

Unit 1

The Open Window

A practical joke is a harmless prank played on someone to confuse the person or cause him/her some embarrassment. The intention is to have fun at someone's expense without hurting or harming them in any way.

- How many synonyms can you find for the term, 'practical joke'?
- Share with the class an occasion when you played a practical joke on someone or when someone did the same to you.

'My aunt will be down presently, Mr Nuttel,' said a very self-assured young lady of fifteen; 'in the meantime you must try and put up with me.'

Framton Nuttel tried to say the correct something which should duly¹ flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting² the aunt that was to come. Privately he doubted whether meeting total strangers would really help in the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.



¹duly in line with what is appropriate ²discounting disregarding

'I know how it will be,' his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to this rural retreat³, 'you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from your isolation. I shall just give you letters of introduction⁴ to all the people I know there. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice.'

Framton wondered whether Mrs Sappleton, the lady to whom he was presenting one of the letters of introduction, came into the nice division.

'Do you know many of the people round here?' asked the niece, when she judged that they had had sufficient silence.

'Hardly a soul,' said Framton. 'My sister was staying here, at the rectory⁵, you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here.'

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

'Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?' pursued the young lady.

'Only her name and address,' admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs Sappleton was married or widowed. Something about the room seemed to suggest the presence of menfolk.



³ rural retreat a quiet place in the countryside to rest and relax ⁴ letters of introduction written for a person by someone who can testify their character and eligibility for something ⁵ rectory a priest's house

'Her great tragedy happened just three years ago,' said the child; 'that would be since your sister's time.'

'Her ^{misfortune} tragedy?' asked Framton; somehow in this restful country spot tragedies seemed out of place.

'You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon,' said the niece, indicating a large French window that opened on to a lawn.

'It is quite warm for the time of the year,' said Framton, 'but has that window got anything to do with the tragedy?'

'Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her two young brothers went off for their day's shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor⁶ to their favorite snipe⁷-shooting ground they were, all three, engulfed in a treacherous piece of bog⁸. It had been that dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it.'

Here the child's voice lost its self-confident note and became falteringly⁹ human.

'Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back someday, they and the little brown spaniel¹⁰ that was lost with them, and walk in at that window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite dusk. Poor dear aunt, she has often told me how they went out, her husband with his white waterproof coat over his arm, and Ronnie, her youngest brother, singing "Bertie, why do you bound?" as he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves¹¹. Do you know, sometimes on still, quiet evenings like this, I almost get a creepy feeling that they will all walk in through that window—'

She broke off with a little shudder. It was a relief to Framton when the aunt bustled¹² into the room with a whirl of apologies¹³ for being late in making her appearance.

'I hope Vera has been amusing you?' she said.

⁶moor a piece of uncultivated land ⁷snipe a species of birds ⁸bog an area of wet muddy ground too soft to support anything heavy ⁹falteringly unsteadily ¹⁰spaniel a breed of dogs ¹¹got on her nerves annoyed her ¹²bustled moved in an energetic and busy manner ¹³whirl of apologies a rapid-fire succession of apologies

'She has been very interesting,' said Framton.

'I hope you don't mind the open window,' said Mrs Sappleton briskly, 'my husband and brothers will be home directly from shooting, and they always come in this way. They've been out for snipe in the marshes¹⁴ today, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor carpets. So like you menfolk, isn't it?'

She rattled on cheerfully about the shooting and the scarcity of birds, and the prospects for duck in the winter.

To Framton it was all purely horrible. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the talk on to a less ghastly¹⁵ topic; he was conscious that his hostess was giving him only a fragment of her attention, and her eyes were constantly straying past him to the open window and the lawn beyond. It was certainly an unfortunate coincidence that he should have paid his visit on this tragic anniversary.

'The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise,' announced Framton, who laboured under the tolerably widespread delusion¹⁶ that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities¹⁷, their cause and cure. 'On the matter of diet they are not so much in agreement,' he continued.

'No?' said Mrs Sappleton, in a voice which only replaced a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into alliteration alert attention—but not to what Framton was saying.

'Here they are at last!' she cried. 'Just in time for tea, and don't they look as if they were muddy up to the eyes!'

Framton shivered slightly and turned towards the niece with a look intended to convey sympathetic comprehension¹⁸. The child was staring out through the open

¹⁴marshes areas of low-lying land, mostly waterlogged ¹⁵ghastly causing great horror or fear
¹⁶laboured under the tolerably widespread delusion shared the fairly common misconception
¹⁷infirmities physical or mental weaknesses ¹⁸comprehension understanding

window with a dazed horror in her eyes. In a chill shock of nameless fear Framton swung round in his seat and looked in the same direction.

In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window. They all carried guns under their arms, and one of them was additionally burdened with a white coat hung over his shoulders. A tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels.

Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk, 'I said, Bertie, why do you bound?'

Framton grabbed wildly at his stick and hat; the hall door, the gravel drive¹⁹, and the front gate were dimly noted stages in his headlong retreat²⁰. A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid imminent²¹ collision.

'Here we are, my dear,' said the bearer of the white mackintosh, coming in through the window, 'fairly muddy, but most of it's dry. Who was that who rushed out as we came up?'

'A most extraordinary man, a Mr Nuttel,' said Mrs Sappleton, 'could only talk about his illnesses, and dashed off without a word of goodbye or apology when you arrived. One would think he had seen a ghost.'

'I expect it was the spaniel,' said the niece calmly, 'he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah²² dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly-dug grave with the creatures snarling²³ and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make anyone lose their nerve.'

Romance²⁴ at short notice was her speciality.

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¹⁹drive the pebbled pathway from the front gate to the house ²⁰headlong retreat wild, panic-stricken departure ²¹imminent about to happen ²²pariah stray ²³snarling making angry, aggressive sounds ²⁴Romance mystery, excitement

Appreciation

1. Answer after you have read the story for the first time.

a. You have just read

- i. a magazine article
- ii. a short story
- iii. an extract from a famous novel
- iv. a ghost story

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b. After reading this story you were

- i. frightened
- ii. well-informed
- iii. amused and entertained
- iv. confused

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c. In this story the writer uses

- i. suspense to terrify the reader
- ii. humour to entertain the reader
- iii. facts and information to teach the reader
- iv. a twist in the end of the tale to surprise and delight the reader

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2. At the beginning of the story we come to know that Framton Nuttel had come to a 'rural retreat'. What do you understand by this term? Why had he come here? Why had he come to Mrs Sappleton's house in particular?
3. What, according to Vera, was the 'great tragedy' that had taken place three years earlier?
4. Mention some of the specific details about the victims of the 'tragedy' that Vera gives Nuttel. Why do you think she provides so many details?
5. *To Framton it was all purely horrible. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the talk on to a less ghastly topic ...*

What was *purely horrible* and a *ghastly topic*? Why did he think it was so?

6. Read the following lines and answer the questions that follow.

The child was staring out through the open window with a dazed horror in her eyes. In a chill shock of nameless fear Framton swung round in his seat and looked in the same direction.

- a. What did Nuttel see when he swung round and looked in the same direction? Why did this fill him with fear? How did he react?
 - b. How did the others react to his response? What is ironical about Mrs Sappleton's remark *One would have thought he had seen a ghost*?
 - c. How did Vera explain his behaviour? What does this tell you about her?
7. To review the main events in the story, complete each of the following sentences, choosing the most appropriate expression from the choices given.
- a. Nuttel's sister had given him introductions to people she knew in the 'rural retreat' to which he was going, so that
 - i. someone would give him a cure for his nerves. ☐
 - ii. he could find a job there. ☐
 - iii. he would make friends and this would soothe his nerves. ☒
 - b. Vera ascertains from Nuttel that he does not know anyone in the village and nothing about her aunt because
 - i. she wanted to make polite conversation. ☐
 - ii. she wanted to make friends with him. ☐
 - iii. there would be less chance of him finding out that her story was a false one. ☒
 - c. Vera tells Nuttel that the reason why the window is open is that
 - i. her aunt's husband and brothers had gone out hunting and would enter the house through the window when they returned. ☐
 - ii. her aunt expects that her husband and brothers, who had died three years ago, would return through that window. ☒
 - iii. she (Vera) believes that the men and the dog will enter the window when they return from hunting. ☐

- d. Nuttel is completely convinced that Vera's story of the tragedy is true when
- she describes the open window. ☐
 - Vera's aunt says that the menfolk are out hunting and will return soon through the open window. ☒
 - Vera's voice changes and she shudders. ☐
- e. Vera gazes at the window with an expression of 'dazed horror' because
- she is afraid for her aunt. ☐
 - she is seeing ghosts. ☐
 - she is continuing her act to make a fool of Nuttel, by pretending that the approaching men are ghosts. ☒
- f. Vera explains Nuttel's strange behaviour to the others
- by quickly making up another story. ☒
 - by saying that his nerves are shaky. ☐
 - by suggesting that he is afraid of ghosts. ☐

8. Did the ending of the story surprise you? At what point in the story did you realize that Vera had fooled Nuttel—and perhaps, the reader as well? How did the author achieve this?

9. Which of the adjectives given in the box below would best describe

a. Vera

b. Nuttel

Provide examples of their behaviour to illustrate your choices.

precocious	gullible	timid	mischievous	cowardly
selfish	evil	inventive	wicked	bold
self-confident	insensitive	naïve	quick-witted	

10. Select the expression from the brackets which conveys the meaning of the highlighted words or phrases.

- A very **self-assured** young lady. (arrogant; confident; selfish; nervous)
- She judged that they had **had sufficient silence**. (been quiet for sometime)

talked a great deal; understood each other well; been indifferent to one another)

- c. In a tone of **distinct regret**. (unhappiness; cheerfulness; eagerness; **sorrow**)
- d. In this restful country spot tragedies seemed **out of place**. (sure to happen; unlikely to happen; well-suited to the location; appropriate and natural)
- e. His hostess was **giving him only a fragment of her attention**. (listening to him attentively; speaking to him constantly; not paying much attention to him; not listening to him at all)

Reflection

VB


1. Do you think it was wrong on Vera's part to lie to Nuttel the way she did? He had, after all, been sent to this part of the country for peace and quiet, to soothe his nerves and Vera's prank caused him a great deal of distress. Can Vera's behaviour be justified in any way?

Writing

1. Complete the unfinished sentence given below with the most suitable option chosen from the four choices provided.
 - a. The writer of this story tends to express himself in a complicated way at times. He does this
 - i. in order to impress the reader with his superior command of the language.
 - ii. because he wants to confuse the reader.
 - iii. because he feels that this creates an effect of humor.
 - iv. because he is an old-fashioned writer.
2. Discuss ways in which to express the following sentences in a more simple and straightforward way and write them in your notebook. Does this improve the expressions?

- a. Framton tried to say the correct something which should duly flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt that was to come.
- b. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the talk on to a less ghastly topic.
- c. Framton ... laboured under the tolerably widespread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities, their cause and cure.
- d. Framton grabbed wildly at his stick and hat; the hall door, the gravel drive, and the front gate were dimly noted stages in his headlong retreat.
- e. Romance at short notice was her speciality.

Know your author



Hector Hugh Munro (1870–1916) was born in Akyab, British Burma. After spending some time in England, Munro returned to Burma at the age of 22 to work in the police force but a bout of malaria forced him to return to England. He began his career as a journalist, writing a series of satires based on *Alice and Wonderland* characters that would later be published as a short novel, *The Westminster Alice*. When World War I broke out in 1914 he enlisted as an ordinary soldier and was, in November 1916, killed by a German sniper. Munro, who is considered one of the best short story writers in the English language, published his work under the pen name

SAKI or H.H. Munro. He gently criticized the society of his times in his witty and sometimes mischievous stories. Besides his short stories, he wrote a full-length play, two one-act plays, a historical study and a fantasy about a future German invasion and occupation of Britain.