
'CHANGE AT THE JUNCTION'

Now that the Dublin-Limerick train runs "on-the-hour give-or-take-twenty-minutes" a whole world is forever gone of fluttery aunts and men with bags of meal slung over their shoulders gazing the length of the stone cold platform at Limerick Junction.

The fluttering aunts and the men with the sacks of meal hardly had much in common, except an innate respect for each other's lives — and the train at Limerick Junction. And to understand how the two met you would need to know a little about the workings of the railway south of Portlaoise. And this is how it worked. In order to get from Dublin to Limerick by rail you would board a train at what used to be Kingsbridge and after a series of stops there would be a long stop at what appeared to be a railway platform a mile long in the middle of nowhere. This is Limerick Junction, so called because in order to get to Limerick you now disembark from the train and wait. You waited for the train which had come up specially from Limerick "to meet" the Dublin train, and bear back to Limerick all who travel in her. Meanwhile the train in which the Limerick-bound travellers have come this far, that train is now *en route* to Cork, presumably laden with passengers who actually intend going to Cork. But if you were hoping to arrive in Limerick you had to be alert approaching the long platform. Although you would have a wait once you got off the Cork train, it didn't hang about long at Limerick Junction, which incidentally is in Tipperary.

Where does the Cork train come into all this, you may ask? Indeed you may, but your asking is only a polite query in the ocean of querulous questioning that went on along that stretch of platform in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of Tipperary. At the Railway Station in Dublin you had been told: "Passengers for Limerick, take the Cork train and change at Limerick Junction." And that is why, having taken that advice, there is now a lady of refined advancement standing on the draughty stretch of platform, waiting for the Limerick train and standing next to her is a man with a sack slung over his shoulders.

He has come up that morning from Charleville in the County Cork, travelling as he hopes to Boher in the County Limerick. It is as well to state that Charleville is in County Cork and that Boher is a pretty little hamlet on the

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rail run to Limerick, for the contusions of how he will arrive in Boher bewilder the man with the sack of meal slung over his shoulder. At Cork Station he has been told to take the train for Dublin and change at Limerick Junction for Limerick — but to get off at Boher which is the last stop before Limerick. And when he diffidently asked how would he know when he was at Limerick Junction, he was told that the city people coming down from Dublin all change at "The Junction" for Limerick. Keep an eye on them and you will be all right . . .

Meanwhile the dear lady of advanced refinement; she had become a little uneasy when the train stopped back at Portlaoise. What made her a little uncertain was the way the porters shouted "Train for Cork, train for Cork" all along the Portlaoise platform. Although she had been assured at Kingsbridge "Take the Cork train and change at Limerick Junction" she had become, nonetheless, a *little* uneasy. So she asks, gently, if this is the train for Limerick and she is told . . . no, it is not actually the train for Limerick, it is the train for Cork but if you get off at Limerick Junction you will be all right — just keep an eye out for someone going to Limerick and follow him, you will be all right . . .

And that is how, on the long, draughty platform in the middle of nowhere which is in the middle of Tipperary, there would usually be a lady of respectable demeanour standing quite close to a little old man with a sack of meal slung over his shoulder. There would be few words exchanged between them and on the surface they appeared to have little in common. Yet when the train for Limerick came in and the porter with the brown trousers and pullover inside a black jacket started shouting "Limerick train, Limerick train" through his postman's cap with the shiny peak, the lady of refinement and the man with the sack over his shoulder would move together towards a

carriage. Moreover, they moved with the certainty of a couple going on a journey, together.

They would often sit opposite each other and look sideways past each other's gaze as the train trundled towards Limerick, the essence of polite tolerance as if they were locked in a marriage which all their friends had advised them against — but which in the event they had managed to make a good job of, mainly by not talking and avoiding each other's gaze on train journeys. Which, when you think about it, mightn't be a bad recipe for marriage, anyway.

In my years of travelling the Limerick train I used to see such couples on almost every journey. To idle the last leg I used to wonder what *she* did — maybe a matron in a hospital or a senior clerk in a solicitor's office in Dublin and in any case a spinster. Of course I wondered as well what was in the bag which the man had slung over his shoulder on the platform and which, when they both got in the train, was usually settled with care on the seat beside him. There would be specks of meal on his much-used herringbone tweed coat, and his blue eyes would pierce the fields as we passed, taking-in that maybe the land here was better drained than in Charleville. But none of that — or all of that — would absolutely indicate what lay in the sack.

I don't see much of them nowadays. With seven trains a day and girls from offices with weekend plastic bags and youngsters with coke tins — and the loudspeaker system crackling away precise instructions at The Junction about the trains now standing at platform two . . . well a lady of refined years can make the journey on her own. Although her ears will be ringing at the end with the noise of youngsters' transistors. And men with sacks of meal don't . . . well with E.E.C. prices and all that, it would be an awful waste of time going all the way from Charleville to Boher with just a sack of meal. And anyway, with all this early retirement and automatic feeders and whatnot, well there's not much for hardy little farming men to do on the bits of land anymore. Except, maybe, mull over the way the world has changed. Time was when a man could make a whole day's journey out of getting from Charleville to Limerick. With a stop at The Junction to change trains . . .