大学英语泛读教材

第十册

重庆师范学院外语系编

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十

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1. Public Opinion

Frank O'Connor[1]

Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking how nice it would be to live in a little town like this. You could have a king's life in a house with a fine garden like mine and a car so that you could slip up to town whenever you felt in need of company. It's easy for you, living in Dublin and writing things for the American papers, to imagine you could come and live down here and write whatever you liked about people on our local Council, like MacDunphy. Don't misunderstand me; there's *a hell of a lot*[2] you could say about him; I've said a few things myself from time to time. All I mean is that you wouldn't be able to go on for long. This town has finished better men than you. It broke me, and, believe me, I'm not soft.

When I came here first, ten years ago, I felt exactly the way you do, the way

everybody does. At that time—and the same is nearly true today—there wasn't a single man of importance in this town who would dare to have a housekeeper younger than sixty, for fear of what people might say about them. In fact, you may have noticed that none of the men around here are what you might call 'happily married'. They went at it in too much of a hurry.

Oh, of course, I wasn't going to make that mistake! When I needed a housekeeper I chose a girl called Bridie Casey, a lovely little girl of seventeen from a village up the coast. But I went about it carefully. I drove out there one day when she was at home, and I had a look at the cottage and a talk with her mother and a cup of tea, and after that I didn't need anyone to recommend her. I knew that if there was anything Bridie did not do properly her mother would not take long to correct her. After that, there was only one inquiry I wanted to make.

'Have you a boy-friend, Bridie?' said I.

'No, Doctor, I have not,' said she with a simple expression that didn't *take me in*[2] a

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bit. As a doctor you soon get used to innocent looks.

'Well, you'd better hurry up and get one,' said I, 'or I'm not going to take you.'

She laughed at this, as if she thought I was only joking. I was not joking at all. *A housekeeper or maid without a man of her own is as bad as a hen with an egg.*[4]

'It's no laughing matter,' I said. 'And when you do get a fellow, if you haven't one already, you can tell him I said he could drink as much of my beer as he likes, but if ever I catch you putting water in my whiskey, I'll sack you right away.'

I made no mistake, though, in Bridie or her mother. She mightn't get a job in *the Shelbourne Hotel*[5], but what that girl could cook she cooked well, and anything she cleaned looked as if it was clean. What's more, she could judge a patient better than I could myself. There's no doubt about it, as housekeepers or maids Irish girls are usually *not worth a damn*[6], but a girl from a good Irish home can *turn her hand to anything*[7]. Of course, she was so good-looking that people who came to the house used to *pass*

remarks about us'. But that was only jealousy. They didn't dare to employ a good-looking girl themselves for fear of what people would say. But I knew that as log as a girl had a man of her own to look after, she'd give me no trouble.

No, what broke up my happy home was something different altogether. You mightn't understand it, but in a place like this it's the hardest thing in the world to get people to pay you in cash. They'll give you anything you can think of instead of money. Here, everything depends on what they call 'friendship'. I suppose it's the shopkeepers who give them the habit, because a regular customer is always supposed to be in debt. But if he ever pays off his debt, that's the end of the 'friendship'; from then on they're deadly enemies. Of course, people think a professional man—a lawyer or a doctor—should live the same way, and instead of money what you get is presents: chickens, butter, eggs and meat, too much for even a large family to eat, let alone a single man! Friendship is all very well, but between you and me it's

a poor thing for a man to have to depend on at the beginning of his career.

I had one patient I remember particularly well, called Willie Joe Corcoran of Glashanaddig—he died last year, poor man, and my mind is already more at ease—and Willie Joe seemed to think I was always *on the point of starvation*[8]. One Sunday, when I got home from church after the twelve o'clock service, I went to the whiskey cupboard to get myself a drink and I noticed the most extraordinary smell. Doctors are sensitive to smells, of course—we have to be—and I knew I wouldn't be able to rest until I had found where it was coming from. I searched the room and I searched the hall and I even *poked my head into*[9] the bedrooms before I tried the kitchen. Knowing how clean Bridie was, I never even associated the smell with her. When I went in, there she was in a clean white uniform, cooking the dinner, and she looked round at me.

'What the hell is that smell[10]*,* Bridie?' said I.

She folded her arms and leaned against the wall. You wouldn't find a prettier

girl in five counties.

'I told you before,' says she in her thin, high voice, 'it's *that side of beef*!! Willie Joe Corcoran left on Thursday. The smell's all over the house; I can't get rid of it.'

'But didn't I tell you to throw that out?' I said.

'You did,' says she, as if I was the most unreasonable man in the world, 'but you didn't tell me where you wanted me to throw it.'

'What's wrong with the rubbish-bin?' said I.

'What's wrong with the rubbish-bin?' says she. 'There's nothing wrong with it, only the dustmen won't be coming till Tuesday.'

'Then for God's sake girl, can't you throw it over the wall into the field?'

'Into the field!' says she, her voice rising sharply like a sick bird, 'And what would people say?'

'I don't know, Bridie,' I said, trying to keep her calm. 'What do you think they'd say?'

'They're bad enough to make up all sorts of stories,' says she.

Believe me, I had to look at her to make sure she was serious. There she was, a girl of seventeen with the face of a nun, suggesting things that I could hardly imagine.

'Why, Bridie?' I said, treating it as a joke. 'You don't think they'd say I was bringing dead bodies back from the hospital to cut up?'

'They've said worse,' she said in a high vioce, and I could see that she didn't think much of my powers of imagination. Because you write books, you think you know a few things, but you should listen to the conversation of well-behaved girls in this town.

'About me, Bridie?' said I in astonishment.

'About *you and others*[12]' said she. And then, by God, I lost my temper with her.

'And does it surprise you if they do,' said I, 'when bloody fools like you pay attention to them?'

I have a nasty temper when I'm roused, and for a while that frightend her more than the thought of what people might say

of her.

'I'll get Kenfick's boy in the morning and tell him to take it away,' said she. 'Shall I give him a shilling?'

'Put it in the *church collection*,'[13] said I in a rage. 'I'll be going out to Dr MacMahon's for supper and I'll take it away myself. If people are going to talk about anyone they can talk about me. I should be able to stand it. And let me tell you, Bridey Gasey, if I was the sort of person to mind what anyone said about me, you wouldn't be where you are this minute.'

I was very unkind to her, but of course I was angry. After all, I had to take my drink and eat my dinner with that smell around the house and Bridie running around me like a frightened hen. When I went out to get the side of beef, she gave a cry as if I'd stood on her foot.

'*Mother of God*[14]!' says she, 'Your new suit!' 'Never mind my new suit,' said I, and I wrapped the beef in a couple of newspapers and heaved it into the back of the car. I can tell you it wasn't pleasnt. I had all the windows open, but even then the

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smell was dreadful, and I drove through the town with the people lifting their heads like hunting-dogs to sniff after us.

I wouldn't have minded that so much, but Sunday is the only free day I have. In those days, before I was married, I nearly always drove out to Jerry MacMahon's for supper and a game of cards. I knew poor Jerry looked forward to it because his wife was very strict with him about his drinking.

I stopped the car on top of the cliffs to throw out the meat, and just as I was looking for a place where I could easily throw it over the edge, I saw a tall, awkward-looking countryman coming up the road towards me. He had a long, sad sort of face and mad eyes. Something about his appearance made me sure that I didn't want him to see what I was doing. You might think it funny for a doctor to behave like this, but that's the way I am.

'Nice evening,' says he.

'Grand evening, thank God,' says I. Then, not to give him an excuse for being too curious, I said, 'That's a splendid

view.'

'Well,' says he sourly, just giving it a glance, 'the view is all right but it's no use to the people who have to live with it. You can't make money out of that view,' says he, and then he began to inspect me more carefully, and I knew I'd made a great mistake in opening my mouth to him at all. 'You're an artist, then, I suppose?' says he.

You've noticed, perhaps, that I'm very sensitive to being questioned. It is a thing I cannot stand. Even signing my name to a telegram is a thing I never like to do, and I hate a direct question.

'How did you guess?' said I.

'And I suppose,' said he, turning to inspect the view again, 'if you painted that view you'd find people who would buy it?'

'That's what I was hoping,' said I.

So he turned to the scenery again, and this time he examined it carefully, as if it was *a cow at a fair*[18].

'I expect you'd get nearly five pounds for a large view like that?' said he.

'You would—and more,' said I.

'Ten?' said he, with his eyes beginning to stand out.

'More,' said I.

'It's crazy,' said he, shaking his head. 'Why, the whole thing isn't worth that much. No wonder the country's in such a bad state. Good luck!'

'Good luck,' said I, and I watched him disappear among the rocks on the other side of the road. I waited; then *I saw* him *peering out at me from behind a rock*[17] like some wild mountain animal, and I knew that even if I stayed there till nightfall he wouldn't go away. He simply could not get used to the idea that a picture could be worth as much as a cow, and he probably thought that if he stayed long enough he might learn the trick and paint the equivalent of a whole herd of cows. The man's mind didn't rise above cows. And I was determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing what I was really trying to do. You might think I was beig *shortsighted*[18]. but that's the sort of person I am.

I got into the car and drove off down

to Barney Phelan's *pub*[19] on the edge of the bay. Barney's pub is the best in this part of the world, and Barney himself is *a bit of a character*[20]; a tall excitable man with wild blue eyes and a restless tongue. He kept filling my glass as fast as I could empty it, and three or four times it was *on the tip of my tongue*[21] to tell him what I was doing; but I knew he'd make a story out of it for the boys that night, and sooner or later it would get back to Willie Joe Corcoran. And though Willie Joe was a bad man, I did not want to hurt his feelings. That is another great weakness of mine. I never like hurting people's feelings.

Of course that was a mistake, for when I walked out of the pub the first thing I saw was the man I had met on the cliff and two other locals peering in at the parcel in the back of my car. This really made me wild. I can not stand that sort of rude curiosity.

'Well,' I said, giving the tall man a shove with my shoulder to get him out of the way, 'I hope you saw something good.'

At that moment Barney came out,

drying hands in his apron and showing his two front teeth like a rat.

'Are those fellows playing around with your car, Doctor?' says he.

'Oho,' said the man from the cliff to his two friends. 'So a Doctor is what he is now!'

'And what the hell did you think he was, you fool?' asked Barney.

'A painter is what he was when we last heard of him,' said the madman.

'And I suppose he was looking for a little job painting the huts you have up in Bensheen?' asked Barney with a nasty smile.

'The huts may be humble but the men are true,' said the madman solemnly.

'Damn you, man,' said Barney, holding up his fists, 'are you saying that I haven't known the Doctor since he was *in short trousers*?'

'No man knows the soul of another?' said the tall man, shaking his head again.

'For God's sake, Barney, don't waste your time with that poor fool,' said I. 'It's my own fault for bringing people like

him into the world. There can't be any more useless occupation than being a doctor or being in prison *breaking stones*.[23]

'I should not talk against breaking stones,' said the cliff-man sourly. '*It might not be long till*[24] certain people here find themselves doing just that.'

'The Devil take you,' I roared, and drove off in the direction of Jerry MacMahon's. When I glanced in the driving mirror I saw Barney standing in the middle of the road with the three locals around him, waving their hands. It struck me that, although I had been determined to tell him nothing, Barney would have a story for the boys that night, and it would not be about Willie Joe. It would be about me. It also struck me that I was behaving in a most unnecessary way. *If I'd been a real murderer trying to get rid of a real body I could hardly have behaved more suspiciously*.[25] And why? Because I did not want people discussing my business. I don't know what it is about Irish people that makes them afraid of having their business discussed. It is not that Irish people's

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