At a party the man who was later to become my father, Kerr Quaney, met a girl named Beatrice, fell in love with her, and, after a short courtship, they decided to get married. The days passed in a delightful whirl of preparations for the wedding. They were married in the pro-Cathedral in Marlboro Street, Dublin, and were inundated with confetti, blessings, presents and good wishes from a crowd of friends and relatives.

When they arrived home after the wedding breakfast, a letter awaited Kerr from a firm of bacon-curers in Limerick. It was in connection with an advertisement for the services of an electrical engineer to which Kerr had replied a month before and forgotten about. The letter contained an invitation from Mr. Shaw to visit him in the capacity of consultant, to advise him in the matter of changing his factory from old-fashioned, hand-operated methods of production, to modern electrically operated equipment.

The happy pair decided to be practical and spend their honeymoon in Limerick, with the prospect of Kerr taking up a post there later. They just managed to catch the afternoon train to Limerick, and booked into an hotel there on arrival.

After a wonderful honeymoon during which they explored the city, visited King John's Castle and other romantic places on the banks of River Shannon, the day arrived when Kerr had to keep his business appointment.

Mr. Shaw, a handsome middle-aged man, received him cordially and made him feel at ease. He was interested in industrial progress and especially in electricity and its application to machinery. They discussed his bacon-curing and carcass-processing plant and its output in detail. He took an instant liking to Kerr.

"We're working here with worn-out, obsolete appliances and my aim is to build the most up-to-date factory in Ireland", continued Mr. Shaw, with the

Joseph Quaney, the author son of Kerr Quaney, the electrical engineer who came to work at Shaw's Bacon Factory in 1894.
outspokenness and assurance of one to whom money doesn’t matter.

“Name your salary, Kerr, and you’ll have a free hand with everything; we’ll pull together the whole thing together”, he said, convinced that he had met the right man.

The sudden question about salary stumped Kerr. There was no ‘rate’ for electrical engineers in those days, as the profession was not properly established and one of Kerr’s weak points was to underestimate his own value.

On the spur of the moment he named a salary which was about half what Mr. Shaw thought he would expect. Mr. Shaw, shrewd businessman that he was, never blinked an eyelid, but just expressed delight at having secured the services of a competent engineer. With a mutual feeling of confidence and friendship, they shook hands and the interview ended.

Kerr returned to the hotel, elated at having secured steady employment for the next couple of years, as his savings were running low. Beatrice was delighted at his success. As it was beyond their means to continue living in an hotel, they went house-hunting next day, and ended up by renting a small house in Davis Street.

A week later furniture and household effects, including a beautiful piano, arrived, after a five-day voyage on the canal boat from Dublin. They were not long settling in their new home and a period of great happiness followed.

The neighbourhood reminded them of Dublin, as it was by streets of Georgian houses with the same distinctive features of deep areas, iron railings, steps up to the front doors, ornate fanlights and iron balconies in front of the windows, and brickwork mellowed to a sickly yellow, just as if the houses had been transplanted en bloc from Dublin’s Dorset Square or Merrion Square.

In 1894 Limerick city had every right to be called ‘ancient’. There were few gaslights in the streets or houses, no telephones, no motor cars or public transport of any kind, and the luxuries of baths and lavatories were enjoyed only by a privileged few. A very low standard of living prevailed among the working classes, and Samuel Lover’s “stage Irishman”, was a living reality.

The Royal Irish Constabulary maintained law and order in the County, and the City Corporation employed watchmen to arrest footpads and thieves who infested the streets after dark. Watchmen patrolled the streets at night, swinging rattles, calling out the hours and generally making a racket to let everyone know that they were on duty, so that people could sleep in safety and comfort. They were tolerated by the ratepayers as a necessary evil.

The sidewalks in the main streets were paved with flat stones but in the side streets they were muddy and criss-crossed with wheel tracks.

The city itself was a stronghold of class distinction, vested interest, bigotry and slavery. There was an affluent society of Anglo-Irish landed gentry, army and naval officers, a sprinkling of snobbish, high-up civil servants and a quota of parasites who supported the regime and prospered under its protection.

British rule and all its works and pomp was detested by the vast majority of the townspeople, who regarded it, rightly or wrongly, as the direct cause of their poverty and heritage of political woe. Irish people who sided with the British, or fraternised with them in any way, were regarded as traitors to their country and were ostracised by their own kith and kin.

Kerr was not long resident in Limerick before he found himself a kind of social misfit. His education and professional status placed him on the same social plane as a senior army officer, and he would have had no difficulty in being proposed and accepted as a member of any of the city clubs. However, as an Irish-American, he had no wish to be seen hobnobbing with those who upheld British rule, and the only alternative was to mix with nationalist fanatics who were forever making preparations for militant action of one kind or another. This was not to his liking either, so he finally decided to steer a course between both factions, to settle down to the job in hand and leave politics to the politicians and fighting men.

After his appointment, he turned the front parlour of their new home in Davis Street into an office, got out his drawing-board and teee-square and began working on the plans for reconstruction and electrification of the old factory in Mulgrave Street.

The original factory was a sprawling collection of tin-roofed sheds and out-houses where over a hundred men and women were employed in the killing-room curing bacon and hams and manufacturing other pork products, for which the firm already had a big market in Ireland, England and America. Practically all “the work was done by antiquated hand methods. Kerr could never get over the lack of transport facilities and bad roads in Limerick. Used to the clean sidewalks and acres of asphalt in New York, he abhorred dirt and mud. With the inbred naval habit of keeping a smart appearance and maintaining the dignity of his profession, he set out to walk the distance from Davis Street to Mulgrave Street each morning in top hat, frock coat and polished boots, but before he got very far his boots and trousers were as muddy as a ploughman’s. The alternative was to accept a lift on an ass-and-cart, of which he had plenty of offers, and tempted as he often was to take one, he felt that if he did his incongruous appearance would make him the laughing-stock of the town.

When the people got to know that he was the first electrical engineer ever to come to Limerick, they treated him with deference almost amounting to awe.

“Look, there’s Mr. Quaney that’s goin’ to bring th’ electricity here”, or “Aw, he’s another Edison”, they’d say, trundling along on their ass-and-carts. When he went around the old factory it was all “Yes, sir” and “No, sir”, or “What can I do for you, sir?”. Everyone saluted and salaamed and did their best to please him.

The first plan off his drawing-board was for the new boiler-house and hundred foot chimney stack. A contractor was employed to build the chimney and boiler-house and also to extend the roof in the curing house. Mr. Shaw worked with Kerr on the master plan. Kerr estimated the power requirements and ordered the machinery. Mr. Shaw kept the accounts and never questioned the cost of anything.

“If you say it’s the best equipment for the job, we’ll get it, Kerr”, he would say, reaching for his chequebook and writing out the order. Mr. Shaw supervised the construction of the new buildings and extensions and Kerr got out the blueprints for the machinery, shaping and belt-drives, and ordered the electrical power units to be used for the manufacture of brawn and sausages.

There was a burst of activity seldom seen in those parts when the three six-foot diameter Lancashire boilers arrived by canal boat. The heavy sections were loaded on drays and hauled by teams of horses and men, over shockingly bad roads, to be assembled in the new boiler-house. Fitters arrived from England to assemble the boilers.

Then stories began to circulate about the pressure they would generate when the furnaces got going. It was an era before safety valves were perfected.
and lurid tales had come through about boilers bursting in London, Glasgow, Newcastle and other great industrial cities and the number of people who had been killed or maimed by explo-
sions. Most of the men were afraid to
enter the boiler-house or to have any-
thing to do with the boilers and gloom-
ily predicted that local men would
never take jobs as stokers.

Kerr worried a lot about the time he
had to waste walking to and fro from
work, although really it helped to keep
him fit. His young wife was often lonely
and depressed when he didn’t come
home for meals. Neither of them took
much interest in local affairs and few
called to pass the time of day. Beatrix
whiled away the hours practis-
ing at the piano and developing the
wonderful talent she had for music.

On Sundays Kerr would listen to her
playing, enraptured, then suddenly
wake up and start planning furiously
for some way to amass enough money
that would cause more and more
unemployment.

Although patriots sang ‘The West’s
Awake’ with great gusto, it was still in
a trance industrially. Labourers started
work in their own leisurely way and
made a show of effort until someone
produced a pipe and plug of tobacco,
then everyone within talking distance
followed suit and took it easy for a
spell. If a stranger came near where
men were working, they stopped
automatically to find out who he might
be, and what was his business and
until these important questions were
settled no-one would think of starting
work again. Among the working class
the work would be, and what was his business and
the time he
didn’t come
and depressed when he didn’t come
time he
didn’t come

remained was to put the plans into
practice. Mr. Shaw and Kerr were
beginning to feel the strain of continu-
ous overwork. At this stage one of their
chief worries was the shortage of skil-
led technicians to do the fitting and
pipe work.

Another thing was, that their over-
mastering desire to fulfill an ambition
had not inspired the local workmen
to greater efforts. Naturally indolent and
sublimely ignorant, with a come-day-
go-day outlook, the countrymen had
little interest in any sort of progress and
a profound distrust of machinery,
regarding it as an enemy of their class
clans were available and would not be
for some months.

The possibility of a long delay at this
critical stage of the work worried Mr.
Shaw and he discussed the matter with
Kerr to find a way to avoid it. There
wasn’t an electrician of any kind in
Limerick and it seemed unlikely that a
satisfactory man would be found even
if they searched the whole country.
Kerr felt somehow that the onus was on
him to see the job through and the only
way to do it was to tackle it himself, a
risky task to undertake with the type of
help available, but this was a challenge
to his pride and professional integrity.

Beatrix was shocked when Kerr
returned home and told her of his deci-
dion. Brought up with strait-laced ideas
about the ethics of ‘class’ and all its
delineations, she couldn’t understand
how “he could make himself so
cheap”.

“But Kerr, you’re a qualified
engineer, surely they can’t expect you
to go back to being an ordinary work-
man?”, she enquired frustratedly.

“There’s no other way, dear. I
couldn’t walk off and leave the job as it
is, could I?”, he replied quietly, and so
the matter was settled.

When Kerr decided to pocket his
pride and work to see the job through,
he didn’t fully appreciate the dispar-
agement he was letting himself in for.
It was like having to face the world after
being degraded in rank. When he was
going around with a sheaf of plans,
marking out the places for machinery
and teaching workmen how to read
blueprints, everyone looked up to him.
He was a ‘somebody’, able to make his
living with clean hands, the envy of the
artisans; but the fall of Lucifer was no
greater than his the day he turned up in
a boiler suit and heavy boots, carrying a
tool bag.

“Well, there’s a come-down if ever
there was ... an ordinary workman ...
aren’t we thought he was a gentleman’,
they whispered. People kept out of his
way, as if he was a leper, and he had
some difficulty getting labourers to help
him.

“Always thought there was some-
thin’ queer about that fellow,” they went
on. “If he’d joined a club an’ mixed
around with the gintry as he should,
he’d a bin a Knight or somethin’ by no
way was it,” was their verdict.

But Kerr, knowing the world as he
did, wasn’t too perturbed about the
psychological effects of having ‘lost
face’, although he did feel a bit deflated
one morning when one of his helpers
answered respectfully “Yes, sir”, and
the other blurted out:

“Aarrah, what are ya sittir’ him for, for
Jesus’ sake, hasn’t he to work the same
as ourselves?”

More than once he heard himself
described as a ‘Muggadhaun’, but not-
withstanding the slurs and innuen-
does, he got on with the job, and his

THIRTY-ONE
gave the mechanics the "all clear" to stoke up the furnaces and carry out a test.

Clouds of smoke arose from the main chimney, the roar of the furnace increased in volume and, a couple of hours later, the steam gauges registered sufficient pressure for a test. After a series of valve adjustments, spurts of water and escaping steam, the great flywheels began to turn slowly and gain momentum. The hum of the dynamo rose to a high-pitched whine and clusters of sparks, flickered around the armature contacts as the generation of electricity began.

It was dark that evening when Kerr went the rounds, putting on the light switches and running the belt-driven machines until the whole factory blazed with the new electric light and throbbed with steam and electrical energy.

Thus, under the direction of one man, the miracle was accomplished and the first factory in the west of Ireland to be run by electricity was ready for service. The Metropolitan Traction Company of New York has offered the handsome reward of £10,000 to the enterprising inventor who brings out a system of street car propulsion which will be superior or equal to the overhead system, but without possessing the objectionable features of the trolley for crowded thoroughfares. The idea is stated to be to encourage some sort of underground trolley system for street cars." Now Kerr's something in your line worth going in for" commented Beatrice enthusiastically. Once again Kerr felt the call of America but this time he was ready. A new ammonia plant and installation of pickling vats were ready for service.

Within a few months of the switch-over, the factory output statistics showed a remarkable rise, and soon the firm's products became known for excellence and quality in many parts of the world.

The young people who attended the factory were soon reflected by increased earnings of the workers and Kerr became a leading figure in the town and the hero of every schoolboy.

Now that his contract to modernise the ammonia plant was to all intents and purposes finished, the unspoken question arose whether Kerr would stay on at his post of engineer, or leave it for some other field of service. With that delicacy of feeling between true friends, neither man liked the idea of parting or even broaching the subject. Although Mr. Shaw gave many a hint that Kerr's post was permanent if he wished to stay at it, no further agreement was entered into, and Kerr left the matter at that. Prompted by ambition, he already felt fit to take on and grapple with another engineering problem.

In August 1896, a letter arrived from Dublin that opened up new vistas and thrilled the young couple with the spirit of adventure. It was from Kerr's sister, with the news, that at last, after years of talking, an Electric Tramways Company was being formed and had gained permission to provide a public transport system for the whole city of Dublin. There would be wonderful opportunities for engineers who were "in on the start". Kerr and his wife talked things over and decided that it would be in their best interests to move back to Dublin.

The following week Kerr interviewed an electrician who had applied for a maintenance job in the factory. After satisfying himself that the man was competent enough to look after the electrical equipment, he told Mr. Shaw of his wish for a change. With a mutual feeling of regret the friends parted, never to meet again.