



## *Guests of the Nation*

### **A Thought-Provoking Short Story**

This short story by Frank O'Connor contains a twist that transforms it from an ordinary chatting of a bunch of men over a game of cards to an extra-ordinary tale that questions the logic of war and confrontation between two nations.

Two of the men are British and the other three Irish.

The Irish are holding the two as prisoners, but the friendly attitude of the Englishmen encourages the group to spend their time playing cards and fighting boredom.

Two of the Irishmen, Bonaparte and Noble, do not see the reason why they should even keep an eye on the prisoners, for they are not the type to escape. Therefore, after a day or two, they drop all pretense of guarding the Englishmen.

It is towards the end of the story, however, that Bonaparte and Noble realize the possibility that they may have to shoot the Englishmen, should other British regiments decide to kill their Irish captives. This scenario is first dismissed as a remote prospect and then the enormity of the horror sinks in. They are finally forced to kill their companions or "chums" as the Englishmen call them in an endearing tone.

Among them, only Jeremiah who looks like a shy, simple farmer blindly follows orders, encouraging his countrymen to follow suit and kill the British prisoners.

"I don't know clearly how we got over that day, but get over it we did, and a great relief it was when the tea-things were cleared away and Belcher said in his peaceable manner, 'Well, chums, what about it?' So

we all sat round the table and 'Awkins produced the cards, and at that moment I heard Jeremiah Donovan's footsteps up the path, and a dark presentiment crossed my mind. I rose quietly from the table and laid my hand on him before he reached the door. 'What do you want?' I asked him. 'I want those two soldier friends of yours,' he says reddening. 'Is that the way it is, Jeremiah Donovan?' I ask. 'That's the way. There were four of our lads went west this morning, one of them a boy of sixteen.'"

Noble and Bonaparte, who are young and have developed an emotional attachment to their prisoners, almost hope that the two Englishmen would flee or fight back rather than merely stand innocently before them. After all, they are *such decent chaps*. Hawkins keeps insisting that they are all *chums*, and they shouldn't be killing each other, war or no war.

The endless discussions over religion and politics, merely discloses the human side of Hawkins, making his cold-blooded murder and that of the other British prisoner even more shocking both to the reader and the characters in the story.