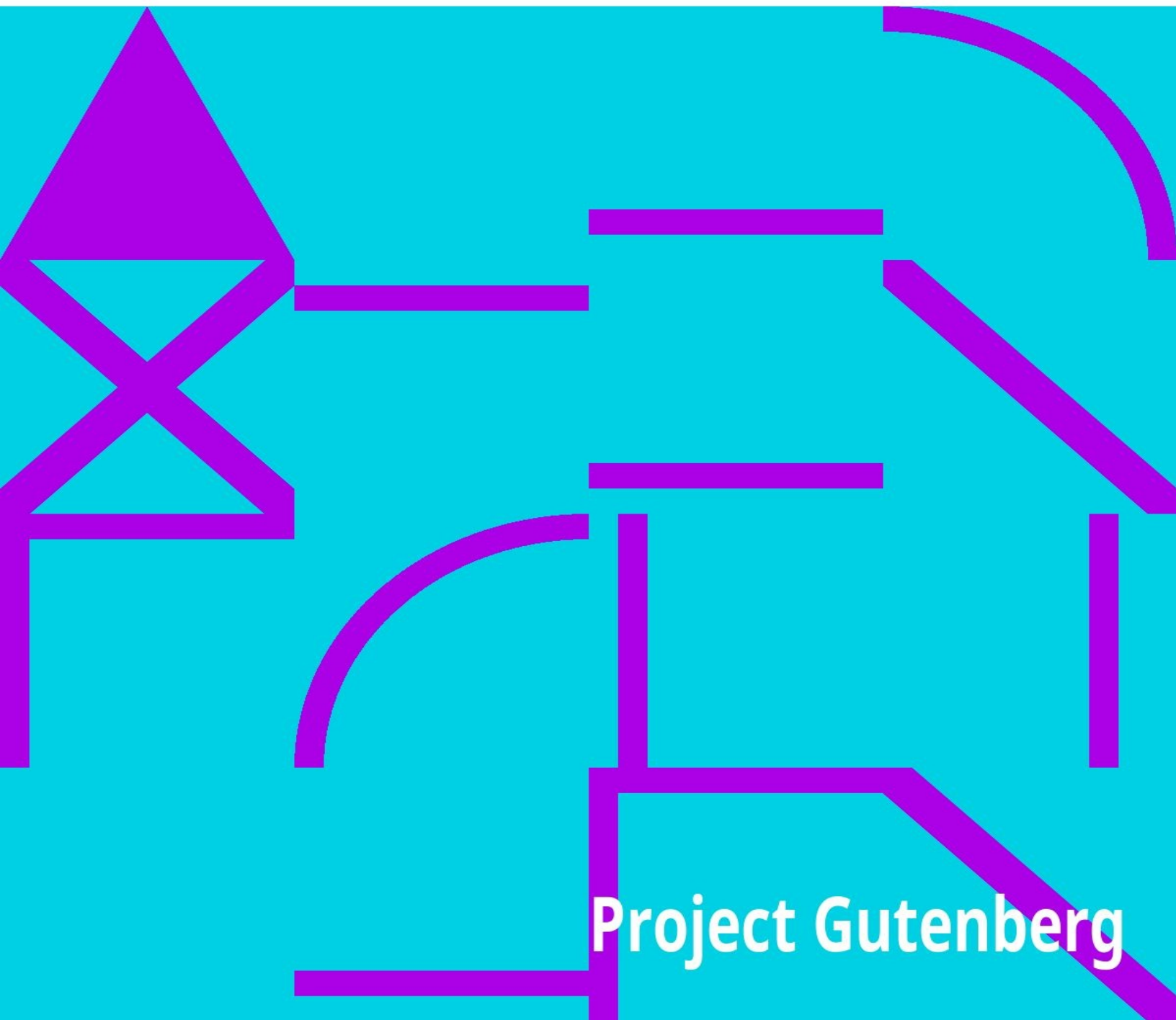


A Rivermouth Romance

Thomas Bailey Aldrich



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A RIVERMOUTH ROMANCE.

By Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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I.

At five o'clock on the morning of the tenth of July, 1860, the front door of a certain house on Anchor Street, in the ancient seaport town of Rivermouth, might have been observed to open with great caution. This door, as the least imaginative reader may easily conjecture, did not open itself. It was opened by Miss Margaret Callaghan, who immediately closed it softly behind her, paused for a few seconds with an embarrassed air on the stone step, and then, throwing a furtive glance up at the second-story windows, passed hastily down the street towards the river, keeping close to the fences and garden walls on her left.

There was a ghost-like stealthiness to Miss Margaret's movements, though there was nothing whatever of the ghost about Miss Margaret herself. She was a plump, short person, no longer young, with coal-black hair growing low on the forehead, and a round face that would have been nearly meaningless if the features had not been emphasized—italicized, so to speak—by the small-pox. Moreover, the brilliancy of her toilet would have rendered any ghostly hypothesis untenable. Mrs. Solomon (we refer to the dressiest Mrs. Solomon, whichever one that was) in all her glory was not arrayed like Miss Margaret on that eventful summer morning. She wore a light-green, shot-silk frock, a blazing red shawl, and a yellow crape bonnet profusely decorated with azure, orange, and magenta artificial flowers. In her hand she carried a white parasol. The newly risen sun, ricocheting from the bosom of the river and striking point blank on the top-knot of Miss Margaret's gorgeousness, made her an imposing spectacle in the quiet street of that Puritan village. But, in spite of the bravery of her apparel, she stole guiltily along by garden walls and fences until she reached a small, dingy frame-house near the wharves, in the darkened doorway of which she quenched her burning splendor, if so bold a figure is permissible.

Three quarters of an hour passed. The sunshine moved slowly up Anchor Street, fingered noiselessly the well-kept brass knockers on either side, and drained the heeltaps of dew which had been left from the revels of the fairies overnight in the cups of the morning-glories. Not a soul was stirring yet in this part of the town, though the Rivermouthians are such early birds that not a worm may be said to escape them. By and by one of the brown Holland shades at one of the upper windows of the Bilkins mansion—the house from which Miss Margaret had emerged—was drawn up, and old Mr. Bilkins in spiral nightcap

looked out on the sunny street. Not a living creature was to be seen, save the dissipated family cat—a very Lovelace of a cat that was not allowed a night-key—who was sitting on the curbstone opposite, waiting for the hall door to be opened. Three quarters of an hour, we repeat, had passed, when Mrs. Margaret O'Rourke, *née* Callaghan, issued from the small, dingy house by the river, and regained the door-step of the Bilkins mansion in the same stealthy fashion in which she had left it.

Not to prolong a mystery that must already oppress the reader, Mr. Bilkins's cook had, after the manner of her kind, stolen out of the premises before the family were up, and got herself married—surreptitiously and artfully married, as if matrimony were an indictable offence.

And something of an offence it was in this instance. In the first place Margaret Callaghan had lived nearly twenty years with the Bilkins family, and the old people—there were no children now—had rewarded this long service by taking Margaret into their affections. It was a piece of subtle ingratitude for her to marry without admitting the worthy couple to her confidence. In the next place, Margaret had married a man some eighteen years younger than herself. That was the young man's lookout, you say. We hold it was Margaret that was to blame. What does a young blade of twenty-two know? Not half so much as he thinks he does. His exhaust-less ignorance at that age is a discovery which is left for him to make in his prime.

"Curly gold locks cover foolish brains,
Billing and cooing is all your cheer;
Sighing and singing of midnight strains,
Under Bonnybell's window panes,—
Wait till you come to Forty Year!"

In one sense Margaret's husband *had* come to forty year—she was forty to a day.

Mrs. Margaret O'Rourke, with the baddish cat following close at her heels, entered the Bilkins mansion, reached her chamber in the attic without being intercepted, and there laid aside her finery. Two or three times, while arranging her more humble attire, she paused to take a look at the marriage certificate, which she had deposited between the leaves of her Prayer-Book, and on each occasion held that potent document upside down; for Margaret's literary culture was of the severest order, and excluded the art of reading.

The breakfast was late that morning. As Mrs. O'Rourke set the coffee-urn in front of Mrs. Bilkins and flanked Mr. Bilkins with the broiled mackerel and buttered toast, Mrs. O'Rourke's conscience smote her. She afterwards declared that when she saw the two sitting there so innocent-like, not dreaming of the

comether she had put upon them, she secretly and unbeknownst let a few tears fall into the cream-pitcher. Whether or not it was this material expression of Margaret's penitence that spoiled the coffee does not admit of inquiry; but the coffee was bad. In fact, the whole breakfast was a comedy of errors.

It was a blessed relief to Margaret when the meal was ended. She retired in a cold perspiration to the penetralia of the kitchen, and it was remarked by both Mr. and Mrs. Bilkins that those short flights of vocalism—apropos of the personal charms of one Kate Kearney who lived on the banks of Killarney—which ordinarily issued from the direction of the scullery were unheard that forenoon.

The town clock was striking eleven, and the antiquated timepiece on the staircase (which never spoke but it dropped pearls and crystals, like the fairy in the story) was lisping the hour, when there came three tremendous knocks at the street door. Mrs. Bilkins, who was dusting the brass-mounted chronometer in the hall, stood transfixed, with arm uplifted. The admirable old lady had for years been carrying on a guerilla warfare with itinerant venders of furniture polish, and pain-killer, and crockery cement, and the like. The effrontery of the triple knock convinced her the enemy was at her gates—possibly that dissolute creature with twenty-four sheets of note-paper and twenty-four envelopes for fifteen cents.

Mrs. Bilkins swept across the hall, and opened the door with a jerk. The suddenness of the movement was apparently not anticipated by the person outside, who, with one arm stretched feebly towards the receding knocker, tilted gently forward, and rested both hands on the threshold in an attitude which was probably common enough with our ancestors of the Simian period, but could never have been considered graceful. By an effort that testified to the excellent condition of his muscles, the person instantly righted himself, and stood swaying unsteadily on his toes and heels, and smiling rather vaguely on Mrs. Bilkins.

It was a slightly-built but well-knitted young fellow, in the not unpicturesque garb of our marine service. His woollen cap, pitched forward at an acute angle with his nose, showed the back part of a head thatched with short yellow hair, which had broken into innumerable curls of painful tightness. On his ruddy cheeks a sparse sandy beard was making a timid *début*. Add to this a weak, good-natured mouth, a pair of devil-may-care blue eyes, and the fact that the man was very drunk, and you have a pre-Raphaelite portrait—we may as well say it at once—of Mr. Larry O'Rourke of Mullingar, County Westmeath, and late of the United States sloop-of-war Santee.

The man was a total stranger to Mrs. Bilkins; but the instant she caught sight of the double white anchors embroidered on the lapels of his jacket, she

unhesitatingly threw back the door, which with great presence of mind she had partly closed.

A drunken sailor standing on the step of the Bilkins mansion was no novelty. The street, as we have stated, led down to the wharves, and sailors were constantly passing. The house abutted directly on the street; the granite door-step was almost flush with the sidewalk, and the huge old-fashioned brass knocker—seemingly a brazen hand that had been cut off at the wrist, and nailed against the oak as a warning to malefactors—extended itself in a kind of grim appeal to everybody. It seemed to possess strange fascinations for all seafaring folk; and when there was a man-of-war in port the rat-tat-tat of that knocker would frequently startle the quiet neighborhood long after midnight. There appeared to be an occult understanding between it and the blue-jackets. Years ago there was a young Bilkins, one Pendexter Bilkins—a sad losel, we fear—who ran away to try his fortunes before the mast, and fell overboard in a gale off Hatteras. “Lost at sea,” says the chubby marble slab in the Old South Burying-Ground, “ætæt 18.” Perhaps that is why no blue-jacket, sober or drunk, was ever repulsed from the door of the Bilkins mansion.

Of course Mrs. Bilkins had her taste in the matter, and preferred them sober. But as this could not always be, she tempered her wind, so to speak, to the shorn lamb. The flushed, prematurely old face that now looked up at her moved the good lady's pity.

“What do you want?” she asked kindly.

“Me wife.”

“There 's no wife for you here,” said Mrs. Bilkins, somewhat taken aback. “His wife!” she thought; “it's a mother the poor boy stands in need of.”

“Me wife,” repeated Mr. O'Rourke, “for bettther or for worse.”

“You had better go away,” said Mrs. Bilkins, bridling up, “or it will be the worse for you.”

“To have and to howld,” continued Mr. O'Rourke, wandering retrospectively in the mazes of the marriage service, “to have and to howld, till death—bad luck to him!—takes one or the ither of us.”

“You 're a blasphemous creature,” said Mrs. Bilkins, severely.

“Thim 's the words his riverince spake this mornin', standin' foreninst us,” explained Mr. O'Rourke. “I stood here, see, and me jew'l stood there, and the howly chaplain beyont.”

And Mr. O'Rourke with a wavering forefinger drew a diagram of the

interesting situation on the door-step.

"Well," returned Mrs. Bilkins, "if you 're a married man, all I have to say is, there's a pair of fools instead of one. You had better be off; the person you want does n't live here."

"Bedad, thin, but she does."

"Lives here?"

"Sorra a place else."

"The man's crazy," said Mrs. Bilkins to herself.

While she thought him simply drunk she was not in the least afraid; but the idea that she was conversing with a madman sent a chill over her. She reached back her hand preparatory to shutting the door, when Mr. O'Rourke, with an agility that might have been expected from his previous gymnastics, set one foot on the threshold and frustrated the design.

"I want me wife," he said sternly.

Unfortunately, Mr. Bilkins had gone up town, and there was no one in the house except Margaret, whose pluck was not to be depended on. The case was urgent. With the energy of despair Mrs. Bilkins suddenly placed the toe of her boot against Mr. O'Rourke's invading foot, and pushed it away. The effect of this attack was to cause Mr. O'Rourke to describe a complete circle on one leg, and then sit down heavily on the threshold. The lady retreated to the hat-stand, and rested her hand mechanically on the handle of a blue cotton umbrella. Mr. O'Rourke partly turned his head and smiled upon her with conscious superiority. At this juncture a third actor appeared on the scene, evidently a friend of Mr. O'Rourke, for he addressed that gentleman as "a spalpeen," and told him to go home.

"Divil an inch," replied the spalpeen; but he got himself off the threshold, and returned his position on the step.

"It's only Larry, mum," said the man, touching his forelock politely; "as dacent a lad as iver lived, when he 's not in liquor; an' I 've known him to be sober for days to-gither," he added, reflectively. "He don't mane a ha'p'orth o' harum, but jist now he's not quite in his right moind."

"I should think not," said Mrs. Bilkins, turning from the speaker to Mr. O'Rourke, who had seated himself gravely on the scraper, and was weeping. "Hasn't the man any friends?"

"Too many of 'em, mum, an' it's along wid dhrinkin' toasts wid 'em that Larry got throwed. The punch that spalpeen has dhrunk this day would amaze ye. He

give us the slip awhiles ago, bad 'cess to him, an' come up here. Did n't I tell ye, Larry, not to be afther ringin' at the owld gintleman's knocker? Ain't ye got no sinse at all?"

"Misther Donnehugh," responded Mr. O'Rourke with great dignity, "ye 're dhrunk agin."

Mr. Donnehugh, who had not taken more than thirteen ladles of rum-punch, disdained to reply directly.

"He's a dacent lad enough"—this to Mrs. Bilkins—"but his head is wake. Whin he's had two sups o' whiskey he belaves he's dhrunk a bar'l full. A gill o' wather out of a jimmy-john 'd fuddle him, mum."

"Is n't there anybody to look after him?"

"No, mum, he's an orphan; his father and mother live in the owld counthry, an' a fine hale owld couple they are."

"Has n't he any family in the town"—

"Sure, mum, he has a family; was n't he married this blessed mornin'?"

"He said so."

"Indade, thin, he was—the pore divil!"

"And the—the person?" inquired Mrs. Bilkins.

"Is it the wife, ye mane?"

"Yes, the wife: where is she?"

"Well, thin, mum," said Mr. Donnehugh, "it's yerself can answer that."

"I?" exclaimed Mrs. Bilkins. "Good heavens! this man's as crazy as the other!"

"Begorra, if anybody's crazy, it's Larry, for it's Larry has married Margaret."

"What Margaret?" cried Mrs. Bilkins, with a start.

"Margaret Callaghan, sure."

"*Our* Margaret? Do you mean to say that *OUR* Margaret has married that—that good-for-nothing, inebriated wretch!"

"It's a civil tongue the owld lady has, any way," remarked Mr. O'Rourke, critically, from the scraper.

Mrs. Bilkins's voice during the latter part of the colloquy had been pitched in a high key; it rung through the hall and penetrated to the kitchen, where Margaret was thoughtfully wiping the breakfast things. She paused with a half-dried saucer in her hand, and listened. In a moment more she stood, with bloodless

face and limp figure, leaning against the banister, behind Mrs. Bilkins.

“Is it there ye are, me jew'’l!” cried Mr. O'Rourke, discovering her.

Mrs. Bilkins wheeled upon Margaret.

“Margaret Callaghan, is that thing your husband?”

“Ye-yes, mum,” faltered Mrs. O'Rourke, with a woful lack of spirit.

“Then take it away!” cried Mrs. Bilkins.

Margaret, with a slight flush on either cheek, glided past Mrs. Bilkins, and the heavy oak door closed with a bang, as the gates of Paradise must have closed of old upon Adam and Eve.

“Come!” said Margaret, taking Mr. O'Rourke by the hand; and the two wandered forth upon their wedding journey down Anchor Street, with all the world before them where to choose. They chose to halt at the small, shabby tenement-house by the river, through the doorway of which the bridal pair disappeared with a reeling, eccentric gait; for Mr. O'Rourke's intoxication seemed to have run down his elbow, and communicated itself to Margaret. O Hymen! who burnest precious gums and scented woods in thy torch at the melting of aristocratic hearts, with what a pitiful penny-dip thou hast lighted up our little back-street romance!

II.

It had been no part of Margaret's plan to acknowledge the marriage so soon. Though on pleasure bent, she had a frugal mind. She had invested in a husband with a view of laying him away for a rainy day—that is to say, for such time as her master and mistress should cease to need her services; for she had promised on more than one occasion to remain with the old people as long as they lived. Indeed, if Mr. O'Rourke had come to her and said in so many words, “The day you marry me you must leave the Bilkins family,” there is very little doubt but Margaret would have let that young sea-monster slip back unmated, so far as she was concerned, into his native element. The contingency never entered into her calculations. She intended that the ship which had brought Ulysses to her island should take him off again after a decent interval of honeymoon; then she would confess all to Mrs. Bilkins, and be forgiven, and Mr. Bilkins would not cancel that clause supposed to exist in his will bequeathing two first-mortgage bonds of the Squedunk E. B. Co. to a certain faithful servant. In the mean while she would add each month to her store in the coffers of the Rivermouth Savings Bank; for Calypso had a neat sum to her credit on the books of that provident institution.

But this could not be now. The volatile bridegroom had upset the wisely conceived plan, and “all the fat was in the fire,” as Margaret philosophically put it. Mr. O'Rourke had been fully instructed in the part he was to play, and, to do him justice, had honestly intended to play it; but destiny was against him. It may be observed that destiny and Mr. O'Rourke were not on very friendly terms.

After the ceremony had been performed and Margaret had stolen back to the Bilkins mansion, as related, Mr. O'Rourke with his own skilful hands had brewed a noble punch for the wedding guests. Standing at the head of the table and stirring the pungent mixture in a small wash-tub purchased for the occasion, Mr. O'Rourke came out in full flower. His flow of wit, as he replenished the glasses, was as racy and seemingly as inexhaustible as the punch itself. When Mrs. McLaughlin held out her glass, inadvertently upside down, for her sixth ladleful, Mr. O'Rourke gallantly declared it should be filled if he had to stand on his head to do it. The elder Miss O'Leary whispered to Mrs. Connally that Mr. O'Rourke was “a perfic gentleman,” and the men in a body pronounced him a bit of the raal shamrock. If Mr. O'Rourke was happy in brewing a punch, he was happier in dispensing it, and happiest of all in drinking a great deal of it himself.

He toasted Mrs. Finnigan, the landlady, and the late lamented Finnigan, the father, whom he had never seen, and Miss Biddy Finnigan, the daughter, and a young toddling Finnigan, who was at large in shockingly scant raiment. He drank to the company individually and collectively, drank to the absent, drank to a tin-peddler who chanced to pass the window, and indeed was in that propitiatory mood when he would have drunk to the health of each separate animal that came out of the Ark. It was in the midst of the confusion and applause which followed his song, "The Wearing of the Grane," that Mr. O'Rourke, the punch being all gone, withdrew unobserved, and went in quest of Mrs. O'Rourke—with what success the reader knows.

According to the love-idyl of the period, when Laura and Charles Henry, after unheard-of obstacles, are finally united, all cares and tribulations and responsibilities slip from their sleek backs like Christian's burden. The idea is a pretty one, theoretically, but, like some of those models in the Patent Office at Washington, it fails to work. Charles Henry does not go on sitting at Laura's feet and reading Tennyson to her forever: the rent of the cottage by the sea falls due with prosaic regularity; there are bakers, and butchers, and babies, and tax-collectors, and doctors, and undertakers, and sometimes gentlemen of the jury, to be attended to. Wedded life is not one long amatory poem with recurrent rhymes of love and dove, and kiss and bliss. Yet when the average sentimental novelist has supplied his hero and heroine with their bridal outfit and arranged that little matter of the marriage certificate, he usually turns off the gas, puts up his shutters, and saunters off with his hands in his pockets, as if the day's business were over. But we, who are honest dealers in real life and disdain to give short weight, know better. The business is by no means over; it is just begun. It is not Christian throwing off his pack for good and all, but Christian taking up a load heavier and more difficult than any he has carried.

If Margaret Callaghan, when she meditated matrimony, indulged in any roseate dreams, they were quickly put to flight. She suddenly found herself dispossessed of a quiet, comfortable home, and face to face with the fact that she had a white elephant on her hands. It is not likely that Mr. O'Rourke assumed precisely the shape of a white elephant to her mental vision; but he was as useless and cumbersome and unmanageable as one.

Margaret and Larry's wedding tour did not extend beyond Mrs. Finnigan's establishment, where they took two or three rooms and set up housekeeping in a humble way. Margaret, who was a tidy housewife, kept the floor of her apartments as white as your hand, the tin plates on the dresser as bright as your

lady-love's eyes, and the cooking-stove as neat as the machinery on a Sound steamer. When she was not rubbing the stove with lamp-black she was cooking upon it some savory dish to tempt the palate of her marine monster. Naturally of a hopeful temperament, she went about her work singing softly to herself at times, and would have been very happy that first week if Mr. O'Rourke had known a sober moment. But Mr. O'Rourke showed an exasperating disposition to keep up festivities. At the end of ten days, however, he toned down, and at Margaret's suggestion that he had better be looking about for some employment he rigged up a fishing-pole, and set out with an injured air for the wharf at the foot of the street, where he fished for the rest of the day. To sit for hours blinking in the sun, waiting for a cunner to come along and take his hook, was as exhaustive a kind of labor as he cared to engage in. Though Mr. O'Rourke had recently returned from a long cruise, he had not a cent to show. During his first three days ashore he had dissipated his three years' pay. The housekeeping expenses began eating a hole in Margaret's little fund, the existence of which was no sooner known to Mr. O'Rourke than he stood up his fishing-rod in one corner of the room, and thenceforth it caught nothing but cobwebs.

"Divil a sthroke o' work I 'll do," said Mr. O'Rourke, "whin we can live at aise on our earnin's. Who 'd be afther frettin' hisself, wid money in the bank? How much is it, Peggy darlint?"

And divil a stroke more of work did he do. He lounged down on the wharves, and, with his short clay pipe stuck between his lips and his hands in his pockets, stared off at the sail-boats on the river. He sat on the door-step of the Finnigan domicile, and plentifully chaffed the passers-by. Now and then, when he could wheedle some fractional currency out of Margaret, he spent it like a crown-prince at The Wee Drop around the corner. With that fine magnetism which draws together birds of a feather, he shortly drew about him all the ne'er-do-weels of Rivermouth.

It was really wonderful what an unsuspected lot of them there was. From all the frowzy purlieus of the town they crept forth into the sunlight to array themselves under the banner of the prince of scallawags. It was edifying of a summer afternoon to see a dozen of them sitting in a row, like turtles, on the string-piece of Jedediah Rand's wharf, with their twenty-four feet dangling over the water, assisting Mr. O'Rourke in contemplating the islands in the harbor, and upholding the scenery, as it were.

The rascal had one accomplishment, he had a heavenly voice—quite in the rough, to be sure—and he played, on the violin like an angel. He did not know one note from another, but he played in a sweet natural way, just as Orpheus

must have played, by ear. The drunker he was the more pathos and humor he wrung from the old violin, his sole piece of personal property. He had a singular fancy for getting up at two or three o'clock in the morning, and playing by an open casement, to the distraction of all the dogs in the immediate neighborhood and innumerable dogs in the distance.

Unfortunately, Mr. O'Rourke's freaks were not always of so innocent a complexion. On one or two occasions, through an excess of animal and other spirits, he took to breaking windows in the town. Among his nocturnal feats he accomplished the demolition of the glass in the door of The Wee Drop. Now, breaking windows in Rivermouth is an amusement not wholly disconnected with an interior view of the police-station (bridewell is the local term); so it happened that Mr. O'Rourke woke up one fine morning and found himself snug and tight in one of the cells in the rear of the Brick Market. His plea that the bull's-eye in the glass door of The Wee Drop winked at him in an insult-in' manner as he was passing by did not prevent Justice Hackett from fining the delinquent ten dollars and costs, which made sad havoc with the poor wife's bank account. So Margaret's married life wore on, and all went merry as a funeral knell.

After Mrs. Bilkins, with a brow as severe as that of one of the Parcae, had closed the door upon the O'Rourkes that summer morning, she sat down on the stairs, and, sinking the indignant goddess in the woman, burst into tears. She was still very wroth with Margaret Callaghan, as she persisted in calling her; very merciless and unforgiving, as the gentler sex are apt to be—to the gentler sex. Mr. Bilkins, however, after the first vexation, missed Margaret from the household; missed her singing, which was in itself as helpful as a second girl; missed her hand in the preparation of those hundred and one nameless comforts which are necessities to the old, and wished in his soul that he had her back again. Who could make a gruel, when he was ill, or cook a steak, when he was well, like Margaret? So, meeting her one morning at the fish-market—for Mr. O'Rourke had long since given over the onerous labor of catching dinners—he spoke to her kindly, and asked her how she liked the change in her life, and if Mr. O'Rourke was good to her.

"Troth, thin, sur," said Margaret, with a short, dry laugh, "he 's the divil's own!"

Margaret was thin and careworn, and her laugh had the mild gayety of champagne not properly corked. These things were apparent even to Mr. Bilkins, who was not a shrewd observer.

"I 'm afraid, Margaret," he remarked sorrowfully, "that you are not making both ends meet."

“Begorra, I'd be glad if I could make one ind meet!” returned Margaret.

With a duplicity quite foreign to his nature, Mr. Bilkins gradually drew from her the true state of affairs. Mr. O'Rourke was a very bad case indeed; he did nothing towards her support; he was almost constantly drunk; the little money she had laid by was melting away, and would not last until winter. Mr. O'Rourke was perpetually coming home with a sprained ankle, or a bruised shoulder, or a broken head. He had broken most of the furniture in his festive hours, including the cooking-stove. “In short,” as Mr. Bilkins said in relating the matter afterwards to Mrs. Bilkins, “he had broken all those things which he should n't have broken, and failed to break the one thing he ought to have broken long ago—his neck, namely.”

The revelation which startled Mr. Bilkins most was this: in spite of all, Margaret loved Larry with the whole of her warm Irish heart. Further than keeping the poor creature up waiting for him until ever so much o'clock at night, it did not appear that he treated her with personal cruelty. If he had beaten her, perhaps she would have worshipped him. It needed only that.

Revolving Margaret's troubles in his thoughts as he walked homeward, Mr. Bilkins struck upon a plan by which he could help her. When this plan was laid before Mrs. Bilkins, she opposed it with a vehemence that convinced him she had made up her mind to adopt it.

“Never, never will I have that ungrateful woman under this roof!” cried Mrs. Bilkins; and accordingly the next day Mr. and Mrs. O'Rourke took up their abode in the Bilkins mansion—Margaret as cook, and Larry as gardener.

“I'm convanient if the owld gintleman is,” had been Mr. O'Rourke's remark, when the proposition was submitted to him. Not that Mr. O'Rourke had the faintest idea of gardening. He did n't know a tulip from a tomato. He was one of those sanguine people who never hesitate to undertake anything, and are never abashed by their herculean inability.

Mr. Bilkins did not look to Margaret's husband for any great botanical knowledge; but he was rather surprised one day when Mr. O'Rourke pointed to the triangular bed of lilies-of-the-valley, then out of flower, and remarked, “Thim 's a nate lot o' pur-taties ye 've got there, sur.” Mr. Bilkins, we repeat, did not expect much from Mr. O'Rourke's skill in gardening; his purpose was to reform the fellow if possible, and in any case to make Margaret's lot easier.

Reestablished in her old home, Margaret broke into song again, and Mr. O'Rourke himself promised to do very well; morally, we mean, not agriculturally. His ignorance of the simplest laws of nature, if nature has any

simple laws, and his dense stupidity on every other subject were heavy trials to Mr. Bilkins. Happily, Mr. Bilkins was not without a sense of humor, else he would have found Mr. O'Rourke insupportable. Just when the old gentleman's patience was about exhausted, the gardener would commit some atrocity so perfectly comical that his master all but loved him for the moment.

"Larry," said Mr. Bilkins, one breathless afternoon in the middle of September, "just see how the thermometer on the back porch stands."

Mr. O'Rourke disappeared, and after a prolonged absence returned with the monstrous announcement that the thermometer stood at 820!

Mr. Bilkins looked at the man closely. He was unmistakably sober.

"Eight hundred and twenty what?" cried Mr. Bilkins, feeling very warm, as he naturally would in so high a temperature.

"Eight hundthred an' twinty degray's, I suppose, sur."

"Larry, you 're an idiot."

This was obviously not to Mr. O'Rourke's taste; for he went out and brought the thermometer, and, pointing triumphantly to the line of numerals running parallel with the glass tube, exclaimed, "Add 'em up yerself, thin!"

Perhaps this would not have been amusing if Mr. Bilkins had not spent the greater part of the previous forenoon in initiating Mr. O'Rourke into the mysteries of the thermometer. Nothing could make amusing Mr. O'Rourke's method of setting out crocus bulbs. Mr. Bilkins had received a lot of a very choice variety from Boston, and having a headache that morning, turned over to Mr. O'Rourke the duty of planting them. Though he had never seen a bulb in his life, Larry unblushingly asserted that he had set out thousands for Sir Lucius O'Grady of O'Grady Castle, "an illegant place intirely, wid tin miles o' garden-walks," added Mr. O'Rourke, crushing Mr. Bilkins, who boasted only of a few humble flower-beds.

The following day he stepped into the garden to see how Larry had done his work. There stood the parched bulbs, carefully arranged in circles and squares on top of the soil.

"Did n't I tell you to set out these bulbs?" cried Mr. Bilkins, wrathfully.

"An' did n't I set 'em out?" expostulated Mr. O'Rourke. "An' ain't they a settin' there beautiful?"

"But you should have put them into the ground, stupid!"

"Is it bury 'em, ye mane? Be jabbers! how could they iver git out agin? Give the little jokers a fair show, Misther Bilkins!"

For two weeks Mr. O'Rourke conducted himself with comparative propriety; that is to say, he rendered himself useless about the place, appeared regularly at his meals, and kept sober. Perhaps the hilarious strains of music which sometimes issued at midnight from the upper window of the north gable were not just what a quiet, unostentatious family would desire; but on the whole there was not much to complain of.

The third week witnessed a falling off. Though always promptly on hand at the serving out of rations, Mr. O'Rourke did not even make a pretence of working in the garden. He would disappear mysteriously immediately after breakfast, and reappear with supernatural abruptness at dinner. Nobody knew what he did with himself in the interval, until one day he was observed to fall out of an apple-tree near the stable. His retreat discovered, he took to the wharves and the alleys in the distant part of the town. It soon became evident that his ways were not the ways of temperance, and that all his paths led to The Wee Drop.

Of course Margaret tried to keep this from the family. Being a woman, she coined excuses for him in her heart. It was a dull life for the lad, any way, and it was worse than him that was leading Larry astray. Hours and hours after the old people had gone to bed, she would sit without a light in the lonely kitchen, listening for that shuffling step along the gravel walk. Night after night she never closed her eyes, and went about the house the next day with that smooth, impenetrable face behind which women hide their care.

One morning found Margaret sitting pale and anxious by the kitchen stove. O'Rourke had not come home at all. Noon came, and night, but not Larry. Whenever Mrs. Bilkins approached her that day, Margaret was humming "Kate Kearney" quite merrily. But when her work was done, she stole out at the back gate and went in search of him. She scoured the neighborhood like a madwoman. O'Rourke had not been at the 'Finnigans'. He had not been at The Wee Drop since Monday, and this was Wednesday night. Her heart sunk within her when she failed to find him in the police-station. Some dreadful thing had happened to him. She came back to the house with one hand pressed wearily against her cheek. The dawn struggled through the kitchen windows, and fell upon Margaret crouched by the stove.

She could no longer wear her mask. When Mr. Bilkins came down she confessed that Larry had taken to drinking again, and had not been home for two nights.

"Mayhap he 's drowneded hisself," suggested Margaret, wringing her hands.

“Not he,” said Mr. Bilkins; “he does n't like the taste of water well enough.”

“Troth, thin, he does n't,” reflected Margaret, and the reflection comforted her.

“At any rate, I 'll go and look him up after breakfast,” said Mr. Bilkins. And after breakfast, accordingly, Mr. Bilkins sallied forth with the depressing expectation of finding Mr. O'Rourke without much difficulty. “Come to think of it,” said the old gentleman to himself, drawing on his white cotton gloves as he walked up Anchor Street “*I don't want to find him.*”

III.

But Mr. O'Rourke was not to be found. With amiable cynicism Mr. Bilkins directed his steps in the first instance to the police-station, quite confident that a bird of Mr. O'Rourke's plumage would be brought to perch in such a cage. But not so much as a feather of him was discoverable. The Wee Drop was not the only bacchanalian resort in Rivermouth; there were five or six other low drinking-shops scattered about town, and through these Mr. Bilkins went conscientiously. He then explored various blind alleys, known haunts of the missing man, and took a careful survey of the wharves along the river on his way home. He even shook the apple-tree near the stable with a vague hope of bringing down Mr. O'Rourke, but brought down nothing except a few winter apples, which, being both unripe and unsound, were not perhaps bad representatives of the object of his search.

That evening a small boy stopped at the door of the Bilking mansion with a straw hat, at once identified as Mr. O'Rourke's, which had been found on Neal's Wharf. This would have told against another man; but O'Rourke was always leaving his hat on a wharf. Margaret's distress is not to be pictured. She fell back upon and clung to the idea that Larry had drowned himself, not intentionally, may be; possibly he had fallen overboard while intoxicated.

The late Mr. Buckle has informed us that death by drowning is regulated by laws as inviolable and beautiful as those of the solar system; that a certain percentage of the earth's population is bound to drown itself annually, whether it wants to or not. It may be presumed, then, that Rivermouth's proper quota of dead bodies was washed ashore during the ensuing two months. There had been gales off the coast and pleasure parties on the river, and between them they had managed to do a ghastly business. But Mr. O'Rourke failed to appear among the flotsam and jetsam which the receding tides left tangled in the piles of the Rivermouth wharves. This convinced Margaret that Larry had proved a too tempting morsel to some buccaneering shark, or had fallen a victim to one of those immense schools of fish which seem to have a yearly appointment with the fishermen on this coast. From that day Margaret never saw a cod or a mackerel brought into the house without an involuntary shudder. She averted her head in making up the fish-balls, as if she half dreaded to detect a faint aroma of whiskey about them. And, indeed, why might not a man fall into the sea, be

eaten, say, by a halibut, and reappear on the scene of his earthly triumphs and defeats in the noncommittal form of hashed fish?

"Imperial Cæsar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away."

But, perhaps, as the conservative Horatio suggests, 't were to consider too curiously to consider so.

Mr. Bilkins had come to adopt Margaret's explanation of O'Rourke's disappearance. He was undoubtedly drowned; had most likely drowned himself. The hat picked up on the wharf was strong circumstantial evidence in that direction. But one feature of the case staggered Mr. Bilkins. O'Rourke's violin had also disappeared. Now, it required no great effort to imagine a man throwing himself overboard under the influence of *mania à potu*; but it was difficult to conceive of a man committing violinicide! If the fellow went to drown himself, why did he take his fiddle with him? He might as well have taken an umbrella or a German student-lamp. This question troubled Mr. Bilkins a good deal first and last. But one thing was indisputable: the man was gone—and had evidently gone by water.

It was now that Margaret invested her husband with charms of mind and person not calculated to make him recognizable by any one who had ever had the privilege of knowing him in the faulty flesh. She eliminated all his bad qualities, and projected from her imagination a Mr. O'Rourke as he ought to have been—a species of seraphic being mixed up in some way with a violin; and to this ideal she erected a costly headstone in the suburban cemetery. "It would be a proud day for Larry," observed Margaret contemplatively, "if he could rest his oi on the illegant monumint I 've put up to him." If Mr. O'Rourke could have read the inscription on it, he would never have suspected his own complicity in the matter.

But there the marble stood, sacred to his memory; and soon the snow came down from the gray sky and covered it, and the invisible snow of weeks and months drifted down on Margaret's heart, and filled up its fissures, and smoothed off the sharp angles of its grief; and there was peace upon it.

Not but she sorrowed for Larry at times. Yet life had a relish to it again; she was free, though she did not look at it in that light; she was happier in a quiet fashion than she had ever been, though she would not have acknowledged it to herself. She wondered that she had the heart to laugh when the ice-man made love to her. Perhaps she was conscious of something comically incongruous in the warmth of a gentleman who spent all winter in cutting ice, and all summer in dealing it out to his customers. She had not the same excuse for laughing at the

baker; yet she laughed still more merrily at him when he pressed her hand over the steaming loaf of brown-bread, delivered every Saturday morning at the scullery door. Both these gentlemen had known Margaret many years, yet neither of them had valued her very highly until another man came along and married her. A widow, it would appear, is esteemed in some sort as a warranted article, being stamped with the maker's name.

There was even a third lover in prospect; for according to the gossip of the town, Mr. Donnehugh was frequently to be seen of a Sunday afternoon standing in the cemetery and regarding Mr. O'Rourke's headstone with unrestrained satisfaction.

A year had passed away, and certain bits of color blossoming among Margaret's weeds indicated that the winter of her mourning was over. The ice-man and the baker were hating each other cordially, and Mrs. Bilkins was daily expecting it would be discovered before night that Margaret had married one or both of them. But to do Margaret justice, she was faithful in thought and deed to the memory of O'Rourke—not the O'Rourke who disappeared so strangely, but the O'Rourke who never existed.

"D' ye think, mum," she said one day to Mrs. Bilkins, as that lady was adroitly sounding her on the ice question—"d' ye think I 'd condescind to take up wid the likes o' him, or the baker either, afther sich a man as Larry?"

The rectified and clarified O'Rourke was a permanent wonder to Mr. Bilkins, who bore up under the bereavement with noticeable resignation.

"Peggy is right," said the old gentleman, who was superintending the burning out of the kitchen flue. "She won't find another man like Larry O'Rourke in a hurry."

"Thru for ye, Mr. Bilkins," answered Margaret. "Maybe there's as good fish in the say as iver was caught, but I don't be-lave it, all the same."

As good fish in the sea! The words recalled to Margaret the nature of her loss, and she went on with her work in silence.

"What—what is it, Ezra?" cried Mrs. Bilkins, changing color, and rising hastily from the breakfast table. Her first thought was of apoplexy.

There sat Mr. Bilkins, with his wig pushed back from his forehead, and his eyes fixed vacantly on *The Weekly Chronicle*, which he held out at arm's length before him.

"Good heavens, Ezra! what is the matter?"

Mr. Bilkins turned his eyes upon her mechanically, as if he were a great wax-doll, and somebody had pulled his wire.

“Can't you speak, Ezra?”

His lips opened, and moved inarticulately; then he pointed a rigid finger, in the manner of a guide-board, at a paragraph in the paper, which he held up for Mrs. Bilkins to read over his shoulder. When she had read it she sunk back into her chair without a word, and the two sat contemplating each other as if they had never met before in this world, and were not overpleased at meeting.

The paragraph which produced this singular effect on the aged couple occurred at the end of a column of telegraph despatches giving the details of an unimportant engagement that had just taken place between one of the blockading squadron and a Confederate cruiser. The engagement itself does not concern us, but this item from the list of casualties on the Union side has a direct bearing on our narrative:—

*"Larry O'Rourke, seaman, splinter wound in the leg.
Not serious."*

That splinter flew far. It glanced from Mr. O'Rourke's leg, went plumb through the Bilkins mansion, and knocked over a small marble slab in the Old South Burying Ground.

If a ghost had dropped in familiarly to breakfast, the constraint and consternation of the Bilkins family could not have been greater. How was the astounding intelligence to be broken to Margaret? Her explosive Irish nature made the task one of extreme delicacy. Mrs. Bilkins flatly declared herself incapable of undertaking it. Mr. Bilkins, with many misgivings as to his fitness, assumed the duty; for it would never do to have the news sprung suddenly upon Margaret by people outside.

As Mrs. O'Rourke was clearing away the breakfast things, Mr. Bilkins, who had lingered near the window with the newspaper in his hand, coughed once or twice in an unnatural way to show that he was not embarrassed, and began to think that may be it would be best to tell Margaret after dinner. Mrs. Bilkins fathomed his thought with that intuition which renders women terrible, and sent across the room an eye-telegram to this effect, "Now is your time."

"There 's been another battle down South, Margaret," said the old gentleman presently, folding up the paper and putting it in his pocket. "A sea-fight this time."

"Sure, an' they 're allus fightin' down there."

"But not always with so little damage. There was only one man wounded on our side."

"Pore man! It's sorry we oughter be for his wife an' childer, if he's got any."

"Not badly wounded, you will understand, Margaret—not at all seriously wounded; only a splinter in the leg."

"Faith, thin, a splinter in the leg is no pleasant thing in itself."

"A mere scratch," said Mr. Bilkins lightly, as if he were constantly in the habit of going about with a splinter in his own leg, and found it rather agreeable. "The odd part of the matter is the man's first name. His first name was Larry."

Margaret nodded, as one should say, There's a many Larrys in the world.

"But the oddest part of it," continued Mr. Bilkins, in a carelessly sepulchral voice, "is the man's last name."

Something in the tone of his voice made Margaret look at him, and something in the expression of his face caused the blood to fly from Margaret's cheek.

“The man's last name!” she repeated, wonderingly.

“Yes, his last name—O'Rourke.”

“D'ye mane it?” shrieked Margaret—“d' ye mane it? Glory to God! O worra! worra!”

“Well, Ezra,” said Mrs. Bilking, in one of those spasms of base ingratitude to which even the most perfect women are liable, “you 've made nice work of it. You might as well have knocked her down with an axe!”

“But, my dear”—

“Oh, bother!—my smelling-bottle, quick!—second bureau drawer—left-hand side.”

Joy never kills; it is a celestial kind of hydrogen of which it seems impossible to get too much at one inhalation. In an hour Margaret was able to converse with comparative calmness on the resuscitation of Larry O'Rourke, whom the firing of a cannon had brought to the surface as if he had been in reality a drowned body.

Now that the whole town was aware of Mr. O'Rourke's fate, his friend Mr. Donne-hugh came forward with a statement that would have been of some interest at an earlier period, but was of no service as matters stood, except so far as it assisted in removing from Mr. Bilkins's mind a passing doubt as to whether the Larry O'Rourke of the telegraphic reports was Margaret's scape-grace of a husband. Mr. Donnehugh had known all along that O'Rourke had absconded to Boston by a night train and enlisted in the navy. It was the possession of this knowledge that had made it impossible for Mr. Donnehugh to look at Mr. O'Rourke's gravestone without grinning.

At Margaret's request, and in Margaret's name, Mr. Bilkins wrote three or four letters to O'Rourke, and finally succeeded in extorting an epistle from that gentleman, in which he told Margaret to cheer up, that his fortune was as good as made, and that the day would come when she should ride through the town in her own coach, and no thanks to old flint-head, who pretended to be so fond of her. Mr. Bilkins tried to conjecture who was meant by old flint-head, but was obliged to give it up. Mr. O'Rourke furthermore informed Margaret that he had three hundred dollars prize-money coming to him, and broadly intimated that when he got home he intended to have one of the most extensive blow-outs ever witnessed in Rivermouth.

“Och!” laughed Margaret, “that's jist Larry over agin. The pore lad was allus full of his nonsense an' spirits.”

“That he was,” said Mr. Bilkins, dryly.

Content with the fact that her husband was in the land of the living, Margaret gave herself no trouble over the separation. O'Rourke had shipped for three years; one third of his term of service was past, and two years more, God willing, would see him home again. This was Margaret's view of it. Mr. Bilkins's view of it was not so cheerful. The prospect of Mr. O'Rourke's ultimate return was anything but enchanting. Mr. Bilkins was by no means disposed to kill the fattened calf. He would much rather have killed the Prodigal Son. However, there was always this chance: he might never come back.

The tides rose and fell at the Rivermouth wharves; the summer moonlight and the winter snow, in turn, bleached its quiet streets; and the two years had nearly gone by. In the mean time nothing had been heard of O'Rourke. If he ever received the five or six letters sent to him, he did not fatigue himself by answering them.

“Larry's all right,” said hopeful Margaret. “If any harum had come to the gossoon, we'd have knowed it. It's the bad news that travels fast.”

Mr. Bilkins was not so positive about that. It had taken a whole year to find out that O'Rourke had not drowned himself.

The period of Mr. O'Rourke's enlistment had come to an end. Two months slipped by, and he had neglected to brighten River-mouth with his presence. There were many things that might have detained him, difficulties in getting his prize-papers or in drawing his pay; but there was no reason why he might not have written. The days were beginning to grow long to Margaret, and vague forebodings of misfortune possessed her.

Perhaps we had better look up Mr. O'Rourke.

He had seen some rough times, during those three years, and some harder work than catching cunners at the foot of Anchor Street, or setting out crocuses in Mr. Bilkins's back garden. He had seen battles and shipwreck, and death in many guises; but they had taught him nothing, as the sequel will show. With his active career in the navy we shall not trouble ourselves; we take him up at a date a little prior to the close of his term of service.

Several months before, he had been transferred from the blockading squadron to a gun-boat attached to the fleet operating against the forts defending New Orleans. The forts had fallen, the fleet had passed on to the city, and Mr. O'Rourke's ship lay off in the stream, binding up her wounds. In three days he would receive his discharge, and the papers entitling him to a handsome amount of prize-money in addition to his pay. With noble contempt for so much good

fortune, Mr. O'Rourke dropped over the bows of the gun-boat one evening and managed to reach the levee. In the city he fell in with some soldiers, and, being of a convivial nature, caroused with them that night, and next day enlisted in a cavalry regiment.

Desertion in the face of the enemy—for, though the city lay under Federal guns, it was still hostile enough—involved the heaviest penalties. O'Rourke was speedily arrested with other deserters, tried by court-martial, and sentenced to death.

The intelligence burst like a shell upon the quiet household in Anchor Street, listening daily for the sound of Larry O'Rourke's footstep on the threshold. It was a heavy load for Margaret to bear, after all those years of patient vigil. But the load was to be lightened for her. In consideration of O'Rourke's long service, and in view of the fact that his desertion so near the expiration of his time was an absurdity, the Good President commuted his sentence to imprisonment for life, with loss of prize-money and back pay. Mr. O'Rourke was despatched North, and placed in Moyamensing Prison.

If joy could kill, Margaret would have been a dead woman the day these tidings reached Rivermouth; and Mr. Bilkins himself would have been in a critical condition, for, though he did not want O'Rourke shot or hanged, he was delighted to have him permanently shelved.

After the excitement was over, and this is always the trying time, Margaret accepted the situation philosophically.

“The pore lad's out o' harum's rache, any way,” she reflected. “He can't be git-tin' into hot wather now, and that's a fact. And maybe after awhile they 'll let him go agin. They let out murtherers and thaves and sich like, and Larry's done no hurt to nobody but hisself.”

Margaret was inclined to be rather severe on President Lincoln for taking away Larry's prize-money. The impression was strong on her mind that the money went into Mr. Lincoln's private exchequer.

“I would n't wonder if Misthress Lincoln had a new silk gownd or two this fall,” Margaret would remark, sarcastically.

The prison rules permitted Mr. O'Rourke to receive periodical communications “from his friends outside.” Once every quarter Mr. Bilkins wrote him a letter, and in the interim Margaret kept him supplied with those doleful popular ballads, printed on broadsides, which one sees pinned up for sale on the iron railings of city churchyards, and seldom anywhere else. They seem the natural exhalations of the mould and pathos of such places, but we have a

suspicion that they are written by sentimental young undertakers. Though these songs must have been a solace to Mr. O'Rourke in his captivity, he never so far forgot himself as to acknowledge their receipt. It was only through the kindly chaplain of the prison that Margaret was now and then advised of the well-being of her husband.

Towards the close of that year the great O'Rourke himself did condescend to write one letter. As this letter has never been printed, and as it is the only specimen extant of Mr. O'Rourke's epistolary manner, we lay it before the reader *verbatim et literatim*:—

*february. 1864 mi beloved wife
fur the luv of God sind mee pop gose the wezel.
yours till deth .*

Larry O Rourke.

“Pop goes the Weasel” was sent to him, and Mr. Bilkins ingeniously slipped into the same envelope “The Drunkard's Death” and “Beware of the Bowl,” two spirited compositions well calculated to exert a salutary influence over a man imprisoned for life.

There is nothing in this earthly existence so uncertain as what seems to be a certainty. To all appearances, the world outside of Moyamensing Prison was forever a closed book to O'Rourke. But the Southern Confederacy collapsed, the General Amnesty Proclamation was issued, cell doors were thrown open; and one afternoon Mr. Larry O'Rourke, with his head neatly shaved, walked into the Bilkins kitchen and frightened Margaret nearly out of her skin.

Mr. O'Rourke's summing up of his case was characteristic: “I 've been kilt in battle, hanged by the court-martial, put into the lock-up for life, and here I am, bedad, not a ha'p'orth the worse for it.”

None the worse for it, certainly, and none the better. By no stretch of magical fiction can we make an angel of him. He is not at all the material for an apotheosis. It was not for him to reform and settle down, and become a respectable, oppressed tax-payer. His conduct in Rivermouth, after his return, was a repetition of his old ways. Margaret all but broke down under the tests to which he put her affections, and came at last to wish that Larry had never got out of Moyamensing Prison.

If any change had taken place in Mr. O'Rourke, it showed itself in occasional fits of sullenness towards Margaret. It was in one of these moods that he slouched his hat over his brows, and told her she need not wait dinner for him.

It will be a cold dinner, if Margaret has kept it waiting; for two years have gone by since that day, and O'Rourke has not come home.

Possibly he is off on a whaling voyage; possibly the swift maelstrom has

dragged him down; perhaps he is lifting his hand to knock at the door of the Bilkins mansion as we pen these words. But Margaret does not watch for him impatiently any more. There are strands of gray in her black hair. She has had her romance.

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