

The Open Window

BY SAKI

“**M**y aunt will be down soon,” said the 15-year-old girl. “While you wait, you must put up with me.”

Framton Nuttel tried to find the right thing to say. He should be polite, of course, but he should seem to want to meet the aunt very much.

Framton was in the country to cure his nerves. His sister had wanted him to meet some people she knew there. “If you don’t speak to anyone, your nerves will be worse than ever,” she had told him, “and some of these people are very nice.” Framton didn’t think that visits to strangers would help him much. He hoped that Mrs. Sappleton, the aunt, was one of the “nice” ones.



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“Do you know very many people around here?”
the niece asked.

“Hardly anybody,” said Framton. “My sister stayed with friends here about four years ago. She wanted me to meet some people she liked.”

“Then you know almost nothing about my aunt,”
said the girl.

“Only her name and address,” said Framton. He wondered if Mrs. Sappleton was married or a widow. Something about the room made him think that a man lived there.

“The most terrible thing happened to her three years ago,” said the girl. “It was not long after your sister was here.”

“A terrible thing?” asked Framton. Terrible things seemed unlikely in this quiet country spot.

“You may be wondering why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon,” said the niece. She pointed to a large French window that opened onto a rolling green lawn.

“It’s warm for this time of year,” said Framton, “but does that window have anything to do with the terrible thing?”

“It all started when they went out through that window, three years ago today,” the girl said

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mysteriously. “My aunt’s husband and her two young brothers were going hunting with their little brown dog. None of them ever came back. They must have slipped into a swamp and drowned. The worst part was that their bodies were never found.” Here the girl’s voice started to crack. “My poor aunt! She believes that they will walk in through that window, just like they used to. That’s why she keeps the window open.

“My poor, dear aunt. She always talks about the way they went out. Her husband had his red coat over his arm. Ronnie, her younger brother, was singing an old song, ‘My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean.’ He did that to tease her—it got on her nerves. You know, sometimes, on a still, quiet evening like this, I get a creepy feeling. I almost think they will all walk in through that window”

She broke off, shaking her head. Framton was glad when the aunt came into the room, saying how sorry she was to be late.

“I hope you have enjoyed talking to Vera,” 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 be

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home soon. They've been hunting, and they always come in this way. They'll have shot some birds, so they'll mess up the rug, but that's the way men are, isn't it?"

She chattered on cheerfully. She talked about hunting, and how it might be better next winter. To Framton, it was awful. He saw that Vera's aunt was not paying much attention to him. Her eyes were on the open window and the lawn. He was sorry that he had come to visit on this, of all days.

"The doctors say I should do nothing exciting and get lots of rest," Framton said, trying to change the subject. He had not yet learned that few people are interested in other people's health. "Of course, none of them agree about what I should eat."

"No?" said Mrs. Sappleton. Then her face grew brighter, but it was not because of their conversation.

"Here they are at last!" she cried. "They're just in time for tea. They look as if they were muddy right up to their eyeballs!"

Framton turned toward the niece, to give her an understanding look, but the girl was staring out through the open window. Her eyes widened with fear.

In the gray light, three figures were walking across the lawn toward the window. They were carrying

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guns under their arms. One of them had a red coat over his shoulders. A tired brown dog followed close behind. They drew near the house without making a sound, but suddenly a young voice began to sing, “My Bonnie lies over the ocean . . .”

Framton jumped to his feet and ran for the door. Out in the road, a man on a bicycle had to run into a hedge to keep from running into him.

“Here we are, dear,” said the man with the red coat, coming in through the window. “We’re muddy, but most of it’s dry. Who was that who ran out as we came up?”

“A very strange man, a Mr. Nuttel,” said Mrs. Sappleton. “He only talked about being ill. Then he ran off without saying good-bye. You’d think he had seen a ghost.”

“It was probably the dog,” said Vera. “He told me he was afraid of dogs and that once he was chased into a graveyard in India by a pack of wild dogs. He had to spend the night in a grave that had just been dug, and the dogs barked and howled and snapped right above him all night. I’m sure it was enough to make anyone lose their nerve.”

Making up exciting stories on short notice was Vera’s specialty.