

Special Lesson

The Open Window

"My aunt will be down soon, Mr. Nuttel," said the very confident 15-year-old girl. "In the meanwhile, you must put up with me."

Framton Nuttel tried to say something that would flatter the niece without making it seem like he was focusing on her rather than her aunt, who had yet to come down. He doubted whether these formal visits to the homes of total strangers would do much to help cure his nervousness.

"I know how it will be," his sister had said when he was preparing to move to this rural area. "You will hide yourself down there and not speak to anyone. Then your nervousness will be worse than ever. I will tell all the people I know there that you're coming. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice."

Framton wondered whether Mrs. Sappleton, the woman he was now visiting, belonged in the "nice" category.

"Do you know many of the people around here?" asked the niece when she decided that they had stayed silent for long enough.

"Hardly anyone," said Framton. "My sister stayed here four years ago, and she gave me the names of some of the people she wants me to meet."

He made the last statement in a tone of distinct regret.

"Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?" asked the confident young lady.

"Only her name and address," admitted Framton. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was married or widowed. Something undefinable about the room suggested that a man lived there.

"A great tragedy happened just three years ago," said the girl. "It was after your sister left."

"A tragedy?" asked Framton. Somehow, tragedies seemed out of place in such a calm and peaceful countryside.

"You may wonder why we have left that window wide open on an October afternoon," said the niece, pointing to a French window that opened onto a lawn.

"Well, it is quite warm for this time of the year," said Framton. "But does that window have anything to do with the tragedy?"

"Three years ago today, her husband and her two younger brothers went off on a hunting trip through that window. They never came back. While crossing the woods to their favorite hunting spot, they fell into a swamp. It had been very wet and muddy that summer, you know. Places that had been safe in other years suddenly became dangerous. Their bodies were never found. That was the worst part of this story."

Here the girl's voice lost its confident tone and began to tremble. "My poor aunt still thinks that they will come back someday, along with the little brown dog that was lost with them, walking in through that window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every day until sunset.

My aunt often told me how they left. Her husband had his white waterproof coat over his arm, and Ronnie, her youngest brother, was singing 'Bertie, why do you bound?' as he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves. Sometimes on still, quiet evenings like this, I almost get a creepy feeling that they will all walk in through that window—"

She stopped speaking suddenly and shook a little. Framton was relieved when the aunt rushed into the room and apologized for being late.

"I hope Vera has been amusing you," she said.

"She has been very interesting," said Framton.

"I hope you don't mind the open window," said Mrs. Sappleton. "My husband and brothers will soon be back from hunting, and they always come in this way. They've been out in the forest today, so they'll make a mess of my poor carpets. Men always do that sort of thing, don't they?"

She talked cheerfully about hunting and the lack of birds in the area. To Framton, it was dreadful to listen to her. He made a partially successful effort to change the subject to a less upsetting topic. He was conscious that Mrs. Sappleton was giving him only a small part of her attention. Her eyes were constantly moving past him to the open window and the lawn beyond. It was an unfortunate coincidence that he had visited her on such a tragic anniversary.

"My doctors ordered me to rest and to avoid both excitement and physical exercise," said Framton, who mistakenly believed that strangers were interested in his illnesses, as well as their causes and cures.

"However, they are not so much in agreement on what exactly my diet should be," he continued.

"No?" asked Mrs. Sappleton, barely holding back a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly smiled and sat up straight—but it was not because of what Framton was saying.

"Here they are at last!" she cried in delight. "Just in time for tea. But they look as if they were in the mud up to their eyes!"

Framton trembled slightly and turned towards the niece with a look that expressed sympathy for her aunt's condition. The girl was staring out through the open window with horror in her eyes. Suddenly feeling fear in his stomach, Framton turned around in his seat and looked in the same direction.

In the evening darkness, three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window. They all carried guns under their arms, and one of them had a white coat over his shoulders. A tired brown dog walked at their feet. They silently neared the house, and then a young voice began to sing in the dark, "Bertie, why do you bound?"

Framton grabbed wildly for his umbrella and hat. He barely noticed the driveway and the front gate as he ran away from the house. A man riding his bike along the road had to ride into a bush to avoid crashing into him.

"Here we are, my dear," said the man with the white coat, coming in through the open window. "Our clothes got a bit muddy, but they're mostly dry now. Who was that who just ran out of the room as we arrived?"

"An unusual man named Mr. Nuttel," said Mrs.

Sappleton. "He talked only about his illnesses and dashed off without saying goodbye or apologizing when you arrived. It was like he had seen a ghost."

"I think it was the dog," said the niece calmly. "He told me he was scared of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere along the banks of the Ganges by a pack of wild dogs and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures barking furiously just above him. That would be enough to make anyone lose their nerve."

Coming up with elaborate tales on short notice was her speciality.