

'It's a good while since I played the game. I just play the odd time in the house by myself mostly.'

'Oh, ye play by the book then?'

'I do. I do indeed.'

'Would ye fancy a bit of a game while ye're in? Best out of three for a bottle?'

'I wouldn't mind at all,' said Simpkins, 'for it will be good to get away from yon chandering woman of mine for a while.'

I heard most of this conversation as I partially concealed myself behind one of the four little cubicles in the bar – boxes they were usually called – which gave a modicum of privacy to the brave woman who would slip in for a drink. I was in a bold mood that day, for the only other times I had seen inside the place were whenever the side door was left ajar to allow the fumes of tobacco to filter out, and I would take a hasty glance inside and look around at the different characters. I liked the game and used to play at home with my father. I always beat him for I used to watch the games played in the bandstand in Woodvale Park, and I had picked up some of the moves.

Tommy answered the man in a ruminative tone. 'Do ye know,' he said, 'there's nothing as bad as a chandering woman. The way they go on could drive ye around the bend.'

The big man got up and collected his pint, then sat himself down facing the old expert.

'Och now she's not that bad. You see, she used to be a doffing mistress in Linfield Spinning Mill. She retired with the oul' pains a while back, but she still thinks she has that whistle on her apron that she used to call up the doffers.'

'You're not too long around here?' queried Tommy.

'Ah, no,' said Simpkins. 'We came from the Sandy Row direction because the house here has a bigger yard to keep my ladders in.'

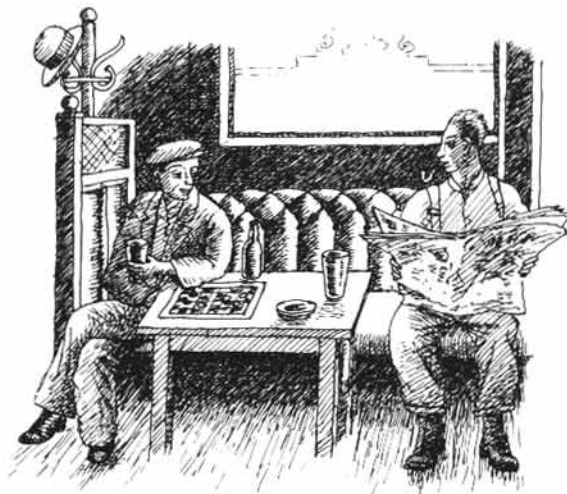
'My name's Tommy Irvine,' ventured the old man.

'You can call me Walter Simpkins.'

'Well Walter, we'll toss for who goes first.'

'Not at all. Away you go.'

I was about to leave when I noticed a little knot of spectators gathering around the two men, so I melted in with them.



*'Would ye fancy a bit of a game while ye're in?
Best out of three for a bottle?'*

Tommy set up the men on the board with the black next to himself. He opened with the 'Fife,' probably the most interesting opening in the game. Then he gave a low whistle, for Simpkins countered with the 'Defiance.' This would prevent the formation of the 'Fife'. Yes, there it was – 27 to 23, and unless it was a random move, this man had to be watched, so Tommy gulped down some of his stout and made his move 8 to 11. Of course most of the manoeuvres on the board were Greek to me but the atmosphere was thrilling. And no one thought to throw me out. I was standing with the men in the *Busy Bee*.

The game became intriguing, and this was not lost on the spectators, quite a few of whom were knowledgeable about draughts, and indeed the odd bet was wagered on the outcome