

# Public Opinion

*Frank O'Connor*

Published by the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
Bentley House, 200 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB  
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

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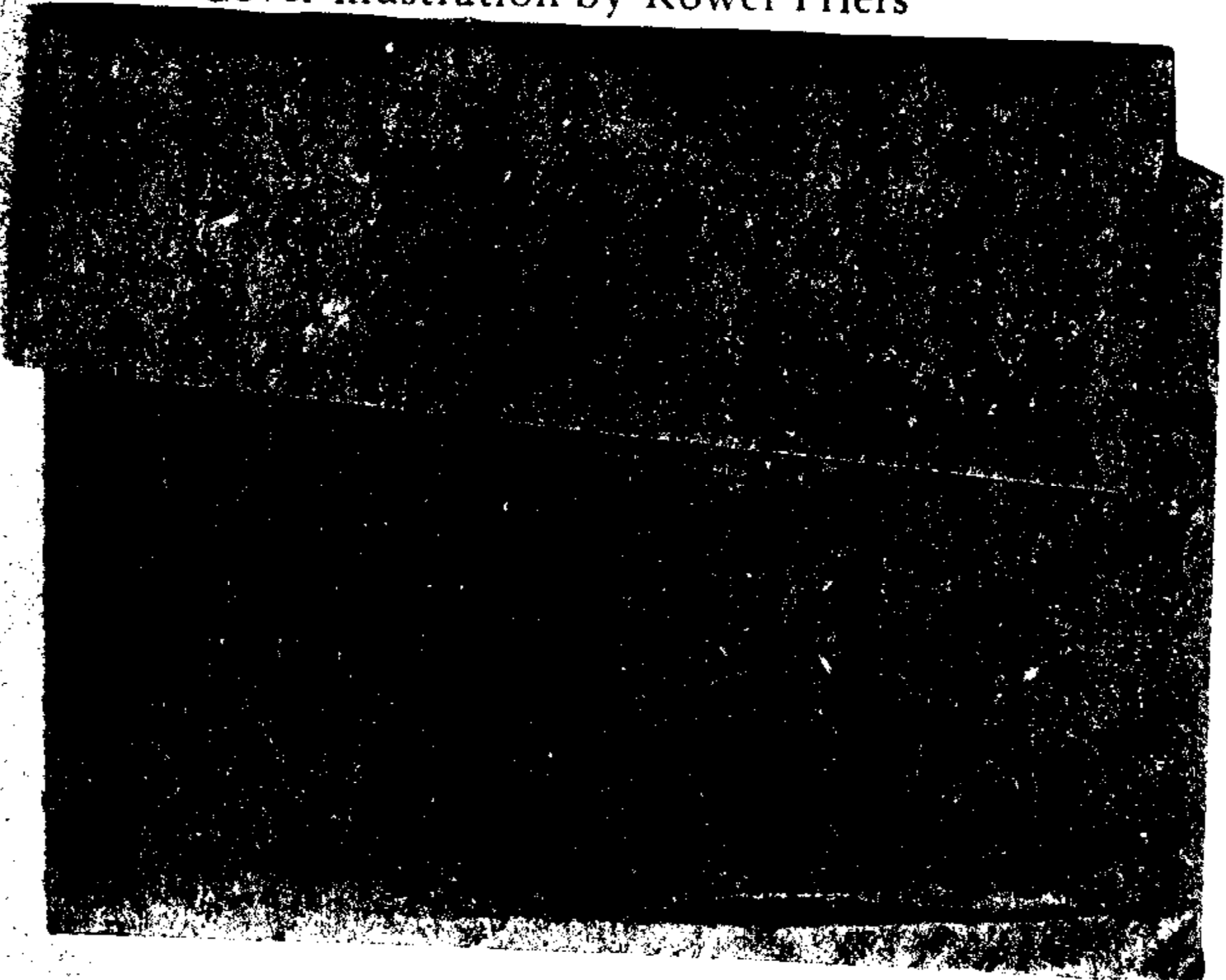
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ISBN 0 521 20991 9

This simplified edition first published 1976

Printed in Great Britain by David Green (Printers) Ltd.  
Kettering, Northamptonshire, England

Cover illustration by Rowel Friers



## Public Opinion

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\* 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.

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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.

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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\* a 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. 10

'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\*, 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\*, but a girl from a good Irish home can turn her hand to anything\*. 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 long as a girl had a man of her own to look after, she'd give me no trouble. 20 30

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.

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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\*. 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\* 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.

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'What the hell is that smell, Bridie?' said I.

She folded her arms and leaned against the wall. You wouldn't find a prettier girl in five counties\*.

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'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?'

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'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 voice, 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.

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

'About you and others\*,' 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 frightened her more than the thought of what people might say of her.

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'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\*,' 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 Casey, 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\*!' 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 pleasant. I had all the windows open, but even then the smell was dreadful, and I drove through the town with the people lifting their heads like hunting-dogs to sniff after us. 10

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. 20

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. 30

'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?'

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'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\*.

'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!'

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'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 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 being shortsighted\*, but that's the sort of person I am.

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I got into the car and drove off down to Barney Phelan's pub\* 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; 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 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 cannot stand that sort of rude curiosity.

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

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

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'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.

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'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\*.'

'I should not talk against breaking stones,' said the cliff-man sourly. 'It might not be long till 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. 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 business is any worse than other people's business, only we behave as if it was.

I stopped the car at a convenient spot\* by the edge of the bay, miles from anywhere. I could have got rid of the beef there and then, but my strength of will seemed to have broken. I walked up and down that road slowly, looking to right and left to make sure no one was watching. Even then I was perfectly safe, but I saw a farmer crossing a field a mile away up the hill and I decided to wait till he was out of sight. That was my big mistake, because, of course, the moment he glanced over his shoulder and saw a strange man with a car stopped on the road he stopped himself, with his head on one side like an old dog. I'm not blaming him, you know! I blame nobody but myself. Up to that day I had never felt the least bit of sympathy for my neurotic patients, who were always imagining diseases they hadn't got. But

there I was, a doctor, giving myself a disease I hadn't got, and with no excuse whatever.

By this time the smell was so bad that I knew I wouldn't be able to get it out of the seat covers for days. And there was Jerry MacMahon waiting for me with a bottle of whiskey which his wife wouldn't let him touch till I got there, and I couldn't go for fear of the way he'd laugh at me. I looked again and saw that the man who'd been crossing the field had changed his mind. Instead he'd come down to the gate and was leaning over it, lighting his pipe while he admired the view of the bay and the mountains.

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This was too much for me. I knew now that even if I got rid of the beef my Sunday would still be ruined. I got in the car and drove straight home. Then I went to the whiskey cupboard and poured myself a drink big enough to match my misery. Just as I sat down to take a sip, Bridie walked in without knocking. This is one fault I should have told you about — all the time she was with me I never managed to train her to knock. I declare to God, when I saw her standing in the doorway I jumped. I'd always been very careful of my nerves, and jumping like this was a new thing to me.

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'Didn't I tell you to knock before you came into a room?' I shouted.

'I forgot,' she said, pretending not to notice the state I was in. 'So you didn't go to Dr MacMahon's?'

'I did not,' I said.

'And did you throw away the beef?'

'I didn't,' I said. Then, as I saw her waiting for an explanation, I added; 'There were too many people around.'

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'Is that so?' she said, with some satisfaction. 'I suppose we'll have to bury it in the garden after dark?'

'I suppose so,' I said, not realising that I had handed myself over to her\*. I was now in her hands, every bit of me.

That evening I took a spade and dug a deep hole in

the back garden, and Bridie heaved in the side of beef. The remarkable thing is that the whole time we were doing it we talked in whispers and glanced up at the backs of other houses in the road to see if we were being watched. But when it was over I was so glad to have the weight off my mind that I even felt kind towards Bridie! Then I went over to Jim Donoghue, the dentist, and told him the whole story over a couple of drinks. We were splitting our sides with laughter.

When I say we were splitting our sides, I do not mean 10  
that this is a funny story. It was very far from being funny for me before it was over. You wouldn't believe the scandal\* there was about Bridie and myself after that. You'd wonder how people could imagine such things, let alone\* repeat them. That day changed my whole life . . . Oh, laugh! laugh! I was laughing out of the other side of my mouth\* before it was finished. Up till then I'd never cared a damn what anyone thought of me, but from that day on I was afraid of my own shadow. With all the talk there was about us, I even had 20  
to send Bridie away, and, of course, within twelve months I was married like the rest of them . . . By the way, when I mentioned unhappy marriages, I wasn't speaking of my own. Mrs Ryan and myself get on quite well. I only mentioned it to show what might happen if ever you were foolish enough to come and live here. A town like this can bend iron. And if you doubt my word, that's only because you don't know what they are saying about you.

# Glossary

Many words have more than one meaning. The meanings given here refer to the sentence in the story in which the word appears.

*General Note:* Words like 'hell', 'damn', 'God', 'Devil', 'bloody' are used in certain dialects, including Irish, to express strong feelings.

## *page 1*

- line 4 town: Dublin (capital of the Republic of Ireland)  
10 a hell of a lot: (colloquial) plenty  
19 housekeeper: woman employed to look after the house, and also to be in charge of the other servants, if there are any.

## *page 2*

- 6 take me in: fool me, deceive me  
18 sack: dismiss  
20 the Shelbourne Hotel: a fashionable hotel in Dublin  
25 not worth a damn: (colloquial) no good, useless  
26 turn her hand to anything: do any job

## *page 3*

- 8 let alone: not to mention, to say nothing of  
16 on the point of starvation: almost dying of hunger  
23 poked my head into: had a quick look in  
30 counties: regions, each with at least one major town  
32 side of beef: large piece of beef, weighing about 45 lb (20 kilos)

## *page 4*

- 15 nun: woman living a life given to God, together with other women  
25 you and others: Bridie really means 'you and me', but she does not dare say so  
29 roused: made angry, upset  
34 church collection: money given to the church during the church service

## *page 5*

- 8 Mother of God: an exclamation of shock  
31 grand: (Irish dialect) beautiful  
34 sourly: unpleasantly

*page 6*

- line 13 fair: local market (where animals are often sold)  
24 peering: looking carefully, through half-shut eyes  
34 shortsighted: suspicious  
36 pub: (abbreviation) public house: place where people meet to drink and talk

*page 7*

- 4 the boys: his male friends  
12 locals: people from the neighbourhood  
23 so a Doctor is what he is now: the man from the cliff does not believe Barney Phelan  
35 in short trousers: a young boy

*page 8*

- 4 breaking stones: doing hard labour  
7 it might not be long . . . : an indirect way of waying to the doctor: 'You will be in prison soon.'  
24 spot: place

*page 9*

- 36 handed myself over to her: given her complete control over me

*page 10*

- 13 scandal: disapproving talk  
15 let alone: far less  
17 I was laughing out of the other side of my mouth: I found that the joke had turned against me, and it was no longer funny

# Questions

- 1 Why did Dr Ryan not like being given presents instead of being paid?
- 2 What prevented Bridie from throwing away the side of beef when the doctor had asked her to do so?
- 3 Why did the doctor decide not to tell Barney Phelan what he was doing?
- 4 Why did Dr Ryan wait twelve months before marrying Bridie?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 5 Why did Dr Ryan choose to tell this story to the journalist from Dublin?
- 6 While discussing how to get rid of the meat, the doctor lost his temper with Bridie. Why?
- 7 What did Dr Ryan fear that people might say about him if they saw him trying to get rid of the meat?
- 8 When the man from the cliff heard that Ryan was a doctor he said: 'A painter is what he was when we last heard of him' (p. 7). What did he mean?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 9 Why did Dr Ryan want to be sure that Bridie had a boy-friend?
- 10 Why did Dr Ryan pretend to be an artist to the man on the cliff?
- 11 In what way did Dr Ryan's profession affect his decisions?

## Topics for discussion

- 1 Why is Dr Ryan worried by 'public opinion'?
- 2 Dr Ryan tells the journalist that everything in the town depends on friendship (p. 2). What does he mean by 'friendship'?
- 3 'By the way, when I mentioned unhappy marriages, I wasn't speaking of my own' (p. 10). Why does Dr Ryan say this?
- 4 The influence of our public position on our private life.
- 5 Examples from your own experience of the power of 'public opinion'.