



## Punishment as Misdirected Discipline: A Psychological Study of “The Lumber Room” by H.H. Munro alias Saki

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### Abstract

“The Lumber Room” by Hector Hugh Munro(1870-1916),who wrote under the penname “Saki”, is a short story that covers the survival struggle of the juvenile Nicholas growing in the care of some authoritarian adults. The conditions Nicholas suffers in the story parallel with some details of Munro’s childhood that he spent in the custody of his aunts after the death of his mother. Based on what transpires in the life of Nicholas as a child, this paper attempts to carry out a psychological study of punishment as misdirected discipline, in order to establish that the intelligent independently develop their own stance about the good and the bad, however much they are suppressed in society. From this general stance on Munro’s short stories, this paper investigates the psychological effects of punishment on the Aunt and Nicholas in their respective roles as the prosecutor and the offender in “The Lumber Room” in a situation of misdirected discipline.

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### INTRODUCTION

Hector Hugh Munro, whose father was Scotsman Charles Augustus Munro, an inspector-general in the Burma police, lost his mother, Mary Frances (née Mercer) in a tragic accident in England with a runaway cow in 1872. Thereafter, Hector and his two elder siblings Ethel (1868) and Charlie (1869) were sent to Broadgate Villa, in Pilton village near Barnstaple, North Devon where Charles Munro's widowed mother lived with her two unmarried daughters, Charlotte and Augusta (Greenwell, 2018). His sister Ethel in her Biography of Saki writes: "One of Munro's aunts, Augusta, was a woman of ungovernable temper, of fierce likes and dislikes, imperious, and moral coward, possessing no brains worth speaking of, and a primitive disposition." Based on the traumas he sustained as a parentless child at the hands of the two aunts who were very strict disciplinarians inclined to corporal punishment and indiscriminate cruelty (E.M. Munro 1924), Munro wrote his short stories collected as *Beasts and Super Beasts* (Munro 1914).

Thus the setting of "The Lumber Room" is Edwardian England. Munro satirises the harsh practices the adults of the time followed at the domestic level long after the appalling narratives of child abuse in the cottages, farms, poor houses, work camps, orphanages, boarding schools, and factories in the novels by Dickens, the Brontë sisters, Gaskell, Hardy, etc.

"The idea that children have rights that the state should protect may have seemed silly at the dawn of the nineteenth century, but by the time Queen Victoria died in 1901, it had gained significant support" (Gubar 2005). Yet it takes time to get such an idea to be embedded in a society.

Creative works of this type produced under the influence of personal traumas, have undergone the psychoanalytic screening of both Freud (1905) who "treated literature as the expression of the author's subconscious mind" (Selden 1988), and Jung (1930) who considered that "literature is drawn from 'primordial experience' transmitted through 'collective unconscious'" (Selden 1988). Both their premises apply to the perception of Munro's narratives as a byproduct of the realities recorded in the subconscious and the fantasies engendered by the collective unconscious. In this context, Delahoyde's (2011) premise that "One may psychoanalyze a particular character within a literary work, but it is usually assumed that all such characters are projections of the author's psyche" is relevant. Accordingly, the psychological traits Munro's characters manifest significantly determine their positions in the personal relationships within the matrix of power fashioned under the Edwardian value system. Through his work, Munro illustrates how the impersonal conditions maintained by social institutions related to law, government, religion, education,



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industry, etc. affect personal relationships at the domestic level.

### THE STORY STRUCTURE

The story has a fine narrative structure. It is set in a household run by a headstrong woman whose behaviour leads to an interminable conflict between the adults and the children. The protagonist Nicholas is a boy with a questioning mind. The story opens in a setting where Nicholas argues with the Aunt on being left behind as a punishment while the other children have gone out on an excursion. Then the story goes on to an elaboration of the offence Nicholas has committed to deserve such a punishment. Thereafter it reveals how Nicholas turns his punishment into an exploratory expedition inside the lumber room, a forbidden quarter of the house. Later it relates how the Aunt, out of curiosity looks for Nicholas in the gooseberry garden, and falls into a rainwater tank. This follows a dramatization of the Aunt's repeated order to Nicholas to help her out and Nicholas' repeated refusal on the grounds that he has been prohibited to enter the garden by the Aunt herself. At last, when the other children return in utter frustration due to bad weather and various physical pains, silence dominates the atmosphere of the house. Nicholas recalls what he has observed in the tapestry he saw during his visit to the lumber room. He feels thankful that he did not have to go out

in the cold weather while the others in the household, including the Aunt, had a tough time outside. Nicholas considers his plight being similar to that of the hunter and his dogs cornered by a pack of wolves in the tapestry and chooses silence as the solution to all his problems.

### A Punishment Inflicted through Psychological Torture

With the announcement of a punishment imposed on Nicholas, the story opens in a claustrophobic courtroom like atmosphere. In order to penalize Nicholas for an offence committed at the breakfast table, the other children are "to be driven, as a special treat, to the sands at Jagborough" So, while Nicholas' boy-cousin and girl-cousin and his "quite uninteresting" younger brother are to enjoy an outing, Nicholas is "to stay at home". Munro provides a description of the punishment procedure of the house as follows:

"His cousins' aunt, who insisted, by an unwarranted stretch of imagination, in styling herself his aunt also, had hastily invented the Jagborough expedition in order to impress on Nicholas the delights that he had justly forfeited by his disgraceful conduct at the breakfast-table" (Munro 1914).

It is clear that the Aunt has improvised this tour simply to hurt Nicholas. In



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that sense Nicholas' punishment can be defined as "solitary confinement plus sensory deprivation" which, according to Grassian (2006), "can cause severe psychiatric harm." While the others are supposed to play on the sands at Jagborough, he is supposed to spend his time in isolation. This type of punishment brutalizes the convict further, inculcating hatred and jealousy in him against those who enjoy privileges prohibited to him, but the so-called "older and wiser and better people" in the house do not understand it. Munro explicitly states how the Aunt has incorporated the particular penal strategy in the management of her household on a routine basis:

It was her habit, whenever one of the children fell from grace, to improvise something of a festival nature from which the offender would be rigorously debarred; if all the children sinned collectively they were suddenly informed of a circus in a neighbouring town, a circus of unrivalled merit and uncounted elephants, to which, but for their depravity, they would have been taken that very day" (Munro 1914).

Through this strategy she inculcates a constant fear of deprivation in the children which would curb their natural playfulness in the long run. At the same time, by engendering desires in the children for various types of

extravagances, the Aunt ignites frustration in them. Pretending to be concerned about the children's welfare, she uses rumours of fabulous entertainment events in the neighbouring towns to instigate unrest and antagonism among the children. Those who are rewarded are thus made to suffer from the dislike of their deprived peers who assume them to be the cause of their deprivation. Thus, the Aunt plays the classical colonizer's game of divide-and-rule in her small colony of dependents.

### Nicholas' Offence: Subversion of the Adults' Authority

The terms used in the communication between the adults and the children within this particular household setting are meant to inculcate in the minds of the children the idea that the adults are "older and wiser and better people" and that the food they offer is always "wholesome" and that the complaints the children make are invariably "nonsense". This implies that the children have to accept everything the adults say or do without reservation or inquiry. Nicholas seems to subvert the authoritarian pseudo-judicial practice of the house. As Turiel (2003) explains, "Resistance and subversion are common because social arrangements and practices often embody inequalities. ... However, this is not only in the usual sense of people acting in line with societal expectations; social conditions evoke opposition, resistance and subversion" (Turiel 2003).



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In that context, the offence Nicholas has committed to deserve punishment appears as follows:

“Only that morning he had refused to eat his wholesome bread-and-milk on the seemingly frivolous ground that there was a frog in it” (Munro 1914).

Although the adults in the household deny the presence of a frog in “his bread and milk”, Nicholas argues that there was one, describing “with much detail the coloration and markings of the alleged frog.” The use of the term “alleged” implies the pseudo-judicial manner in the way the household is run. However, Nicholas subverts the authority of the adults by trying to establish his position about the frog:

“The dramatic part of the incident was that there really was a frog in Nicholas's basin of bread-and-milk; he had put it there himself, so he felt entitled to know something about it” (Munro 1914).

Munro provides the ground for Nicholas' confidence in the argument by revealing what he did with the frog and the basin of bread-and-milk. Whether Nicholas is right to commit an offence such as “taking a frog from the garden and putting it into a bowl of wholesome bread-and-milk” is immaterial, but his knowledge about its presence in his bread-and-milk remains a source of inspiration for him while challenging the authority of the adults. It is obvious that his sole

intention of “the whole affair” is to refute the adults' claim that they are eternally right. Disregarding the possibility of Nicholas' claim about the frog, the Aunt flatly rejects it as “nonsense”. Later when she is proven wrong, the Aunt interprets his act of putting the frog in the basin of bread-and-milk as a “sin”. That gives the implication that the Aunt, in addition to psychological torture, makes use of the notion of ‘sin’ to suppress the children's right to freedom. This portrays, as Widyalkara (2015) argues, how religion and law were exploited in the rearing of children in England during the Edwardian era. A set of values arbitrarily developed to the advantage of the adults were forcibly inculcated in the children using a jargon influenced by law and religion.

### **Moral Deterioration: Negative Impact of Punishment**

In one effective sentence Munro reads the mind of the Aunt who designed this punitive scheme. “A few decent tears were looked for on the part of Nicholas when the moment for the departure of the expedition arrived” (Munro 1914). This reveals a sadistic element dormant in the Aunt's psyche. She expects Nicholas to become obedient as a result of the deprivation he is destined to suffer from. Yet the Aunt's intention to overpower Nicholas psychologically does not materialize to her satisfaction. Instead of a catharsis, her strategy generates in Nicholas a sadistic tendency to derive pleasure over the inconveniences and



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discomforts the other children suffer from. (See Vaknin 2013) Signs of moral deterioration emerge in his remarks about others. "How she did howl," says Nicholas "cheerfully" regarding his girl-cousin who kept crying after scraping her knee "rather painfully against the step of the carriage". From the plight of Bobby, with his shoes that are too tight, he derives similar type of pleasure, predicting "with a grim chuckle", "Bobby won't enjoy himself much, and he won't race much either" (Munro 1914). On the whole he becomes jubilant to find no "elation of high spirits" among the party.

The Aunt turns a deaf ear to the dangerous signals sent out by Nicholas on the way his mind is working through his remarks. "She'll soon get over that," she says regarding Nicholas' girl cousin. Further she predicts fine weather and tries to rouse jealousy in Nicholas through an interjection, "How they will enjoy themselves!" Regarding the boy's problem with the shoes, she resorts to a rhetorical question as a way out: "Why didn't he tell me they were hurting?" Disregarding her "asperity", Nicholas emphatically articulates his complaint, "He told you twice, but you weren't listening. You often don't listen when we tell you important things" (Munro 1914). From his remarks about the sad plight of the two cousins, the girl with a wounded knee and the boy in tight shoes, it is understood that they both have been brought up to passively follow the Aunt's instructions. Nicholas is

different from them because, despite the Aunt's antagonism, he complains to her about things he does not like.

Unable to admit her fault in the case of Bobby's shoes, the aunt shouts, changing the subject:

"You are not to go into the gooseberry garden..."

"Why not?" demanded Nicholas.

"Because you are in disgrace..." (Munro 1914)

The gooseberry garden is totally irrelevant here but the aunt attempts to assert her command through a prohibition imposed on Nicholas. Her rhetoric mirrors her devastating character. This type of defence mechanism suggests paranoia on the part of the tormentor.

"... paranoid thoughts only become a problem if they stop people getting on with their everyday life because they are frightened of what might happen. They are similar to phobias – a fear of heights, or spiders, for example. Many people have such fears from time to time, but phobias only become problematic for a small number of individuals" (BPS 2015).

In addition, she tries to intimidate Nicholas, by further limiting his space. However, Nicholas is not so easily tamed. That is why he demands an explanation. The aunt's response is just a formula she uses on those who



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offend her. The “lofty” tone she uses characterizes her arrogance. Nicholas does not utter anything as a counterargument. Yet, “[h]is face took on an expression of considerable obstinacy” (Munro 1914). He realizes the error of the Aunt’s judgement about his movements but maintains an advantageous silence.

The Aunt believes that, even though Nicholas had no real desire to visit the gooseberry garden, Nicholas would go there simply to challenge her authority. Nicholas makes use of the misunderstanding the Aunt nurtures in her mind about his desire to visit the gooseberry garden to take her attention off his real intention. Munro describes the aunt as “a woman of few ideas, with immense powers of concentration”. Unable to realize that Nicholas is a smart boy who could do whatever he wants without getting caught, despite her tight schedule for the afternoon, she spends her time on “trivial gardening operations among flower beds and shrubberies” just in order to guard “the two doors that led to the forbidden paradise”. She clearly wants to pin another offence on Nicholas. The type of moral deterioration the children undergo under the suspicious eyes of adults of this sort damages their characters beyond repair. This can be explained through Michel Foucault’s premise on the relationship between 1.) systems of social control and people in a disciplinary situation and, 2.) the power-knowledge concept conveyed

through his metaphor of the Panopticon.<sup>1</sup>

### Nicholas’ Exploratory Excursion

The Aunt, “a woman of few ideas, with immense powers of concentration,” without knowing that the gooseberry garden has already become a “stale delight” for Nicholas, screens Nicholas’ movements in the belief that he is likely to get into the gooseberry garden anytime. Well aware of this character-flaw of the Aunt, Nicholas by pretending to be trying to get into the forbidden garden manipulates the Aunt into installing herself “in a self-imposed sentry duty for the greater part of the afternoon”.

“Having thoroughly confirmed and fortified her suspicions Nicholas slipped back into the

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<sup>1</sup>Panopticon is an architectural design put forth by Jeremy Bentham in the mid-19th Century for prisons, insane asylums, schools, hospitals, and factories. Instead of using violent methods, such as torture, and placing prisoners in dungeons that were used for centuries in monarchial states around the world, the progressive modern democratic state needed a different sort of system to regulate its citizens. The Panopticon offered a powerful and sophisticated internalized coercion, which was achieved through the constant observation of prisoners, each separated from the other, allowing no interaction, no communication. This modern structure would allow guards to continually see inside each cell from their vantage point in a high central tower, unseen by the prisoners. Constant observation acted as a control mechanism; a consciousness of constant surveillance is internalized. (Mason 2015).



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house and rapidly put into execution a plan of action that had long germinated in his brain”(Munro 1914).

Thus, with meticulous reasoning, Nicholas sets the scene for a plan of action that for quite some time he had been longing to implement. The other children are away. The Aunt is thoroughly engaged in guarding the two entrances to the gooseberry garden. There is nobody inside the house to keep an eye on him. So Nicholas is completely free to go on an excursion to a mysterious part of the house. Nicholas distinguishes himself from the other children with his curiosity about this place known as the lumber room, “a room for storing old pieces of furniture and other things that are not being used” (Marian-Webster).

The richness of the experience Nicholas is to experience in the lumber room is suggested in the image of the “fat” and “important-looking” key to it that “repose[s]” on a shelf high above the children’s reach. Through the use of the verb “repose” the key is personified as a guardian or even a jinni in Arabian legends that guards treasure troves enjoying his rest when he is not on duty.

“The key was as important as it looked; it was the instrument which kept the mysteries of the lumber-room secure from unauthorised intrusion, which opened a way only for aunts

and such-like privileged persons” (Munro 1914).

In this phrase Munro sounds like a museum curator describing an artefact. The officialdom the adults maintained in terms of the house and its smaller occupants comes to light through the use of terms such as “unauthorised intrusion” and “privileged persons”. When rulers master strategies of control, their subjects master strategies on how to outmanoeuvre their masters. This is well-illustrated in Nicholas’ attempt at mastering “the art of fitting keys into keyholes and turning locks ... with the key of the schoolroom door”. Nicholas’ brilliance shines in his perception of the necessity of expertise before embarking on the project. “The key turned stiffly in the lock, but it turned.” The stiffness felt while turning the key suggests that the door has not been opened for quite some time. His fascination with the idea of treasures that might be stored within the room is suggested in the epithets such as “a stale delight” and “a mere material pleasure” used in relation to the gooseberry garden. The Lumber Room appears to be “an unknown land” far more fascinating than what the young Nicholas sees in his daily life.

The lumber room “so carefully sealed from youthful eyes and concerning which no questions were ever



answered" represents a mysterious characteristic of the Victorian-Edwardian society that had a strange interest in collecting and preserving things for the sake of amassing wealth. The colonial forces of the British Empire, in a variety of roles as warriors, administrators, business people, apostles, educationists, anthropologists, etc., invaded other countries in the world, colonized them and plundered their treasures in order to bring them home. (See Ferguson 2003: 7-9) But the British people at home did not have the necessary imagination in order to appreciate those treasures, and therefore, they were consigned to dusty lumber rooms. Nicholas stands apart from the rest of the household because of his interest in visiting the "large and dimly lit" lumber room. For him it is "a storehouse of unimagined treasures". By drawing attention to Nicholas' enthusiasm to go through the "wonderful things for the eye to feast on", Munro ironically highlights the Victorian-Edwardian belief that "things spoil by use" and "consigned them to dust and damp by way of preserving them".

### A Riddle of Life Focused on an Enlightenment Test

Munro turns Nicholas' visit of the lumber room into a decisive didactic experience by making him come across "a piece of framed tapestry that was evidently meant to be a fire-

screen,"<sup>2</sup> a stunning piece of art from the orient.<sup>3</sup> It is acknowledged that Munro has adopted his penname "Saki" from the character of the cupbearer called "Saki" in "*The Rubáiyát*" by the Persian poet Omar Khayyam (Williams 1978).<sup>4</sup> As Persia is famous for manufacturing rugs and tapestries it could be assumed that this particular piece of tapestry, too, might have originated in that region.

The "living, breathing story" in the fire-screen which captures a moment in a huntsman's life draws Nicholas into a contemplation of his own destiny in comparison to that of the huntsman. The protagonist "dressed in the hunting costume of some remote period" takes immediately Nicholas (as well as the reader of the short story) into an historical or fairy-tale setting where the huntsman, in the role of an amateur adventurer, appears alien to Nicholas who leads a straight

<sup>2</sup>A fire-screen, "a protective screen placed in front of an open fire" (Marian-Webster).

<sup>3</sup>Tapestry is "a fabric consisting of a warp upon which coloured threads are woven by hand to produce a design, often pictorial, used for wall hangings, furniture, coverings, etc." (Dictionary.com)

<sup>4</sup>"*The Rubáiyát*" by the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, (Williams 1978) is "a classic [composed in quartets] full of themes that involved complex mystical and philosophical thoughts" (Iran Chamber Society 2015).



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jacketed life under the supervision of a woman with a limited imagination.

The occasion depicted in the tapestry provides a succinct riddle through the nexus of the characters it portrays. As the huntsman has shot down a stag, he obviously has the right to claim it. But, because of the ridiculously short range at which the hunter shot the stag while it was grazing in the wood, his prowess in archery remains doubtful. One wonders whether the huntsman who is admiring his kill is aware of the fact that four wolves were coming towards him through the woods. They may be members of a large pack of wolves, and there may be more wolves hidden behind the trees. The two spotted hounds of the huntsman do not seem to demonstrate any ferocity either. So the huntsman cannot depend on them in facing an attack from the wolves. In addition, he has got only two more arrows left in his quiver. That means, even if he were an expert archer, he did not have a sufficient number of arrows necessary to defend himself against a large group of wolves. The final conclusion is that, in the face of the ferocious wolves, the huntsman can depend on neither his personal strength nor his dogs and arrows. All these facts about the hunting scene suggest the mortal danger the protagonist has exposed

himself to in his attempt to claim his kill.

Nicholas is fascinated by the life-like quality of the figures in the tapestry. He sympathises with the huntsman, assesses the danger the huntsman is in for, and formulates options for the huntsman in order to rescue him and his dogs from the "tight corner" they are in. Munro calls the "minutes" Nicholas spends on the plight of the huntsman and his dogs "golden" in the sense that they are so valuable for him because of the intellectual reinforcement they provide him with. He creatively puts all the circumstances together and works out the best option for the huntsman. Finally, he decides that the hunter should "escape with his hounds while the wolves feasted on the stricken stag". This understanding of the necessity of compromises is crucial for his existence among the Aunt and her entourage of the so-called "older and wiser and better people". By putting himself in the shoes of the huntsman he confronts the limitation of his own capacity to fight against his adversaries and subsequently he applies the solution he proposed to the huntsman to his own situation. Through his experience Nicholas seems to have gathered a certain amount of enlightenment on his capacity to deal with oppressive forces in his life.



### Enjoying the Harmonising Impact of Art

Once within the lumber room Nicholas finds himself free from the depression that plagued him. In addition to the fire-screen with the huntsman and his hounds, he comes across many “other objects of delight and interest” that arrest his attention. The “quaint twisted candlesticks in the shape of snakes”, the “teapot fashioned like a china duck”, the “carved sandal-wood box packed tight with aromatic cotton-wool”, the “little brass figures, hump-necked bulls, and peacocks and goblins between the layers of cotton-wool”, the “large square book with plain black covers” containing “a whole portrait gallery of undreamed-of creatures” such as “herons and bustards, kites, toucans, tiger-bitterns, brush turkeys, ibises, golden pheasants” call for his admiration. However, the duck-shaped china teapot contrasts with the “dull and shapeless nursery teapot,” the birds in the book, the fine brass figures, etc. drew his attention to the dullness of his existence. Together all the objects of art around him teases his imagination and creates around him an aesthetically powerful atmosphere rich with serene delights. It is surmised that Nicholas owes his appreciation of the antiques and nature drawings to Munro’s exposure to great pieces of literature such as “Ode to a Grecian Urn” where John Keats creatively professes a disciplined method of art appreciation (Lang 1844-

1912) and nature drawings in Victorian era natural history books inspired by great renaissance masters such as Alfred Dürer (1471-1528).

Very ironically, Nicholas’ peaceful contemplation of beauty comes to an abrupt end with the cacophony the Aunt makes from the gooseberry garden. Thus, Munro suggests the devastating interference the Aunt often makes in the lives of the children in her house. She ruins their contemplation on whatever that pleases them, agonises them with her frequent domineering, and thereafter finds fault with them when they angrily react to her intrusions. “Suspicious at his long disappearance” the Aunt leaps to the conclusion that Nicholas has “climbed over the wall behind the sheltering screen of the lilac bushes” and gets “engaged in energetic and rather hopeless search for him among the artichokes and raspberry canes”. Soothed by his experience with art, Nicholas remains calm on the face of the Aunt’s false allegation and smiles at her screaming. Pointing to the mysterious atmosphere of the place, Munro suggests, “It was probably the first time for twenty years that anyone had smiled in that lumber-room.” Nicholas gets ready to leave the lumber room. In the meantime the angry repetitions of his name gives way to an alarming shriek, and then to a helpless cry. So clear in his mind in what must be done first, Nicholas carefully takes every step necessary to eliminate all traces of his presence in the room. He even shakes



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some dust over the book of birds from a neighbouring pile of newspapers. After locking the door and replacing the key exactly where it was, he quietly walks into the front garden, as if nothing has happened. From this account, it is clear that Munro believes in a calming influence of arts on those who are exposed to them.

### Malice Answered by Malice

Munro presents the communication that takes place between the Aunt and Nicholas in a dramatic dialogue where he is using logic as opposed to arbitrary commands of the adults in his dealing with adults. Nicholas proves that he has matured as a result of his exposure to arts. Having fallen into a wretched rainwater tank at a time of cold and wet weather, Aunt commands Nicholas to help her come out:

“Nicholas, Nicholas! ... you are to come out of this at once. It’s no use trying to hide there; I can see you all the time.”

“Who’s calling?”

“Me, ... didn’t you hear me? I’ve been looking for you in the gooseberry garden, and I’ve slipped into the rain-water tank. Luckily there’s no water in it, but the sides are slippery and I can’t get out. Fetch the little ladder from under the cherry tree —”

“I was told I wasn’t to go into the gooseberry garden...”

“I told you not to, and now I tell you that you may ...”

“Your voice doesn’t sound like aunt’s, ... you may be the Evil One tempting me to be disobedient. Aunt often tells me that the Evil One tempts me and that I always yield. This time I’m not going to yield.”

“Don’t talk nonsense ... go and fetch the ladder.”

“Will there be strawberry jam for tea?”

“Certainly there will be ...”

“Now I know that you are the Evil One and not aunt ... when we asked aunt for strawberry jam yesterday she said there wasn’t any. I know there are four jars of it in the store cupboard, because I looked, and of course you know it’s there, but she doesn’t, because she said there wasn’t any. Oh, Devil, you *have* sold yourself!”

(Adapted from Munro 1914)

First the Aunt calls Nicholas in a stern voice, pretending to have noticed where he is. Once she has fallen into the rainwater tank, she calls him again and again in several tones, implying the increasing depth of her desperation. Reluctant to admit her helplessness, the Aunt speaks arrogantly and Nicholas in turn does not want to give in. Instead, Nicholas responds ironically reminding the Aunt of the prohibition she set on him against entering the gooseberry garden. The Aunt admits it at once, and declares the prohibition lifted.



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Nicholas pretentiously suspects her to be “the Evil One” who tempts him “to be disobedient” and ironically expresses his determination to stick to the Aunt’s warning. As usual the Aunt tells him not to talk “nonsense”. Nicholas changes the subject with a question that is irrelevant. “Will there be strawberry jam for tea?” The Aunt assures him of the availability of it. Nicholas uses this to expose the lie she told him about strawberry jam the previous day, and tells her about the discovery he made of the “four jars of it in the store cupboard”. Still, Nicholas pretends to believe that it is the Evil One who is presently talking to him and shouts, “Oh, Devil, you *have* sold yourself!”

“There was an unusual sense of luxury in being able to talk to an aunt as though one was talking to the Evil One, but Nicholas knew, with childish discernment, that such luxuries were not to be over-indulged in” (Munro 1914)

Munro gets the Aunt to learn a few lessons in dealing with the children: 1) she would be the ultimate victim of her prohibitions when the children follow them to the letter – in an emergency they are scared to bypass her bans and help her; 2) children pick up her obnoxious flouting and hedging tactics and apply them when she needs their help – instead of helping her they frustrate her by deviating from the topic as she always does; 3) children do not believe all that

she tells them – they carry out their own investigations into the truth value of her claims and confirm her dishonesty; 4) although children do not have any authority, they are not always at her mercy – under various circumstances, adults have to depend on children; and finally 5) children’s cooperation and help have to be earned rather than acquired by force – children are thinking individuals and like adults they use their discretion while offering their assistance to somebody. Nicholas does not overindulge himself in the luxury of telling off the Aunt; rather he becomes conscious of the danger hanging in the air. Maybe, just recalling the plight of the huntsman and his hounds in the middle of a pack of wolves, he withdraws from the scene without talking further.

### Malice Repaid with Shame

“With shame their malice be repaid...”  
(PSALM LXXI. 5)

The above Psalm from the Bible, where David makes a prayer to God against his enemies, suits the final scene where everybody meets for tea in a fearsome silence: the Aunt, rescued by a kitchen maid from an “undignified and unmerited detention in a rain-water tank for thirty-five minutes”; the children, back from Jagborough Cove disappointed with the weather; Bobby who suffered from an afternoon-long disastrous effect from the tightness of his boots; and Nicholas in the absorption of the solution he



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formulated for the huntsman that the latter “would escape with his hounds while the wolves feasted on the stricken stag”. The Aunt is the most affected person in the group. More than the physical pain she suffered from in the cold rainwater tank she could not stand the humiliation of being branded as the Devil. “The aunt maintained the frozen muteness of one who has suffered.” She remains the centre of everybody’s silent criticism for overlooking the weather “in the haste of organizing her punitive expedition”.

## CONCLUSION

With the resolution as to what Nicholas should do in domestic crises where the Aunt and her team of “older and wiser and better people” charge him of various types of crimes and resort to various types of punitive actions, the story ends in a remorseful atmosphere. The Persian fire screen stimulates Nicholas’ critical thinking with its symbolism that projects a universal moral. Nicholas places himself in the position of the hunter and the Aunts and her team of adults in those of the wolves. Ultimately he realises that what he decides for the hunter applies to him with tremendous accuracy. Thus the reality of the Edwardian society Munro depicts is that the children cannot win a fight against the adults, however much they are innocent and genuine in

their behaviour. Yet, as Maxey (2005) argues, Munro concludes “The Lumber Room” with the great message that “in spite of constant punishment and privation, a child can retain mental independence, albeit fleetingly, through stolen moments of private fantasy, physically embodied either by a cherished animal or the four walls of a secret room or shed.”

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