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

Framton Nuttel tried to think of the correct phrase to flatter the niece of the moment without insulting the aunt that was to come. Privately, he doubted that these formal visits on a series of total strangers would really help the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.

"I know how it will be," his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to the small country town; "you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from moping. I shall just give you letters of introduction 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 he was about to meet, was one of the "nice" ones.

"Do you know many of the people round here?" asked the niece, when she judged that they had had enough silent communion.

"Hardly a soul," said Framton. "My sister stayed here before, though, about 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 self-possessed young lady.

"Only her name and address," admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or widowed state. An undefinable something about the room where they sat seemed to suggest masculine inhabitants.

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

"Her 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, gesturing at 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 exactly, her husband and her two young brothers went off for a day's hunting trip. They never came back. In crossing the marsh to
their favorite hunting place, they were all caught in a treacherous piece of bog. It had been a dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years sank suddenly without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it." Here the child's voice lost its self control and became falteringly human. "Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back someday, they and the little brown spaniel 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 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 nerves. 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 bustled into the room with apologies 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 briskly; "my husband and brothers will be home any minute from shooting, and they always come in this way. They've been out hunting ducks in the marshes today, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor carpets. Isn't that just like you menfolk?"

She chattered on cheerfully about the shooting and the number of birds, and what the hunting would be like in the winter. To Framton it was all purely horrible. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the conversation to a less ghastly 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.

"All my doctors agree that I need a complete rest, with no mental excitement, and to avoid all stressful physical exercise," announced Framton, who shared the widespread delusion that total strangers are hungry for the smallest details of one's ailments, their causes and cures. "As for my diet, they are not so much in agreement," he continued.

"No?" said Mrs. Sappleton, in a voice which only avoided a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into 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 show his sympathy. 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.

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 had 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 cane and hat; the door, the driveway, and the front gate passed before his eyes in rapid confusion. A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid collision.

"Here we are, my dear," said the spirit with the white raincoat, coming in through the window, "fairly muddy, but most of it's dry. Who was that who sprinted 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. It's as if he had seen a ghost."

"It was probably the spaniel," said the niece calmly; "he told me he had a phobia of dogs. He was once in chased into a cemetery somewhere in India by a pack of wild dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and snapping and foaming just above him. Enough to make anyone lose their nerve."

Romance at short notice was her specialty. ♦