

Limerick's "Marconi"

by Kevin Hannan

WHEN George Turner first appeared in the streets of Limerick he gave little cause for undue notice, except, perhaps, for the occasional envious glance from some secret admirer of his immaculate plus-four suit and elegant shining brogues. His impeccable appearance evoked memories of the "Yank" in Glenanaar, who was "arrayed in all kinds of sartorial splendour". With all this and an Oxford accent, too, there was no mistaking the man from across the water.

While he was refined and even overmannerly in his approach—indeed, one could find little trace of asperity in his whole make-up—he was strangely reserved, and rarely sought the assistance of the "man in the street" on any matter of guidance or information.

During the first few months after his arrival in Limerick he was known as "the gentleman", a soubriquet usually applied locally only to the most mannerly and respectable of males. As time moved on it gradually became evident that this was a person of peculiarly eccentric habits. At the Crescent Hotel, where he first set up house, it was noticed after a while that he paid no attention whatever to his general appearance, or to the care of his clothing. Furthermore, it was reported by those in closer contact that his entire wardrobe was on his back.

His one preoccupation appeared to be a passionate interest in radio and electrical fittings, pieces of cable and flex and small engineering fittings, such as broken car engine valve springs, which he collected in abundance in the local garages. He also kept a stock of waste engine oil.

As if to give the impression that he was engaged in some important engineering project, he carried much of these oddments with him on his trips here and there through the city. Even his tweed cap was brought into requisition as a repository for a number of coils of wire, with which, according to local wags, he expected to make contact with outer space. The cap was so mis-shapen and distended from this unusual service that the fastener on the peak broke and could not be used to maintain the earlier neat appearance.

His bicycle, the tyres of which he never bothered to inflate, was a feature that seemed to belong to him as irrevocably as the shape of his cap. During his last years it was never used for its intended purpose, rather was it a means of transport for the bulk of his strange impedimenta, which could not be accommodated on his already overburdened person.

Thus, he trundled his fantastic budget through the city streets, all the while becoming more immersed in his important mania. He looked more wretched every day and, as if to accelerate the gradual accumulation of filth and grime, he applied liberal quantities of burnt engine oil on his hands and legs and not a little on his face. Soon the whites of his eyes stood out against their dusky background like saucers on a ebony table.

The expensive plus-four suit that once embellished his dignified bearing became a sorry sight. The bellows pockets of the jacket bulged and sagged under the weight of his most prized possessions. The trousers, which he had fashioned into a kind of skirt by ripping the inside leg seams, and which was soaked in the rancid substance which blackened every part of his anatomy, flapped against the calves of his legs at every step, making a sound like that of a wet dishcloth being slapped against the side of a kitchen sink.

One observer was convinced that George Turner, by this time widely known as "Marconi" (and sometimes "The Man with the Wires") washed his face regularly for



the purpose of shaving—and immediately afterwards applied soot and waste oil as one would apply after-shave lotion.

Street urchins, whose jibes and cat-calls usually make life a little more difficult for such as he, had a strange reverence for this quiet and immovable character. He remained an object of sympathy and curiosity and was never the butt of the practical joker. He went his daily rounds as if on a desert island, never displaying the slightest interest in those around him.

If his contribution to local lore cannot be measured he, at least, filled the void created by the passing of Steve "Mack" and Jack "Tar" and secured a place for himself on the long and varied list of "characters" who lent colour and interest to the teeming city streets.

Though he lived in the centre of a so-called Christian community he died in a burrow which he had excavated for himself at the rear of the old Munster and Connaught College in Hartstonge Street. He left no debts, and the £60 which was found on his person was more than adequate to pay for his coffin and the two-horse hearse that transported it to the old churchyard of Punchbowl, in the Clare Hills, where he was buried quietly and unceremoniously without the benefit of either mourners or clergy.

The strange and lonely funeral aroused the curiosity of two wildfowlers who happened to be in the vicinity and who, on learning of the identity of the principal, assisted in the last, sad exercises.

Though George Turner's life in Limerick was spent in the realms of fantasy, his agonising last days must have shocked him into a realisation of his dreadful plight. Whatever his mental state, he endured the rigours of his final frightful malady—gangrene of the feet—without even the comfort of a bed, or the soothing touch or voice of a solitary friend.