen the Sprat

into the gap formed in my own establishment by Mr. Peter Cadogan's elopement.

Philippa's workhouse-tea took place on Christmas Eve. We were still hurrying through an early luncheon when the nodding crest of the Christmas tree passed the dining-room windows. My youngest son immediately upset his pudding into his lap; and Philippa hustled forth to put on her hat, an operation which, like the making of an omelette, can apparently only be successfully performed at the last moment. With feelings of mingled apprehension and relief I saw the party drive from the door, the Christmas tree seated on one side of the car, Philippa on the other, clutching her offspring, Denis on the box, embosomed, like a wood-pigeon, in the boughs of the spruce fir. I congratulated myself that the Quaker, now white with the snows of many winters, was in the shafts. Had I not been too deeply engaged in so arranging the rug that it should not trail in the mud all the way to Skebawn; I might have noticed that the lamps had been forgotten.

It was, as I have said, Christmas Eve, and as the afternoon wore on I began to reflect upon what the road from Skebawn would be in another hour, full of drunken people, and, what was worse, of carts steered by drunken people. I had assured Philippa (with what I believe she describes

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

as masculine *esprit de corps*) of Denis's adequacy as a driver, but that did not alter the fact that in the last rays of the setting sun, I got out my bicycle and set forth for the Workhouse. When I reached the town it was dark, but the Christmas shoppers showed no tendency to curtail their operations on that account, and the streets were filled with an intricate and variously moving tide of people and carts. The paraffin lamps in the shops did their best, behind bunches of holly, oranges, and monstrous Christmas candles, and partially illumined the press of dark-clad women, and more or less drunken men, who swayed and shoved and held vast conversations on the narrow pavements. The red glare of the chemist's globe transformed the leading female beggar of the town into a being from the Brocken; her usual Christmas family, contributed for the festival by the neighbours, as to a Christmas number, were grouped in fortunate ghastliness in the green light. She extracted from me her recognised tribute, and pursued by her assurance that she would forgive me now till Easter (*i.e.* that further alms would not be exacted for at least a fortnight), I made my way onward into the outer darkness, beyond the uttermost link in the chain of public-houses.

The road that led to the Workhouse led also



AN INTRICATE AND VARIOUSLY MOVING TIDE OF PEOPLE

Oweneen the Sprat

to the railway station ; a quarter of a mile away the green light of a signal-post stood high in the darkness, like an emerald. • As I neared the Workhouse I recognised the deliberate footfall of the Quaker, and presently his long pale face entered the circle illuminated by my bicycle-lamp. My family were not at all moved by my solicitude for their safety, but, being in want of an audience, were pleased to suggest that I should drive home with them. The road was disgustingly muddy ; I tied my bicycle to the back of the car with the rope that is found in the wells of all outside cars. It was not till I had put out the bicycle lamp that I noticed that the car-lamps had been forgotten, but Denis, true to the convention of his tribe, asseverated that he could see better without lights. I took the place vacated by the Christmas tree, the Quaker pounded on at his usual stone-breaking trot, and my offspring, in strenuous and entangled duet, declaimed to me the events of the afternoon.

It was without voice or warning that a row of men was materialised out of the darkness, under the Quaker's nose ; they fell away to right and left, but one, as if stupefied, held on his way in the middle of the road. It is not easy to divert the Quaker from his course ; we swung to the right, but the wing of the car, on my side, struck

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

the man full in the chest. He fell as instantly and solidly as if he were a stone pillar, and, like a stone, he lay in the mud. Loud and inebriate howls rose from the others, and, as if in answer, came a long and distant shriek from an incoming train. Upon this, without bestowing an instant's further heed to their fallen comrade, the party took to their heels and ran to the station. It was all done in a dozen seconds; by the time the Quaker was pulled up we were alone with our victim, and Denis was hoarsely suggesting to me that it would be better to drive away at once. I have often since then regretted that I did not take his advice.

The victim was a very small man; Denis and I dragged him to the side of the road, and propped him up against the wall. He was of an alarming limpness, but there was a something reassuring in the reek of whisky that arose as I leaned over him, trying to diagnose his injuries by the aid of a succession of lighted matches. His head lay crookedly on his chest; he breathed heavily, but peacefully, and his limbs seemed uninjured. Denis at my elbow, did not cease to assure me, tremulously, that there was nothing ailed the man, that he was a stranger, and that it would be as good for us to go home. Philippa, on the car, strove as best she might with the

Oweneen the Sprat

unappeasable curiosity of her sons and with the pigheaded anxiety of the Quaker to get home to his dinner. At this juncture a voice, fifty yards away in the darkness, uplifted itself in song—

“Heaven’s reffe-hex! Killa-ar-ney!”

It bawled hideously.

It fell as balm upon my ear, in its assurance of the proximity of Slipper.

“Sure I know the man well,” he said, shielding the flame of a match in his hand with practised skill. “Wake up, me *bouchaleen*!” He shook him unmercifully. “Open your eyes, darlin’!”

The invalid here showed signs of animation by uttering an incoherent, but, as it seemed, a threatening roar. It lifted Denis as a feather is lifted by a wind, and wafted him to the Quaker’s head, where he remained in strict attention to his duties. It also lifted Philippa.

“Is he very bad, do you think?” she murmured at my elbow. “Shall I drive for the doctor?”

“Arrah, what dothor?” said Slipper magnificently. “Give me a half-a-crown, Major, and I’ll get him what meddyceen will answer him as good as any dothor! Lave him to me!” He shook him again. “I’ll regulate him!”

The victim here sat up, and shouted something

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

about going home. He was undoubtedly very drunk. It seemed to me that Slipper's ministrations would be more suitable to the situation than mine, certainly than Philippa's. I administered the solatium; then I placed Denis on the box of the car with the bicycle-lamp in his hand, and drove my family home.

After church next day we met Flurry Knox. He approached us with the green glint in his eye that told that game was on foot, whatever that game might be.

"Who bailed you out, Mrs. Yeates?" he said solicitously. "I heard you and the Major and Denis Leary were all in the lock-up for furious driving and killing a man! I'm told he was anointed last night."

Philippa directed what she believed to be a searching glance at Flurry's face of friendly concern.

"I don't believe a word of it!" she said dauntlessly, while a very becoming warmth in her complexion betrayed an inward qualm. "Who told you?"

"The servants heard it at first Mass this morning; and Slipper had me late for church telling me about it. The fellow says if he lives he's going to take an action against the Major."

I listened with, I hope, outward serenity. In

Oweneen the Sprat

dealings with Flurry Knox the possibility that he might be speaking the truth could never safely be lost sight of. It was also well to remember that he generally knew what the truth was.

I said loftily, that there had been nothing the matter with the man but Christmas Eve, and inquired if Flurry knew his name and address.

"Of course I do," said Flurry, "he's one of those mountainy men that live up in the hill behind Aussolas. Oweneen the Sprat is the name he goes by, and he's the crossdest little thief in the Barony. Never mind, Mrs. Yeates, I'll see you get fair play in the dock!"

"How silly you are!" said Philippa; but I could see that she was shaken.

Whatever Flurry's servants may have heard at first Mass, was apparently equalled, if not excelled, by what Denis heard at second. He asked me next morning, with a gallant attempt at indifference, if I had had any word of "the man-eeen."

"'Twas what the people were saying on the roads last night that he could have the law of us, and there was more was saying that he'd never do a day's good. Sure they say the backbone is cracked where the wheel of the car went over him! But didn't yourself and the mistress swear black-

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

and blue that the wheel never went next or nigh him? And didn't Michael say that there wasn't a Christmas this ten years that that one hadn't a head on him the size of a bullawawn with the len'th o' dhrink?"

In spite of the contributory negligence that might be assumed in the case of any one with this singular infirmity, I was not without a secret uneasiness. Two days afterwards I received a letter, written on copybook paper in a clerkly hand. It had the Aussolas post-mark, in addition to the imprint of various thumbs, and set forth the injuries inflicted by me and my driver on Owen Twohig on Christmas Eve, and finally, it demanded a compensation of twenty pounds for the same. Failing this satisfaction the law was threatened, but a hope was finally expressed that the honourable gentleman would not see a poor man wronged; it was, in fact, the familiar mixture of bluff and whine, and, as I said to Philippa, the Man-een (under which title he had passed into the domestic vocabulary) had of course got hold of a letter writer to do the trick for him.

In the next day or so I met Flurry twice, and found him so rationally interested, and even concerned, about fresh versions of the accident that had cropped up, that I was moved to tell him of the incident of the letter. He looked serious, and

Oweneen the Sprat

said he would go up himself to see what was wrong with Oweneen. He advised me to keep out of it for the present, as they might open their mouths too big.

The moon was high as I returned from this interview; when I wheeled my bicycle into the yard I found that the coach-house in which I was wont to stable it was locked; so also was the harness-room. Attempting to enter the house by the kitchen door I found it also was locked; a gabble of conversation prevailed within, and with the mounting indignation of one who hears but cannot make himself heard, I banged ferociously on the door. Silence fell, and Mrs. Cadogan's voice implored heaven's protection.

"Open the door!" I roared.

A windlike rush of petticoats followed, through which came sibilantly the words, "Glory be to goodness! 'Tis the mather!"

The door opened, I found myself facing the entire strength of my establishment, including Denis, and augmented by Slipper.

"They told me you were asking after me, Major," began Slipper, descending respectfully from the kitchen table, on which he had been seated.

I noticed that Mrs. Cadogan was ostentatiously holding her heart, and that Denis was shaking like the conventional aspen.

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

"What's all this about?" said I, looking round upon them. "Why is the whole place locked up?"

"It was a little unaisy they were," said Slipper, snatching the explanation from Mrs. Cadogan with the determination of the skilled leader of conversation; "I was telling them I seen two men below in the plantation, like they'd be watching out for some one, and poor Mr. Leary here got a reeling in his head after I telling it——"

"Indeed the crayture was as white, now, as white as a masheroon!" broke in Mrs. Cadogan, "and we dhrew him in here to the fire till your Honour came hôme."

"Nonsense!" I said angrily, "a couple of boys poaching rabbits! Upon my word, Slipper, you have very little to do coming here and frightening people for nothing."

"What did I say?" demanded Slipper, dramatically facing his audience, "only that I seen two men in the plantation. How would I know what business they had in it?"

"Ye said ye heard them wishling to each other like curlews through the wood," faltered Denis, "and sure that's the whishle them Two-higs has always——"

"Maybe it's whistling to the girls they were!" suggested Slipper, with an unabashed eye at Hannah.

Oweneen the Sprat

I told him to come up with me to my office, and stalked from the kitchen, full of the comfortless wrath that has failed to find a suitable victim.

The interview in the office did not last long, nor was it in any way reassuring. Slipper, with the manner of the confederate who had waded shoulder to shoulder with me through gore, could only tell me that though he believed that there was nothing ailed the Man-eeen, he wouldn't say but what he might be severely hurted. That I wasn't gone five minutes before near a score of the Twohigs come leathering down out of the town in two ass-butts (this term indicates donkey-carts of the usual dimensions), and when Oweneen felt them coming, he let the most unmarciful screech, upon which Slipper, in just fear of the Twohigs, got over the wall, and executed a strategic retreat upon the railway station, leaving the Twohigs to carry away their wounded to the mountains. That for himself he had been going in dread of them ever since, and for no one else in the wide world would he have put a hand to one of them.

I preserved an unshaken front towards Slipper, and I was subsequently sarcastic and epigrammatic to Philippa on the subject of the curlews who were rabbiting in the plantation, but some-

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

thing that I justified to myself as a fear of Philip-pa's insatiable conscientiousness, made me resolve that I would, without delay, go "back in the mountain," and interview Oweneen the Sprat.

New Year's Day favoured my purpose, bringing with it clear frost and iron roads, a day when even the misanthropic soul of a bicycle awakens into sympathy and geniality. I started in the sunny vigour of the early afternoon, I sailed up the hills with the effortless speed of a seagull, I free-wheeled down them with the dive of a swallow, and, as it seemed to me, with a good deal of its grace. Had Oweneen the Sprat had the luck to have met me, when, at the seventh milestone from Shreelane, I realised that I had beaten my own best time by seven minutes, he could practically have made his own terms. At that point, however, I had to leave the high road, and the mountain lane that ensued restored to me the judicial frame of mind. In the first twenty yards my bicycle was transformed from a swallow to an opinionated and semi-paralysed wheelbarrow; struggling in a species of dry watercourse. I shoved it up the steep gradients of a large and brown country of heather and bog, silent save for the contering voices of the streams. A family of goats, regarding me from a rocky mound, was the first hint of civilisation; a more reliable

Oweneen the Sprat

symptom presently advanced in the shape of a lean and hump-backed sow, who bestowed on me a side glance of tepid interest as she squeezed past.

The *bohivreen* dropped, with a sudden twist to the right, and revealed a fold in the hillside, containing a half dozen or so of little fields, crooked, and heavily walled, and nearly as many thatched cabins, flung about in the hollows as indiscriminately as the boulders upon the wastes outside. A group of children rose in front of me like a flight of starlings, and scudded with barefooted nimbleness to the shelter of the houses, in a pattering, fluttering stampede. I descended upon the nearest cabin of the colony. The door was shut; a heavy padlock linking two staples said Not at Home, and the nose of a dog showed in a hole above the sill, sniffing deeply and suspiciously. I remembered that the first of January was a holy-day, and that every man in the colony had doubtless betaken himself to the nearest village. The next cottage was some fifty yards away; and the faces of a couple of children peered at me round the corner of it. As I approached they vanished, but the door of the cabin was open, and blue turf smoke breathed placidly outwards from it. The merciful frost had glazed the inevitable dirty pool in front of the door,

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

and had made practicable the path beside it; I propped my bicycle against a rock, and projected into the dark interior an inquiry as to whether there was any one in.

I had to repeat it twice before a small old woman with white hair and a lemon-coloured face appeared; I asked her if she could tell me where Owen Twohig lived.

"Your Honour's welcome," she replied, tying the strings of her cap under her chin with wiry fingers, and eyeing me with concentrated shrewdness. I repeated the question.

She responded by begging me to come in and rest myself, for this was a cross place and a backwards place, and I should be famished with the cold—"sure them little wheels dhraws the wind."

I ignored this peculiarity of bicycles, and, not without exasperation, again asked for Owen Twohig.

"Are you Major Yeates, I beg your pardon?" I assented to what she knew as well as I did.

"Why then 'tis here he lives indeed, in this little house, and a poor place he have to live in. Sure he's my son, the 'crayture—" her voice at once ascended to the key of lamentation—"faith, he didn't rise till to-day. Since Christmas Eve I didn't quinch light in the house with him stretched

Oweneen the Sprat

in the bed always, and not a bit passed his lips night or day, only one suppeen of whisky in its purity. Ye'd think the tongue would light out of his mouth with the heat, and ye'd see the blaze of darkness in his face! I hadn't as much life in me this morning as that I could wash my face!"

I replied that I wanted to speak to her son, and was in a hurry.

"He's not within, ashore, he's not within at all. He got the lend of a little donkey, and he went back the mountain to the bone-setter, to try could he straighten the leg with him."

"Did Dr. Hickey see him?" I demanded.

"Sure a wise woman came in from Finnaun, a' Stephen's Day," pursued Mrs. Twohig swiftly, "and she bet three spits down on him, and she said it's what ailed him he had the Fallen Palate, with the dint o' the blow the car bet him in the poll, and that any one that have the Fallen Palate might be speechiess for three months with it. She took three ribs of his hair then, and she was pulling them till she was in a passpiration, and in the latter end she pulled up the palate." She paused and wiped her eyes with her apron. "But the leg is what has him destroyed, altogether; she told us we should keep sheep's butter

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

rubbed to it in the place where the thrack o' the wheel is down in it."

The blush of a frosty sunset was already in the sky, and the children who had fled before me had returned, reinforced by many others, to cluster in a whispering swarm round my bicycle, and to group themselves attentively in the rear of the conversation.

"Look here, Mrs. Twohig," I said, not as yet angry, but in useful proximity to it, "I've had a letter from your son, and he and his friends have been trying to frighten my man, Denis Leary; he can come down and see me if he has anything to say, but you can tell him from me that I'm not going to stand this sort of thing!"

If the Widow Twohig had been voluble before, this pronouncement had the effect of bringing her down in spate. She instantly, and at the top of her voice, called heaven to witness her innocence, and the innocence of her "little boy"; still at full cry, she sketched her blameless career, and the unmerited suffering that had ever pursued her and hers; how, during the past thirty years, she had been drooping over her little orphans, and how Oweneen, that was the only one she had left to do a hand's turn for her, would be "under clutches" the longest day that he'd live. It was at about this point that I gave her five

Oweneen the Sprat

shillings. It was a thoroughly illogical act, but at the moment it seemed inevitable, and Mrs. Twohig was good enough to accept it in the same spirit. I told her that I would send Dr. Hickey to see her son (which had, it struck me, a somewhat stemming effect upon her eloquence), and I withdrew, still in magisterial displeasure. I must have been half way down the lane before it was revealed to me that a future on crutches was what Mrs. Twohig anticipated for her son.

By that night's post I wrote to Hickey, a strictly impartial letter, stating the position, and asking him to see Owen Twohig, and to let me have his professional opinion upon him. Philippa added a postscript, asking for a nerve-tonic for the parlour-maid, a Dublin girl, who, since the affair of the curlews in the plantation, had lost all colour and appetite, and persisted in locking the hall door day and night, to the infinite annoyance of the dogs.

Next morning, while hurrying through an early breakfast, preparatory to starting for a distant Petty Sessions, I was told that Denis wished to speak to me at the hall door. This, as I before have had occasion to point out, boded affairs of the first importance. I proceeded to the hall door, and there found Denis, pale as the Lily

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

Maid of Astolat, with three small fishes in his hand.

"There was one of thim before me in my bed lasht night!" he said in a hoarse and shaken whisper, "and there was one in the windy in the harness-room, down on top o' me razor, and there was another nelt to the stable door with the nail of a horse's shoe."

I made the natural suggestion that some one had done it for a joke.

"Thim's no joke, sir," replied Denis, portentously, "thim's Sprats!"

"Well, I'm quite aware of that," I said, unmoved by what appeared to be the crushing significance of the statement.

"Oweneen the *Sprat!*" murmured Philippa, illuminatingly, emerging from the dining-room door with her cup of tea in her hand, "it's Hannah, trying to frighten him!"

Hannah, the housemaid, was known to be the humorist of the household.

"He have a brother a smith, back in the mountain," continued Denis, wrapping up the sprats and the nail in his handkerchief; "'twas for a token hé put the nail in it. If he dhraws thim mountainy men down on me, I may as well go under the sod. It isn't yourself or the mistress they'll folly; it's meself." He crept

Oweneen the Sprat

down the steps as deplorably as the Jackdaw of Rheims, "and it's wlat Michael's after telling me,



"THIM'S NO JOKE, SIR, THIM'S SPRATS!"

they have it all through the country that I said you should throw Twohig in the' ditch, and it was good enough for the likes of him, and I said

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

to Michael 'twas a lie for them, and that we cared him as tender as if he was our mother itself, and we'd have given the night to him only for the mistress that was roaring on the car, and no blame to her; sure the world knows the mother o' children has no courage!"

This drastic generality was unfortunately lost to my wife, as she had retired to hold a court of inquiry in the kitchen.

The inquiry elicited nothing beyond the fact that since Christmas Day Denis was "using no food," and that the kitchen, so far from indulging in practical jokes at his expense, had been instant throughout in sympathy, and in cups of strong tea, administered for the fortification of the nerves. All were obviously deeply moved by the incident of the sprats, the parlour-maid, indeed, having already locked herself into the pantry, through the door of which, on Philippa's approach, she gave warning hysterically.

The matter remained unexplained, and was not altogether to my liking. As I drove down the avenue, and saw Denis carefully close the yard gates after me, I determined that I would give Murray, the District Inspector of Police, a brief sketch of the state of affairs. I did not meet Murray, but, as it happened, this made no difference. Things were already advancing

Oweneen the Sprat

smoothly and inexorably towards their preordained conclusion.

I have since heard that none of the servants went to bed that night. They, including Denis, sat in the kitchen, with locked doors, drinking tea and reciting religious exercises; Maria, as a further precaution, being chained to the leg of the table. Their fears were in no degree allayed by the fact that nothing whatever occurred; and the most immediate result of the vigil was that my bath next morning boiled as it stood in the can, and dimmed the room with clouds of steam—a circumstance sufficiently rare in itself, and absolutely without precedent on Sunday morning. The next feature of the case was a letter at breakfast time from a gentleman signing himself "Jas. Fitzmaurice." He said that Dr. Hickey having gone away for a fortnight's holiday, he (Fitzmaurice) was acting as his locum tenens. In that capacity he had opened my letter, and would go and see Twohig as soon as possible. He enclosed prescription for tonic as requested.

It was a threatening morning, and we did not go to church. I noticed that my wife's house-keeping *séance* was unusually prolonged, and even while I smoked and read the papers, I was travelling in my meditations to the point

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

of determining that I would have a talk with the priest about all this infernal nonsense. When Philippa at length rejoined me, I found that she also had arrived at a conclusion, impelled thereto by the counsels of Mrs. Cadogan, abetted by her own conscience.

Its result was that immediately after lunch, long before the Sunday roast beef had been slept off, I found myself carting precarious parcels—a jug, a bottle, a pudding-dish—to the inside car, in which Philippa had already placed herself, with a pair of blankets and various articles culled from my wardrobe (including a pair of boots to which I was sincerely attached). Denis, pale yellow in complexion and shrouded in gloom, was on the box, the Quaker was in the shafts. There was no rain, but the clouds hung black and low.

It was an expedition of purest charity; so Philippa explained to me over again as we drove away. She said nothing of propitiation or diplomacy. For my part I said nothing at all, but I reflected on the peculiar gifts of the Dublin parlour-maid in valeting me, and decided that it might be better to allow Philippa to run the show on her own lines, while I maintained an attitude of large-minded disapproval.

The blankets took up as much room in the car

Oweneen the Sprat

as a man; I had to hold in my hand a jug of partly jellified beef tea. A sourer Lady Bountiful never set forth upon an errand of mercy. To complete establishment—in the words of the *Gazette*—Maria and Minx, on the floor of the car, wrought and strove in ceaseless and objectless agitation, an infliction due to the ferocity of a female rival, who terrorised the high road within hail of my gates. I thanked heaven that I had at least been firm about not taking the children; for the dogs, at all events, the moment of summary ejection would arrive sooner or later.

Seven miles in an 'inside car' are seven miles indeed. The hills that had run to meet my bicycle and glided away behind it, now sat in their places to be crawled up and lumbered down, at such a pace as seemed good to the Quaker, whose appetite for the expedition was, if possible, less than that of his driver. Appetite was, indeed, the last thing suggested by the aspect of Denis. His drooping shoulders and deplorable countenance proclaimed apology and deprecation to the mountain tops, and more especially to the mountainy men. Looking back on it now, I recognise the greatness of the tribute to my valour and omnipotence that he should have consented thus to drive us into the heart of the enemy's country.

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

A steep slope, ending with a sharp turn through a cutting, reminded me that we were near the mountain *bhírean* that was our goal. I got out and walked up the hill, stiffly, because the cramp of the covered car was in my legs. Stiff though I was, I had outpaced the Quaker, and was near the top of the hill, when something that was apparently a brown croquet-ball rolled swiftly round the bend above me, charged into the rock wall of the cutting with a clang, and came on down the hill with a weight and venom unknown to croquet-balls. It sped past me, missed the Quaker by an uncommonly near shave, and went on its way, hotly pursued by the two dogs, who, in the next twenty yards, discovered with horror that it was made of iron, a fact of which I was already aware.

I have always been as lenient as the law, and other circumstances, would allow towards the illegal game of "bowling." It consists in bowling an iron ball along a road, the object being to cover the greatest possible distance in a given number of bowls. It demands considerable strength and skill, and it is played with a zest much enhanced by its illegality and by its facilities as a medium for betting. The law forbids it, on account of its danger to the unsuspecting wayfarer, in consideration of which a scout is

Oweneen the Sprat

usually posted ahead, to signal the approach of the police, and to give warning to passers by. The mountainy men, trusting to their isolation, had neglected this precaution, with results that came near being serious to the Quaker, and filled with wrath, both personal and official, I took the hill at a vengeful run, so as to catch the bowler red-handed. At the turn in the cutting I met him face to face. As a matter of fact he nearly ran into my arms, and the yelp of agony with which he dodged my impending embrace is a life-long possession. He was a very small man; he doubled like a rabbit, and bolted back towards a swarm of men who were following the fortunes of the game. He flitted over the wall by the roadside, and was away over the rocky hillside at a speed that even in my best days would have left me nowhere.

The swarm on the road melted; a good part of it was quietly absorbed by the lane up which I had dragged my bicycle two days before, the remainder, elaborately uninterested and respectable, in their dark blue Sunday clothes, strolled gravely in the opposite direction. A man on a bicycle met them, and dismounted to speak to the leaders. I wondered if he were a policeman in plain clothes on the prowl. He came on to meet me, loading his bicycle, and I perceived that a small black

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

leather bag was strapped to the carrier. He was young, and apparently very hot.

"I beg your pardon," he said in the accents of Du'blin, "I understand you're Major Yeates. I'm Dr. Hickey's 'Locum,' and I've come out to see the man you wrote to me about. From what you said I thought it better to lose no time."

I was rather out of breath, but I expressed my sense of indebtedness.

"I think there must be some mistake," went on the "Locum." "I've just asked these men on the road where Owen Twohig lives, and one of them—the fellow they call Skipper, or some such name—said Owen Twohig was the little chap that's just after sprinting up the mountain. He seemed to think it was a great joke. I suppose you're sure Owen was the name?"

"Perfectly sure," I said heavily.

The eyes of Dr. Fitzmaurice had travelled past me, and were regarding with professional alertness something farther down the road. I followed their direction, dreamily, because in spirit I was far away, tracking Flurry Knox through deep places.

On the hither side of the rock cutting the covered car had come to a standstill. The reins had fallen from Denis's hands; he was obviously

Oweneen the Sprat



"HE KNOWS WHAT'S WHAT!" SAID THE LOCUM.

Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.

having the "wakeness" appropriate to the crisis. Philippa, on the step below him, was proffering to him the jug of beef tea and the bottle of port. He accepted the latter.

"He knows what's what!" said the "Locum."

