

EXPERIENCES OF AN IRISH R.M



E. CE. SOMERVILLE & MARTIN ROSS

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FICTION

EXPERIENCES OF AN IRISH R.M.

BY E. C. SOMERVILLE AND MARTIN ROSS

INTRODUCTION BY E. C. SOMERVILLE, HON. LITT.D.

EDITH CENONE SOMERVILLE, born in Corfu, 2nd May 1858. Educated at home, and studied art in Paris, at Royal Westminster School of Art, London, etc. Master of the West Carbery Foxhounds, 1903-8, 1912-19. Commenced writing in 1899, in collaboration with 'Martin Ross,' and since 'Martin Ross's' death has continued to publish most of her books under the joint signature. Hon. Litt.D., Trinity College, Dublin, 1932.

'MARTIN ROSS' (pseudonym of Violet Florence Martin), born at Ross, County Galway, on 11th June 1862. Educated in Dublin. Died 21st December 1915. Hon. Litt.D. conferred posthumously by Trinity College, Dublin, 1932.

INTRODUCTION

Edith Ænone Somerville and Violet Florence Martin, the authors of this book, were second cousins, a convenient degree of relationship that can be acknowledged or ignored as may be desired. Their mothers were first cousins, which is a more serious affair that cannot be evaded. But in the case of these second cousins the question of evasion did not arise. A few details of their family history may not be considered out of place and shall be offered.

In the first place it may be said that they were both Irish, by birth and upbringing, and were proud of it. Their mutual great-grandfather was Lord Chief Justice of Ireland during the early years of the nineteenth century. He was Charles Kendal Bushe, a brilliant Irishman, a wit and an orator, and a man, in those days when bribery was rampant, so inflexibly honest, that the label 'Incorruptible' was attached to his name. His wife was Nancy Crampton, an artist and a musician, as brilliant in her own line as he in his. They had a large family of sons and daughters, to whom they transmitted no small share of brains, and an ever widening company of great-grandchildren feel themselves honoured in being able to claim descent from 'The Chief' and his Nancy.

And among these were the two descendants of whom I now propose to speak. Both of them were daughters of old families that had struck roots deep into Irish soil. The Martins had come to Ireland with Strongbow, and were one of the well-known Tribes of Galway. In the year 1500 they moved out of Galway Town to the lands of Ross, and built themselves a house there, and, incidentally, provided Violet with a handy *nom de plume*. She was born at Ross House, on 11th June 1862, and was the youngest of the eleven daughters of James Martin, D.L., of Ross, and of his wife, Anna Selina, daughter of Judge Fox and Katharine Bushe, a daughter of 'the Chief.'

Edith was born on 2nd May 1858, in Corfu, where her father was quartered with his regiment, the Buffs. She was the eldest

of the seven children of Lieut.-Colonel Thomas Henry Somerville, D.L., and of his wife, Adelaide, daughter of Admiral Sir Josiah Coghill, Bart., R.N., and Anna Maria Bushe, who was a daughter of the Chief.

The first formative years of both young writers were spent in comfortable old-fashioned Irish country houses, whose atmosphere was surely enriched and mellowed by the pervading spirits of many generations of kindly ancestors. It would seem as though there had been deliberate intention on the part of Fate that these two cousins should write together, and that they should start their career as writers with a similar equipment of interests, tastes, and experiences. The children of the two old houses, Ross and Drishane, had happy lives, full of dogs and horses, and boating on sea and lake. The atmosphere of their homes was full of good talk, of books and music, of pictures and politics, and they learned from their fathers' tenants, in a mutual friendship as sincere as it was unselfconscious, the idiom of that delightful way of speech that among Irish country-people has sprung, like a wild flower, from the stiffer soil of the language of English 'Everyman' (and everywoman).

This was the life in which 'Martin Ross and E. Æ. Somerville' (to use their literary signatures) absorbed the spirit of the Ireland that they loved, which has saturated all that they have ever written. They met each other for the first time, in Castle Townshend, County Cork, in the year 1886, and almost immediately they were aware that Chance, or Fate, had done them a good turn, and that to the marriage of true minds there would be no impediment.

Nor was there. For the future, up to the year 1915, when, on 21st December, Martin Ross had to leave her colleague, they were seldom apart. Starting with the publication, by Bentley, of *An Irish Cousin*, which had a success that was, for two beginners, as surprising as it was delightful, they were commissioned by two or three illustrated papers to make tours in various countries, viz. France, Connemara, Denmark, and Wales. These very enjoyable tours were illustrated by E. Æ. S., who studied Art seriously in Paris and London, and has all her life combined the practices of Painting and Literature with what would seem an equal enthusiasm. (The Cousins' joint experiences in Denmark were recorded by Martin Ross, single-handed.)

Their first full-length three-volume novel, *The Real Charlotte*, was published in May 1894. It had a decidedly mixed reception. From those who may be described as 'High-brow' critics, it was received with much approval, even with respect. The writing was compared with Balzac's, and 'Charlotte' was said to recall the heroine of Balzac's *La Cousine Bette*. But by many readers it was detested, and by none more than by the cousins' nearest relations! Yet, after a decidedly stormy youth, it may now be said to have achieved classic rank, and in 1932, nearly fifty years after her original appearance, Charlotte received special honourable mention when Trinity College, Dublin, conferred the degree of Hon. Litt.D. on the surviving author, and the same distinction was bestowed, posthumously, on Martin Ross.

A short novel and some volumes of Irish stories and essays followed *The Real Charlotte*, and then, after a preliminary canter in the pages of the *Badminton Magazine*, the succession of stories of Irish life entitled *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* was published in a single volume, by Messrs. Longmans, Green & Co., in October 1899.

It is not too much to say that the authors awoke to find themselves famous. Gales of laughter wafted Major Yeates and his experiences round the world. One reviewer described it as a book no self-respecting person could read in a railway-carriage with any regard to decorum. A kind American critic said, picturesquely, that it 'had Shakespeare in a corner, screaming for mercy.' A reader wrote to assure the authors that she kept a copy of the book on both sides of her bed, so that she could, on waking, resume the study of what she felt to be its inspired pages without an instant of delay. Edition after edition poured forth, and presently the authors were assailed by letters from enthusiasts demanding to be told who were the originals of these priceless people and where they could be met with. And three readers, from three different Irish Hunts, each announced, in varying tones of triumph, that now they knew where the authors had found the originals of—; one character after another was claimed and identified as a member of the writers' county, while the authors themselves have more than once declared that of them all only Slipper and Maria had a right to assert that they were founded on fact.

Of all the many letters that the book has elicited those that

may be described as Medical Testimonials have been almost the warmest and most persistent. No patent medicine has been credited with more various and remarkable cures. The Irish R.M. appears to have been especially successful in cases of quinsy. More than one grateful wife has written to the authors describing how her husband, suffering, suffocating, feeling literally at his last gasp, had panted a request for a farewell chapter to be read to him, and how, therewith, in that moment of extremity, an almost agonizing fit of laughter had overwhelmed him, the quinsy broke, and a generous testimonial was dispatched to the gratified authors.

For a considerable time the sex of the authors was a matter of heated interest, speculation, and controversy. One inquirer held that both writers were men: one of them an old man and the other a young one. Another, on what grounds it is difficult to determine, said that he knew one author was a very old lady, and the other was her nephew, a young soldier, but which was which he wasn't quite sure.

These cats are now out of the bag. Uncertainty is at an end, and this brief introduction may close with the candid admission of a fox-hunting gentleman. He said:

'The first time I read it, I read it at top speed. And the second time I read it *very* slowly, chewing every word. And then I read it a third time, going over the bits I liked best. And then—and I thank God not till then!—I heard it was written by two women!'

E. OE. SOMERVILLE

January 1944.

P.S.—The arduous post of R.M., i.e. Resident Magistrate, exists no more in Ireland. Its duties consisted in attending the sittings of local magistrates and assisting in their deliberations. The post has been extinguished, like many other features of an earlier régime, and its incumbents no longer vie with the snipe and the dispensary doctor in endurance of conditions which test even those exponents of the art of being jolly in creditable circumstances.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

With the exception of those marked with an asterisk, the works in this list were published as by E. Æ. Somerville and Martin Ross. Many of them are illustrated by Dr. E. Æ. Somerville, including the 'Irish R.M.' books.

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| <p><i>An Irish Cousin</i>, 1889
 <i>Naboth's Vineyard</i>, 1891
 <i>Through Connemara in a Governess Cart</i>, 1892.
 <i>In the Vine Country</i>, 1893
 <i>The Real Charlotte</i>, 1894
 <i>Beggars on Horseback</i>, 1895
 <i>The Silver Fox</i>, 1897
 <i>Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.</i>, 1899
 <i>A Patrick's Day Hunt</i>, 1902 (a sporting picture book)
 <i>*Slipper's A.B.C. of Foxhunting</i>, 1903 (a sporting picture book)
 <i>All on the Irish Shore</i>, 1903
 <i>Some Irish Yesterdays</i>, 1906
 <i>Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.</i>, 1908
 <i>Dan Russel, the Fox</i>, 1911
 <i>The Discontented Little Elephant</i>, 1912 (a children's picture book)</p> | <p><i>In Mr. Knox's Country</i>, 1915
 (the third book of Irish R.M. Stories)
 <i>Irish Memories</i>, 1917
 <i>Mount Music</i>, 1919
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 <i>*An Enthusiast</i>, 1921
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 <i>The Sweet Cry of Hounds</i>, 1936
 <i>Sarah's Youth</i>, 1938
 <i>Notions in Garrison</i>, 1942</p> |
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For an autobiographical record of the families, lives, and careers of the authors, see *Irish Memories*.

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SOME EXPERIENCES OF AN IRISH R.M.

I

GREAT-UNCLE McCARTHY

A RESIDENT magistracy in Ireland is not an easy thing to come by nowadays; neither is it a very attractive job; yet on the evening when I first propounded the idea to the young lady who had recently consented to become Mrs. Sinclair Yeates, it seemed glittering with possibilities. There was, on that occasion, a sunset, and a string band playing *The Gondoliers*, and there was also an ingenuous belief in the omnipotence of a godfather of Philippa's—(Philippa was the young lady)—who had once been a member of the Government.

I was then climbing the steep ascent of the Captains towards my majority. I have no fault to find with Philippa's godfather: he did all and more than even Philippa had expected; nevertheless, I had attained to the dignity of mud major, and had spent a good deal on postage stamps, and on railway fares to interview people of influence, before I found myself in the hotel at Skebawn, opening long envelopes addressed to 'Major Yeates, R.M.'

My most immediate concern, as any one who has spent nine weeks at Mrs. Raverty's hotel will readily believe, was to leave it at the earliest opportunity; but in those nine weeks I had learned, amongst other painful things, a little, a very little, of the methods of the artisan in the west of Ireland. Finding a house had been easy enough. I had had my choice of several, each with some hundreds of acres of shooting, thoroughly poached, and a considerable portion of the roof intact. I had selected one; the one that had the largest extent of roof in proportion to the shooting, and had been assured by my landlord that in a fortnight or so it would be fit for occupation.

'There's a few little odd things to be done,' he said easily; 'a lick of paint here and there, and a slap of plaster——'

I am short-sighted; I am also of Irish extraction; both facts that make for toleration—but even I thought he was understating the case. So did the contractor.

At the end of three weeks the latter reported progress, which mainly consisted of the facts that the plumber had accused the carpenter of stealing sixteen feet of his inch-pipe to run a bell-wire through, and that the carpenter had replied that he wished the divil might run the plumber through a wran's quill. The plumber having reflected upon the carpenter's parentage, the work of renovation had merged in battle, and at the next petty sessions I was reluctantly compelled to allot to each combatant seven days, without the option of a fine.

These and kindred difficulties extended in an unbroken chain through the summer months, until a certain wet and windy day in October, when, with my baggage, I drove over to establish myself at Shreelane. It was a tall, ugly house of three storeys high, its walls faced with weather-beaten slates, its windows staring, narrow, and vacant. Round the house ran an area, in which grew some laurustinus and holly bushes among ash heaps, and nettles, and broken bottles. I stood on the steps, waiting for the door to be opened, while the rain sluiced upon me from a broken eaveshoot that had, amongst many other things, escaped the notice of my landlord. I thought of Philippa, and of her plan, broached in to-day's letter, of having the hall done up as a sitting-room.

The door opened and revealed the hall. It struck me that I had perhaps overestimated its possibility. Among them I had certainly not included a flagged floor, sweating with damp, and a reek of cabbage from the adjacent kitchen stairs. A large elderly woman, with a red face, and a cap worn helmet-wise on her forehead, swept me a magnificent curtsy as I crossed the threshold.

'Your honour's welcome——' she began, and then every door in the house slammed in obedience to the gust that drove through it. With something that sounded like 'Mend ye for a back door!' Mrs. Cadogan abandoned her opening speech and made for the kitchen stairs. (Improbable as it may appear, my housekeeper was called Cadogan, a name made locally possible by being pronounced Caydogawn.)

Only those who have been through a similar experience can know what manner of afternoon I spent. I am a martyr to colds in the head, and I felt one coming on. I made a laager in front of the dining-room fire, with a tattered leather screen and the dinner table, and gradually, with cigarettes and strong

tea, baffled the smell of must and cats, and fervently trusted that the rain might avert a threatened visit from my landlord. I was then but superficially acquainted with Mr. Florence McCarthy Knox and his habits.

At about four-thirty, when the room had warmed up, and my cold was yielding to treatment, Mrs. Cadogan entered and informed me that 'Mr. Flurry' was in the yard, and would be thankful if I'd go out to him, for he couldn't come in. Many are the privileges of the female sex; had I been a woman I should unhesitatingly have said that I had a cold in my head. Being a man, I huddled on a mackintosh, and went out into the yard.

My landlord was there on horseback, and with him there was a man standing at the head of a stout grey animal. I recognized with despair that I was about to be compelled to buy a horse.

'Good afternoon, major,' said Mr. Knox in his slow, sing-song brogue; 'it's rather soon to be paying you a visit, but I thought you might be in a hurry to see the horse I was telling you of.'

I could have laughed. As if I were ever in a hurry to see a horse! I thanked him, and suggested that it was rather wet for horse-dealing.

'Oh, it's nothing when you're used to it,' replied Mr. Knox. His gloveless hands were red and wet, the rain ran down his nose, and his covert coat was soaked to a sodden brown. I thought that I did not want to become used to it. My relations with horses have been of a purely military character. I have endured the Sandhurst riding-school, I have galloped for an impetuous general, I have been steward at regimental races, but none of these feats have altered my opinion that the horse, as a means of locomotion, is obsolete. Nevertheless, the man who accepts a resident magistracy in the south-west of Ireland voluntarily retires into the prehistoric age; to institute a stable became inevitable.

'You ought to throw a leg over him,' said Mr. Knox, 'and you're welcome to take him over a fence or two if you like. He's a nice flippant jumper.'

Even to my unexact eye the grey horse did not seem to promise flippancy, nor did I at all desire to find that quality in him. I explained that I wanted something to drive, and not to ride.

'Well, that 's a fine raking horse in harness,' said Mr. Knox, looking at me with his serious grey eyes, 'and you 'd drive him with a sop of hay in his mouth. Bring him up here, Michael.'

Michael abandoned his efforts to kick the grey horse's forelegs into a becoming position, and led him up to me.

I regarded him from under my umbrella with a quite unreasonable disfavour. He had the dreadful beauty of a horse in a toy-shop, as chubby, as wooden, and as conscientiously dappled, but it was unreasonable to urge this as an objection, and I was incapable of finding any more technical drawback. Yielding to circumstance, I 'threw my leg' over the brute, and after pacing gravely round the quadrangle that formed the yard, and jolting to my entrance gate and back, I decided that as he had neither fallen down nor kicked me off, it was worth paying twenty-five pounds for him, if only to get in out of the rain.

Mr. Knox accompanied me into the house and had a drink. He was a fair, spare young man, who looked like a stable boy among gentlemen, and a gentleman among stable boys. He belonged to a clan that cropped up in every grade of society in the county, from Sir Valentine Knox of Castle Knox down to the auctioneer Knox, who bore the attractive title of Larry the Liar. So far as I could judge, Florence McCarthy of that ilk occupied a shifting position about midway in the tribe. I had met him at dinner at Sir Valentine's, I had heard of him at an illicit auction, held by Larry the Liar, of brandy stolen from a wreck. They were 'Black Protestants,' all of them, in virtue of their descent from a godly soldier of Cromwell, and all were prepared at any moment of the day or night to sell a horse.

'You 'll be apt to find this place a bit lonesome after the hotel,' remarked Mr. Flurry, sympathetically, as he placed his foot in its steaming boot on the hob, 'but it 's a fine sound house anyway, and lots of rooms in it, though indeed, to tell you the truth, I never was through the whole of them since the time my great-uncle, Denis McCarthy, died here. The dear knows I had enough of it that time.' He paused, and lit a cigarette—one of my best, and quite thrown away upon him. 'Those top floors, now,' he resumed, 'I wouldn't make too free with them. There 's some of them would jump under you like a spring bed. Many 's the night I was in and out of those attics, following my

poor uncle when he had a bad turn on him—the horrors, y' know—there were nights he never stopped walking through the house. Good Lord! will I ever forget the morning he said he saw the devil coming up the avenue! 'Look at the two horns on him,' says he, and he out with his gun and shot him, and, begad, it was his own donkey!

Mr. Knox gave a couple of short laughs. He seldom laughed, having in unusual perfection the gravity of manner that is bred by horse-dealing, probably from the habitual repression of all emotion save disparagement.

The autumn evening, grey with rain, was darkening in the tall windows, and the wind was beginning to make bullying rushes among the shrubs in the area; a shower of soot rattled down the chimney and fell on the hearthrug.

'More rain coming,' said Mr. Knox, rising composedly; 'you'll have to put a goose down these chimneys some day soon, it's the only way in the world to clean them. Well, I'm for the road. You'll come out on the grey next week, I hope; the hounds'll be meeting here. Give a roar at him coming in at his jumps.' He threw his cigarette into the fire and extended a hand to me. 'Good-bye, major, you'll see plenty of me and my hounds before you're done. There's a power of foxes in the plantations here.'

This was scarcely reassuring for a man who hoped to shoot woodcock, and I hinted as much.

'Oh, is it the cock?' said Mr. Flurry; 'b'lieve me, there never was a woodcock yet that minded hounds, now, no more than they'd mind rabbits! The best shoots ever I had here, the hounds were in it the day before.'

When Mr. Knox had gone, I began to picture myself going across country roaring, like a man on a fire-engine, while Philippa put the goose down the chimney; but when I sat down to write to her I did not feel equal to being humorous about it. I dilated ponderously on my cold, my hard work, and my loneliness, and eventually went to bed at ten o'clock full of cold shivers and hot whisky-and-water.

After a couple of hours of feverish dozing, I began to understand what had driven Great-Uncle McCarthy to perambulate the house by night. Mrs. Cadogan had assured me that the Pope of Rome hadn't a better bed undher him than myself; wasn't I down on the new flog mattherass the old mather

bought in Father Scanlan's auction? By the smell I recognized that 'flog' meant flock, otherwise I should have said my couch was stuffed with old boots. I have seldom spent a more wretched night. The rain drummed with soft fingers on my window-panes; the house was full of noises. I seemed to see Great-Uncle McCarthy ranging the passages with Flurry at his heels; several times I thought I heard him. Whisperings seemed borne on the wind through my keyhole, boards creaked in the room overhead, and once I could have sworn that a hand passed, groping, over the panels of my door. I am, I may admit, a believer in ghosts; I even take in a paper that deals with their culture, but I cannot pretend that on that night I looked forward to a manifestation of Great-Uncle McCarthy with any enthusiasm.

The morning broke stormily, and I woke to find Mrs. Cado-gan's understudy, a grimy nephew of about eighteen, standing by my bedside, with a black bottle in his hand.

'There's no bath in the house, sir,' was his reply to my command; 'but me A'nt said, would ye like a taggeen?'

This alternative proved to be a glass of raw whisky. I declined it.

I look back to that first week of housekeeping at Shreelane as to a comedy excessively badly staged, and striped with lurid melodrama. Towards its close I was positively homesick for Mrs. Raverty's, and I had not a single clean pair of boots. I am not one of those who hold the convention that in Ireland the rain never ceases, day or night, but I must say that my first November at Shreelane was composed of weather of which my friend Flurry Knox remarked that you wouldn't meet a Christian out of doors, unless it was a snipe or a dispensary doctor. To this lamentable category might be added a resident magistrate. Daily, shrouded in mackintosh, I set forth for the Petty Sessions Courts of my wide district; daily, in the inevitable atmosphere of wet frieze and perjury, I listened to indictments of old women who plucked geese alive, of publicans whose hospitality to their friends broke forth uncontrollably on Sunday afternoons, of 'parties' who, in the language of the police sergeant, were subtly defined as 'not to say dhrunk, but in good fighting thrim.'

I got used to it all in time—I suppose one can get used to anything—I even became callous to the surprises of Mrs.