

# JOHN McELGUN

John McElgun's 1873 novel *Annie Reilly; or, The Fortunes of an Irish Girl in New York* follows two young immigrants—James O'Rourke and the Annie of the title—from Munster in southern Ireland to Liverpool and then New York City, where their separate, harrowing stories finally and happily reconnect. Subtitled "A Tale Founded on Fact," the novel vividly documents the injustices and indignities that typified the experience of those who left Ireland in the steerage of "coffin ships" in the wake of the Great Famine. The failure of Ireland's staple potato crop in the 1840s, compounded by persistent social, economic, and political disasters, led to the death or exodus to the United States and elsewhere of some 3 million men and women by the mid-1850s. Arriving somewhat later—at Castle Garden, New York City's Emigrant Landing Depot from 1855 until the opening of Ellis Island in 1892—James and Annie would have been part of a smaller but still massive transatlantic wave. After the famine the departure of sons and daughters became almost an expected rite of passage in Ireland.

About John McElgun, the author of *Annie Reilly*, almost nothing definitive is known. He notes in his preface that his depiction of Liverpool's "man-catchers," who preyed on helpless passengers, "falls short of what I have actually witnessed myself." Perhaps a John McElgun (or McAlgun, or McGunn, or thereabouts, surnames being a frequent minor casualty of the Atlantic crossing) will be recoverable in immigration and other records currently being digitized in the United States and Ireland, and a history of this notable writer's career can begin to be pieced together.

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Excerpt from *Annie Reilly* (New York, 1873), pp. 112–21.

*from*  
**Annie Reilly**

**A**fter a comparatively safe and speedy passage, James O'Rourke reached New York. It was one of those mellow days in the early fall when everything looks so serene and calm that the anxious passengers were landed. How beautiful New York Harbor looked! The waters seemed asleep on the bosom of the bay, save where disturbed by the lively ferry-boats ploughing their way backwards and forwards, in every direction, and the little snorting tugs, puffing in and out here and there, busy as bees of a June morning. A number of large, majestic-looking ships, that had just come in from all ports of the world, lay out in the stream, looking weary after their long voyage.

It being early day, the passengers were not delayed at Castle Garden overnight, except such as chose to wait for friends who were expecting them. James had no friends, and he walked into the streets and up along Broadway, wondering at the size, and beauty, and cheerful look of the buildings along that noble thoroughfare. It was at the time of day when Broadway is at its liveliest, lined with wagons, carriages, carts, and drays, and the sidewalk so crowded with people hurrying along that it is impossible for any of them to make much speed. James walked on—he knew not where—looking on himself as the most lonely and friendless of the great throng. At length he came to what seemed to him a neglected waste of ground, which, having mortally offended the city in some way, was left behind, forgotten, haggard, and cheerless. Near the centre of this waste stood a large building in a half-finished state, looking so dreary that the ill fate of the neighborhood seemed to have visited it at last.

A number of men were standing around the doors or sitting on the steps of the building, and all looking so much like men that had nothing to do, that James thought it might not inconvenience any of them much to tell him where he might find work. So approaching a gentleman with a wide-leafed straw hat, a tight-fitting coat, much too short for him, and very long, wide pantaloons, who stood on the end of a row picking his teeth, James asked:

“Please, sir, can you tell me where I may find employment? I am a stranger here.”

“Most undoubtedly, sir; follow me,” said the gentleman, putting his tooth-pick in his vest pocket. “Come along, sir.”

James, delighted beyond measure at this sudden good luck, hurried after his new friend, but found it no very easy task to keep up with him. He had such a happy method of diving past crowds which jostled against the other that he had once or twice to wait for him on the corner. At length the gentleman swept into a low, narrow door in one of the side streets, and when James rushed in after him, he found him seated behind a neat little desk, looking as composed as if he had been sitting there since morning.

“So you want employment, do you?” said he, surveying James from head to foot.

“Yes, sir,” replied the latter.

“What kind do you prefer?” said he, opening a book which lay on the desk before him. “We have a variety.”

“Well, sir,” replied James with a smile, “I am not afraid of any kind of work, but would of course prefer whichever pays best.”

“Let me see,” said the other, closing his eyes and resting his chin on his hand, “let me see. You are strong enough to work in a dry-goods store?”

“You mean, sir—”

“I mean what you call a cloth-shop in the Old Country.”

“Oh! yes; I beg your pardon, sir,” said James, greatly elated. “Certainly I am, sir.”

“You landed this morning, eh?” said the gentleman.

“This morning, sir?”

“Any friends in New York?”

“No, sir.”

“All alone, eh?”

“Quite so, sir.”

“Well, now, sir, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You give me three dollars, and I’ll send you right up to the establishment.”

James felt greatly surprised at this, for he really thought the gentleman was an extensive employer himself. He had never heard of an “intelligence

office,” and was quite at a loss what to think. He couldn’t be a swindler, having such a handsome place.

“No; he *must* be an employer, and probably wants this money as security for a day or two, till he sees how I get on,” thought James.

And looking at the gentleman again, and seeing him busy writing, and apparently utterly oblivious of his presence, was confirmed in this latter idea.

“I’ll pay the money, sir,” said he, taking from his pocket a few shillings and one half-crown, which was his entire store.

The gentleman thought it most remarkable, but nevertheless it was true, that the coins when changed into dollars amounted to just the required number and ten cents over. So he swept it into a drawer, and, throwing a ten-cent stamp on the desk, drew a piece of paper to him, and, having written a few words on it with violet ink, handed it to James. The latter glanced at it and said:

“What way am I to go there, sir?”

“You see I am so busy, or I would take you up myself. But, anyway, all you have to do is to cross over five blocks to your right, then down a long street you’ll see with a marble building on the up-town corner, then one block to your right, then take the cars—you know the street-cars—and ride eleven blocks more, and any one can point out Van Sleuthers & Duckey’s dry-goods store to you. Go inside, and show them that address, and you’re all right.”

James thanked him, left the office, and went in search of Van Sleuthers & Duckey’s.

That he did not find it, and that there was no such firm in the city, it is needless to say. He had been swindled out of the last penny by an “intelligence agent”; and after travelling up and down the streets, looking at every sign, stopping to make enquiries at every clothing establishment, he found himself at nightfall close by the East River, footsore, weary, and dejected. He sat down on a log on one of the docks, and, covering his eyes with his hands, began to think over his forlorn, desolate state.

In a large city, without a friend, without one face he had ever known, without a single penny in his pocket. Where to spend the night or get a morsel to eat he knew not; he had spent the ten cents riding up and down in search of Van Sleuthers & Duckey’s. He sat a prey to these thoughts for some

time, till, raising his head, he saw coming leisurely towards him, from the direction of the street, a man in his shirt-sleeves, smoking a large briar-wood pipe.

As he approached, James could see he was of his own race, and made up his mind to speak to him. This was no difficult matter, for the stranger came on, puffing like an engine, and, sitting down beside him remarked it was a fine night.

O'Rourke saw at once, from his large, rough hands, that he belonged to the working-class, and, observing his neat white shirt and black tie, and everything he wore so clean, thought of the miserable appearance of the English working-men.

"You're not long out from the ould counthry, I think," said he kindly.

"No, indeed," said James. "I came ashore this morning."

"Well, well," said the man, moving close to him, "I am glad to see any one so late from the ould dart. How is things there now; anything better?"

"Oh! much the same as usual," replied James. "Improvements come very slowly in Ireland."

"That's so, that's so, me friend," said the other, with a sigh. "But the people an't starving as they wor when I left there?"

"Not so bad as that now," said James.

"Do you live around here?" asked the stranger, after a pause.

"I have no home," said James, drawing back his head a little.

"No home," said the other, "and a greenhorn; why, that's rough. I suppose be that ye mane you haven't got any money neither."

"Not a penny," was the reply.

Then James told him how he had been cheated by the intelligence agent.

"You're not the first who has been fleeced by thim robbers," said the other in a rage. "They swindle dozens of poor innocent people every day, and you'll niver hear of one of thim bein' arristed. But," added he, checking himself, "it can't be helped now, and I'll niver see one of my countrymen that desarves it out in the streets at night while I have a room; so you must come wid me to-night. The ould woman 'ill find some place for you to sleep."

James thanked him again and again, and, after enjoying a smoke from his pipe, they walked up the dock and along the street a little way, till they came to a somewhat neat-looking brick house with a wooden stoop. The man

entered, and both went up a flight of very clean but carpetless stairs to the third story, and, turning the knob of the door, entered a tidily furnished room of comfortable dimensions. Over the wooden mantel-piece hung a handsome engraving of Archbishop Hughes, side by side with another of St. Patrick, and on the opposite wall hung a picture of Killarney Lakes. Several other pictures, some of Irish clergy, some of American, were fastened round the walls, all very tastefully arranged.

There was no person in the room on their entrance, and the man, seeing James look closely at the archbishop's likeness, began to tell numerous stories of his kindness and benevolence. After some time, a woman came in, carrying a basket on her arm; and from the appearance of her face, and the trim, cleanly way in which she was clad, James knew at once whose taste had arranged the room.

"Well, well, Terence, and what a man you are," said she, laying down the basket, and looking at her husband with a smile, "to leave housekeeping."

"Oh! in troth, I was afraid she'd begin to screech whin ye'd be gone, Bridget, so I left her inside with Mrs. Kearney. She stays as quiet wid her as wid yourself," said her husband.

"Oh! just so; anything to get rid of the job. But keep quiet now; she's asleep in Mrs. Kearney's arms, and I'll bring her in and put her in the cradle."

The woman left the room, and soon returned, carrying in her arms a little babe of a few months old, and, shaking her hand at her husband to say nothing, lest he should rouse the infant, went through the passage-way into another room.

The man conversed with James for awhile, then, telling him he'd be back in a moment, followed his wife. Both soon returned, and James could see from the kind, sympathetic look the woman gave him that her husband had been telling his story.

"Excuse me," said the man, "but ye haven't tould me yer name."

James told him.

"In troth, and a good name it is. My own is Terence McManus, and this is Mrs. McManus, and that sleepy youngster ye seen a minute ago is Mary McManus. So we know each other all roun' now, and are quite at our aise."

The agreeable, honest, good-natured manner of the man did make James

feel much easier in mind than he had felt for some time. Mrs. McManus prepared a good meal, of which all three partook. This over, they sat together, and talked over matters in the old and new country. One important point to James came out from this conversation, and that was he learned that his host, who worked along the docks, being what is commonly called a 'longshoreman, would find him employment at the same business the following day.