A FISHY STORY

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The West of Ireland, with its rivers full of salmon, is a grand place to go fishing. Sinclair Yeates has been trying to catch salmon for three days, but without success. He starts his journey home, travelling by train, which in the early years of the twentieth century is an experience full of interest and surprises...

People say there is no smoke without fire. But that was not true in the station waiting-room where I had to wait for my train. There was certainly plenty of smoke but the fire seemed quite dead.

When I complained to the stationmaster, he said that any chimney in the world would smoke in a south-easterly wind. He was, however, sympathetic, and took me to his own fire in his office, where the steam rose in clouds from my wet boots. We talked of politics and salmon-fishing, and I had to confess that on my three-day trip I had not caught a single fish.

Before the signal for my train was received, I realized for the hundredth time the wonderful individuality of the Irish mind and the importance of the 'personal element' in Ireland. If you ask people for help, they will break rules, ignore official advice, make special arrangements - all just to please you.

I found a seat in a carriage, and the train dragged itself noisily out of the station. A cold spring rain - the time was the middle of a most unseasonal April - poured down as we came into the open. I closed both windows and began to read my wife's letter again. Philippa often says I do not read her letters, and as I was now on my way to join her and my family in England, it seemed sensible to study again her latest letter of instructions.

'Such bad luck that you haven't caught any salmon. If the worst comes to the worst, and you still haven't by the time you join us, couldn't you buy one?'

I hit my knee with my hand. I had forgotten about the damn fish! Philippa would say, 'Sinclair, I was right! You don't read my letters, do you!' It's a pity she never learns from these frequent experiences; I don't mind being called a fool, but then I should be allowed to forget things, as fools do. Without doubt, Philippa had written to Alice Hervey, whose house we were staying in for the next week, and told her that Sinclair would be only too delighted to bring her a

salmon. And Alice Hervey, who was rich enough to find much enjoyment in saving money, would have already planned the meal down to the last fish bone.

Anxiously thinking about this, I travelled through the rain. About every six miles we stopped at a station. At one, the only event was that the stationmaster presented a newspaper to the guard; at the next, the guard read aloud some interesting facts from it to the driver. The personal element was strong on this line of the Munster and Connaught Railway. Routine, hated by all artistic minds, was disguised by conversation.

According to the timetable, we were supposed to spend ten minutes at Carrig station, but it was fifteen before all the market people on the platform had climbed onto the train. Finally, the window of the carriage next to mine was thrown open, and an angry English voice asked how much longer the train was going to wait. The stationmaster, who was deep in conversation with the guard and a man carrying a long parcel wrapped in newspaper, looked round and said seriously.

'Well now, that's a mystery!'

The man with the parcel turned away and studied an advertisement, his shoulders shaking. The guard put his hand over his mouth.

The voice, even angrier now, demanded the earliest time its owner could get to Belfast.

'Ye'll be asking me next when I take me breakfast,' replied the stationmaster calmly.

The window closed with a bang, and the man on the platform dropped his parcel, which fell to the ground.

'Oh! Me fish!' cried the man, carefully picking up a remarkably handsome salmon that had slipped out of its wrapping.

Suddenly I had a bright idea. I opened my window and called to the stationmaster.

'Excuse me, would your friend sell me that salmon?'

There was a moment's lively discussion, and the stationmaster replied, 'I'm sorry, sir, he's only just bought it, in this little delay we have. But why don't ye run down and get one for yourself? There are six or seven of them down at Coffey's, selling cheap. There'll be time enough. We're waiting for the mail train to pass through in the other direction, and it hasn't been signaled yet.'

I jumped from the carriage and ran out of the station at top speed, followed by a shout from the guard that he wouldn't forget me. Congratulating myself on the influence of the personal element, I hurried through the town. On my way I met a red-faced, heated man carrying another salmon, who informed me there were still three or four fish at Coffey's, and that he was running for the train

himself.

'Coffey's is the house with the boots in the window!' he called after me. 'She'll sell at ten pence a pound if ye're stiff with her!'

'Ten pence a pound,' I thought, 'at this time of year! That's good enough.'

I saw the boots in the window, and rushed through a dark doorway. At that moment I heard, horrifyingly near, the whistle of the approaching mail train. The fat woman who appeared from a back room understood the situation at once, and in one rapid movement picked up a large fish from the floor and threw a newspaper round it.

'Weighs eight pounds!' she said. 'Ten shillings!'

I realized she was charging more than ten pence a pound, but this was not the moment for stiffness. I pushed the coins into her fishy hand, took the salmon in my arms, and ran.

Needless to say, it was uphill, and at the steepest point I heard another whistle, and feared that the worst had happened. When I reached the platform, my train was already out of the station, but the personal element was still working for me. Everybody in the station, or so it seemed to me, shouted loudly to the driver. The stationmaster put his fingers in his mouth and sent an unearthly whistle after the departing train. It took effect; the train slowed. I jumped from the platform and followed it along the rails; there were passengers' heads at all the windows, watching me with deep interest. The guard bent down and helped me up onto the train.

'Sorry, sir, the English gentleman going to Belfast wouldn't let me wait any longer,' he said apologetically.

From Carrig station came a delighted cry from the stationmaster: 'Ye told him ye wouldn't forget him!'

My very public return to my seat was greeted with great sympathy by the seven countrywomen who were now in my carriage. I was hot and out of breath, and the eyes of the seven women were fixed on me with deep and untiring interest. After a while one of them opened the conversation by supposing it was at Coffey's I got the salmon.

I said it was.

There was a silence, during which it was obvious that one question burnt in every heart.

'She's sure to have asked for ten pence!' said one woman.

'It's a beautiful fish!' I said bravely. 'Eight pounds weight. I gave her ten shillings for it.'

This confession produced a wave of shock and sympathy.

'Sure, and Eliza Coffey would rob her own mother!'

'How could an honest gentleman win a battle with her!'

'Eliza Coffey never paid a penny for that fish! Those boys of hers stole a whole lot of them last night.'

At the next station they climbed out. I helped them with their heavy baskets, and in return they told me I was a fine man, and they wished me well on my journey. They also left me with the information that I was soon to present the highly respectable Alice Hervey with a stolen salmon.

The afternoon passed cheerlessly into evening, and my journey did not get any better. Somewhere in the grey half-light I changed trains, and again later on, and at each change the salmon lost some of its newspaper wrapping. I wondered seriously whether to bury it in my suitcase. At the next station we paused for a long time. Nothing at all happened, and the rain beat patiently on the carriage roof. I closed my eyes to avoid the cold stare of the salmon, and fell asleep.

I woke up in total darkness. The train was not moving, and there was complete silence. I could see a lamp at the far end of a platform, so I knew we were at a station. I lit a match and discovered from my watch that it was eleven o'clock, exactly the time I was supposed to board the mail train. I jumped down and ran along the platform. There was no one on the train; there was no one even in the engine, which was making sad little noises to itself in the silence. There was not a human being anywhere. The name of the station was just visible in the darkness. With a lighted match I went along it letter by letter, but it was so long that by the time I got to the end, I had forgotten the beginning. One thing I did realize, though, was that it was not Loughranny, the station where I had planned to catch the mail train.

For a moment I had the feeling that there had been an accident, and that I now existed in another world. Once more I investigated the station - the ticket office, the waiting room - and finally discovered, at some distance, the stationmaster's office. As I came closer, I could see a thin line of light under the door, and a voice was suddenly raised inside.

'Let's see ye beat that. Throw down your King!'

I opened the door with understandable violence, and found the guard, the stationmaster, the driver, and his assistant seated around a table, playing a game of cards.

I was angry, and with good reason, but I accepted what they said in their defense: they thought there was no one left on the train, a few minutes here or there wouldn't matter, they would soon get me to Loughranny, and the mail train was often late.

Hoping they were right about my chances of making the connection, I hurried back to my carriage, with the officials running enthusiastically ahead of

me.

'Watch out for the goods train, Tim!' shouted the station-master to the driver, as he banged my door shut. 'She might be coming any time now!'

The answer travelled back proudly from the engine.

'Let her come! She'll have us to deal with!'

The train moved forward and gained speed rapidly. We had about fifteen miles to go, and we went as fast as the engine could manage. But it was no good - we arrived too late.

'Well,' said the guard, as I stepped onto the deserted platform of Loughranny station, 'that old mail is the most unpunctual train in Ireland! If ye're a minute late, she's gone, and maybe if ye were early, ye'd be half an hour waiting for her!'

On the whole, the guard did his best. He said he would show me the best hotel in town, although he feared it would be hard to get a bed anywhere because of the Feis. A Feis, it seems, is a festival of Irish songs and dances, where people compete for prizes. He picked up my case, he even carried the salmon, and as we walked through the empty streets, he explained to me how easily I could catch the morning boat from Rosslare, and how it was, in fact, quite an improvement on my previous plan.

All was dark at the uninviting door of the hotel chosen by the guard. For five whole minutes we rang the bell hard. I suggested trying a different hotel.

'He'll come,' said the guard confidently. 'He'll come. It rings in his room, so it does.'

A boy, half awake, half dressed, opened the door. 'There's not a bed here,' he said, yawning, 'nor anywhere in the town either.'

'I'll sit in the dining room till the time for the early train,' I said.

'To be sure, there's five beds in the dining room,' he replied, 'and there's mostly two people in every bed.' His voice was firm, but he had a hesitating look in his eye.

'What about the billiard room, Mike?' said the guard helpfully.

'We have blankets on the billiard table at this minute, and the man that won first prize for reels asleep on top of it!'

'Well, can't ye put some blankets on the floor under it?' said the guard, putting my case and the salmon in the hall. 'To be sure, there's no better place in the house! Now I must go home, before me wife thinks I'm dead and buried!'

His footsteps went lightly away down the empty street.

'Nothing troubles him!' said the boy bitterly.

And I realized that only the personal element stood between me and a sleepless night on a cold, wet station platform.

It was in the dark of the early morning that I woke again to life and its troubles. A voice had woken me, the voice of the first prize for reels, descending through a pocket of the billiard table.

'Excuse me, sir, are ye going on the 5 o'clock train to Cork?'

'No,' I said crossly.

'Well, if ye were, ye'd be late,' said the voice.

I received this useful information in annoyed silence, and tried to wrap myself in a disappearing dream.

'I'm going on the 6.30 me self,' continued the voice, 'and it's unknown to me how I'll put on me boots. Ye would not believe how me feet swelled up in me dancing shoes last night. Me feet are delicate like that, ye see.'

I pretended to be asleep, but the dream was gone. And so was any chance of further sleep.

The first prize for reels got down from the billiard table, presenting an extraordinary picture. He was wearing grass-green breeches, a white shirt, and pearl-grey stockings. He undressed, and put on ordinary clothes, including his painful boots. He then removed himself and his things to the hall, where he had a loud conversation with the boy. Meanwhile, I crawled out of my hiding-place to renew my struggle with life. Fortunately, the boy soon appeared with a cup of tea.

'I've wrapped the salmon up in brown paper for ye, sir,' he said cheerfully. 'It's safe to take across Europe with ye if ye like! I'll just run up to the station now, with the luggage. Would ye mind carrying the fish yourself? It's on the table in the hall.' My train went at 6.15. The boy had put my case in one of the many empty carriages, and stayed with me, making pleasant conversation, until the train departed.

'I'm sorry ye had a bad night, sir,' he said, 'and I must tell ye, it was only that Jimmy Durkan - he's the first prize for reels, sir - had taken a few drinks. If he'd been sober, I'd have put a gentleman like ye on the billiard table instead of him. He's a baker, ye know, in the town of Limerick. And he's engaged to my sister. Well, any girl would be glad to marry him. He dances with a beautiful straight back, and he makes grand bread!' Here the train started.

It was late that night when, stiff, dirty, with tired eyes blinded by the bright lights, I was taken by the Herveys' well-trained doorman into the Herveys' huge grand hall, and was told by another of the Herveys' beautifully dressed servants that dinner was over. I was just hoping I could go quietly upstairs to avoid meeting anyone, when a voice cried, 'Here he is!'

And Philippa, looking lovely in evening dress, came into the hall, followed by Alice Hervey, and my niece, whose wedding party this was, and by all the

usual relations who hate to miss anything that's going on before a wedding.

'Is this a wedding present for me, Uncle Sinclair?' cried the future bride, in the middle of a flood of questions and sympathy.

As she spoke, she eagerly took hold of the brown-paper parcel that was still under my arm.

'I advise you not to open it!' I cried. 'It's a salmon!'

The future bride gave a little scream of distaste, and without a moment's hesitation, threw it at her best friend, a girl standing near her. The best friend gave an answering scream, and jumped to one side. The parcel that I had looked after with a mother's care across two countries and a stormy sea fell with a crash on the stone floor.

Why did it crash?

'A salmon!' cried Philippa, staring at the parcel. There was now a small pool around it, spreading over the floor. 'But that's whiskey! Can't you smell it?'

The servant came respectfully forward. He knelt down, and cautiously picked pieces of a broken glass bottle out of the brown paper. The smell of whiskey became stronger.

'I'm afraid the other things are ruined, sir,' he said seriously, and pulled out of the parcel, one after the other, a very large pair of dancing shoes, two long grey stockings, and a pair of grass-green breeches.

They were greeted with wild enthusiasm, in doubtless much the same way as when they shared the success of Mr Jimmy Durkan at the Feis, but Alice Hervey was not amused.

'You know, dear,' she said to Philippa afterwards, 'I don't think it was very clever of dear Sinclair to take the wrong parcel. I had wanted that salmon.'

- THE END -