

# The Lumber-Room (Learn English with a Short Story) [979]

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The dramatic truth was that there really was a frog in Nicholas's bowl of bread and milk. He had put it there himself, so he naturally felt entitled to know so he put it. The offense of taking a frog from the garden and putting it into a bowl of heated bread and milk was discovered. The frog had stood out most clearly in Nicholas's mind was that the older, wiser, and better people had been completely wrong about something they had spoken about with total confidence.

**Learn English with a Short Story**

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### Introduction Notes

In this episode I am going to tell you a short story and then use it to help you learn English in context.

Today's story is called **The Lumber-Room** and it was written by Hector Hugh Munro, who is also known by his pen name Saki.

This story is just under 2000 words long so it'll probably take 10-15 minutes for me to read it from start to finish.

After that I will summarise it to help you make sure you have understood the main details, and then I will go back through the

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story text line by line, and I'll take time to explain a lot of words, phrases, bits of grammar and so on.

So, listen to the story - try to follow what is happening, and then stick around and I will pick apart the text and there is a lot of English to learn here.

**The story is called *The Lumber-Room*. So, what is a lumber room?**

It's a slightly old fashioned word for a room in a house which stores lots of things that aren't being used. A kind of storage room.

These days, most people in the UK would use their attic or loft to store things in boxes - old books or objects that have been in the family for years, but which don't get used every day.

These days things like that might be stored in the *attic* or *loft* in the roof of the house, but in the old days some families might have had what was called a "lumber room" where old things would be kept, and the room might be locked to prevent curious children from entering and exploring.

Think about the people in the story. Consider the way they are described.

- What do you think about the family? What kind of family are they - wealthy, poor, strict, relaxed? What specific lines in the story make you think this?
- What do you think about Nicholas the boy? What kind of child is he?

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- What do you think about the aunt? What kind of person is she?
  - Who do you sympathise with in this story? The aunt or the boy? Why?
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### ***The Lumber-Room* by Saki**

The children were going to be driven, as a special treat, to the sands at Jagborough.

Nicholas was not included; he was being punished for bad behaviour.

That very morning he had refused to eat his healthy bread and milk on the apparently silly excuse that there was a frog in it.

Older, wiser, and better people told him that there could not possibly be a frog in his bread and milk, and that he must stop talking nonsense.

Nicholas, however, continued to talk what seemed to be *complete* nonsense, and described in great detail the colour and markings of the supposed frog.

The dramatic truth was that there really *was* a frog in Nicholas's bowl of bread and milk. He had put it there himself, so he naturally felt entitled to know something about it.

The offence of taking a frog from the garden and putting it into a bowl of healthy bread and milk was discussed at great length, but

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what stood out most clearly in Nicholas's mind was that the older, wiser, and better people had been completely wrong about something they had spoken about with total confidence.

"You said there couldn't possibly be a frog in my bread and milk, but there was a frog in my bread and milk," he repeated, with the persistence of a skilled tactician who had no intention of giving up a strong position.

So his boy cousin, his girl cousin, and his rather uninteresting younger brother were going to be taken to Jagborough sands that afternoon, while he had to stay at home.

His cousins' aunt—who, by a very questionable stretch of imagination, insisted on calling herself his aunt as well—had quickly invented the Jagborough outing to show Nicholas what pleasures he had rightly lost because of his disgraceful behaviour at breakfast.

It was her habit, whenever one of the children did something wrong, to suddenly invent some kind of treat that the guilty child would be strictly excluded from.

If all the children misbehaved together, they would suddenly be told about a circus in a nearby town - a circus of extraordinary quality and with countless elephants - which, if it hadn't been for their bad behaviour, they would have visited that very day.

A respectable amount of crying was expected from Nicholas when the time came for the others to leave.

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In fact, all the crying was done by his girl cousin, who painfully scraped her knee on the step of the carriage while climbing in.

“How she howled and cried” said Nicholas cheerfully, as the group drove off without any of the excitement that should have gone with such an outing.

“She’ll soon get over that,” said the so-called aunt. “It will be a wonderful afternoon running about on those lovely sands. They’ll enjoy it so much.”

“Bobby won’t enjoy himself much, and he won’t run much either,” said Nicholas with a grim chuckle. “His boots are hurting him. They’re too tight.”

“Why didn’t he tell me they were hurting?” asked the aunt sharply.

“He told you twice, but you weren’t listening. You often don’t listen when we tell you important things.”

“You are not to go into the gooseberry garden,” said the aunt, changing the subject.

“Why not?” asked Nicholas.

“Because you are *in disgrace*,” said the aunt grandly.

Nicholas did not accept this logic. He saw no reason why someone couldn’t be in disgrace and in a gooseberry garden at the same time.

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His face became stubborn, and his aunt was certain that he was determined to go into the garden simply because she had forbidden it.

The gooseberry garden had two entrances, and once a small person like Nicholas got inside, he could easily disappear among the artichokes, raspberry canes, and fruit bushes.

The aunt had many other things she could have done that afternoon, but instead she spent an hour or two doing small gardening jobs near the flower beds and bushes, from where she could watch both doors into the forbidden garden.

She was a woman with very few ideas, but enormous powers of concentration.

Nicholas made one or two suspicious-looking attempts in the front garden, creeping stealthily toward one door and then the other, but never managing to escape her watchful eye.

In fact, he had no intention of going into the gooseberry garden at all.

It suited him perfectly that his aunt believed he wanted to; it kept her standing guard for most of the afternoon.

Once he was sure her suspicions were fully established, Nicholas slipped quietly back into the house and put into action a plan he had been thinking about for a long time.

By standing on a chair in the library, he could reach a shelf holding a large, important-looking key.

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It was indeed important: it locked the lumber-room, keeping its mysteries safe from unauthorised children and accessible only to aunts and other privileged adults.

Nicholas did not have much experience with locks, but he had practised for several days with the schoolroom door key.

He did not like to rely too much on luck. The key turned stiffly, but it turned. The door opened, and Nicholas entered a world far more exciting than the gooseberry garden could ever be.

He had often imagined what the lumber-room might be like - that carefully sealed place where no questions were ever answered.

It lived up to his expectations.

First, it was large and dim, lit only by one high window that looked onto the forbidden garden.

Second, it was full of incredible treasures. The aunt-by-assertion believed that using things ruined them, so she preserved them by letting them gather dust and damp.

The parts of the house Nicholas knew best were dull and empty, but here his eyes were met with wonders.

Most impressive of all was a framed piece of tapestry meant to be a fire screen.

To Nicholas, it was a living story.

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Sitting on a roll of Indian hangings glowing with colour beneath a layer of dust, he studied every detail.

A man in old-fashioned hunting clothes had just shot a stag with an arrow. It must have been an easy shot, since the stag stood only a step or two away.

In thick woodland like that, it would not be hard to creep up on a feeding stag. The two spotted dogs leaping forward had clearly been trained to stay close until the arrow was fired.

That part of the picture was simple enough—but did the hunter see what Nicholas saw?

Four wolves were racing toward him through the trees. There could be more hidden behind the forest.

Would the man and his dogs manage against four wolves if they attacked? He had only two arrows left, and might miss with one or both. All Nicholas really knew about his skill was that he could hit a large stag at very close range.

For many golden minutes, Nicholas turned the situation over in his mind. He suspected there were more than four wolves, and that the man and his dogs were in serious danger.

There were many other delights. There were twisted candlesticks shaped like snakes, and a teapot made like a china duck, with tea pouring from its open beak. How dull the nursery teapot seemed by comparison.

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There was also a carved sandalwood box packed tightly with sweet-smelling cotton wool, inside which were small brass figures—hump-backed bulls, peacocks, and goblins—wonderful to look at and touch.

A large black-covered book looked unpromising, but inside it was full of coloured pictures of birds. Nicholas knew only magpies and wood pigeons from the garden and lanes, but here were herons, bustards, kites, toucans, tiger-bitterns, brush turkeys, ibises, golden pheasants - a whole gallery of unimaginable creatures.

As he admired the colours of the mandarin duck and invented its life story, his aunt's voice suddenly rang out from the gooseberry garden, calling his name loudly and angrily.

She had grown suspicious at his long absence and decided he must have climbed over the wall behind the lilac bushes. Now she was noisily and hopelessly searching for him among the artichokes and raspberries.

“Nicholas! Nicholas!” she shouted. “Come out at once. There's no point hiding—I can see you perfectly!”

It was probably the first smile anyone had had in that lumber-room for twenty years.

Soon the angry shouting turned into a shriek, and then into cries for help.

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Nicholas closed the bird book, carefully put it back, and sprinkled dust over it from a nearby pile of newspapers. Then he crept out, locked the door, and returned the key exactly where it had been.

His aunt was still calling when Nicholas wandered calmly into the front garden.

“Who’s calling?” he asked.

“I am!” came the reply from the other side of the wall. “Didn’t you hear me? I’ve fallen into the rainwater tank. There’s no water in it, luckily, but it’s slippery and I can’t get out. Bring the ladder from under the cherry tree.”

“I was told I wasn’t allowed in the gooseberry garden,” said Nicholas firmly.

“I told you not to before, but now I’m telling you that you may,” came the impatient voice.

“That doesn’t sound like aunt’s voice,” said Nicholas. “You might be the Devil trying to tempt me. Aunt says the Devil tempts me and I always give in. This time I won’t.”

“Stop talking nonsense,” said the trapped aunt. “Fetch the ladder.”

“Will there be strawberry jam for tea?” asked Nicholas innocently.

“Yes,” said the aunt, already deciding Nicholas would not get any.

“Now I know you’re the Devil!” shouted Nicholas happily. “We asked aunt for strawberry jam yesterday and she said there wasn’t

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It was wonderfully satisfying to speak to an aunt as though she were the Devil, but Nicholas knew such pleasures should not be overused. He walked away noisily. Eventually, a kitchen maid looking for parsley rescued the aunt.

Tea that evening was eaten in complete silence. The tide had been high when the children reached Jagborough Cove, so there were no sands to play on - something the aunt had overlooked in her rush to organise the punishment trip.

Bobby's tight boots had made him miserable all afternoon, and the outing had been thoroughly unenjoyable.

The aunt remained silent, frozen by her undignified imprisonment in a rainwater tank for thirty-five minutes.

Nicholas was silent too, but for different reasons. He had a lot to think about. It seemed quite possible, he decided, that the hunter might escape with his dogs, while the wolves feasted on the wounded stag.

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### Summary

Let me summarise the story in my own words and discuss these questions from earlier.

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- What do you think about the family? What kind of family are they? What specific lines in the story make you think this?
- What do you think about Nicholas the boy? What kind of child is he?
- What do you think about the aunt? What kind of person is she?
- Who do you sympathise with in the story? The aunt or the boy? Why?

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### Vocabulary & Grammar in the story

#### Version with highlighted vocabulary & grammar

The children were going to be driven, as a special treat, to the sands at Jagborough. Nicholas was not included; he was being punished for bad behaviour.

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“Stop talking nonsense,” said the trapped aunt. “Fetch the ladder.”

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“Yes,” said the aunt, already deciding Nicholas would not get any.

“Now I *know* you’re the Devil!” shouted Nicholas happily. “We asked aunt for strawberry jam yesterday and she said there wasn’t any. I know there are four jars in the cupboard because I checked. You know it’s there, but she doesn’t. You’ve given yourself away!”

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## Vocabulary

Here are all the highlighted items in a list for your convenience.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. as a special treat</li><li>2. bad behaviour</li><li>3. refused to eat</li><li>4. apparently silly</li><li>5. excuse</li><li>6. wiser</li><li>7. talking nonsense</li><li>8. Supposed frog</li><li>9. dramatic truth</li><li>10. felt entitled</li><li>11. offence</li><li>12. at great length</li><li>13. stood out</li><li>14. completely wrong</li><li>15. with total confidence</li><li>16. persistence</li><li>17. a skilled tactician</li><li>18. had no intention of giving up a strong position</li><li>19. by a very questionable stretch of imagination</li><li>20. insisted on</li><li>21. ing</li><li>22. outing</li><li>23. disgraceful behaviour</li><li>24. whenever</li><li>25. to suddenly invent</li><li>26. treat</li><li>27. strictly excluded</li><li>28. misbehaved</li><li>29. countless elephants</li><li>30. respectable amount of crying</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>86. glowing with colour</li><li>87. beneath a layer of dust</li><li>88. old-fashioned hunting clothes</li><li>89. a stag</li><li>90. an arrow</li><li>91. an easy shot</li><li>92. only a step or two away</li><li>93. thick woodland</li><li>94. to creep up on</li><li>95. spotted dogs</li><li>96. leaping forward</li><li>97. were racing toward him</li><li>98. at very close range</li><li>99. golden minutes</li><li>100. turned the situation over in his mind</li><li>101. suspected</li><li>102. delights</li><li>103. twisted candlesticks</li><li>104. made like a china duck</li><li>105. pouring</li><li>106. beak</li><li>107. by comparison</li><li>108. a carved sandalwood box</li><li>109. packed tightly</li><li>110. with sweet-smelling cotton wool</li><li>111. small brass figures</li><li>112. hump-backed bulls</li><li>113. peacocks</li><li>114. goblins</li><li>115. black-covered book</li></ol>
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31. painfully scraped	116. unpromising
32. howl	117. magpies
33. drove off	118. wood pigeons
34. an outing	119. herons
35. get over	120. bustards
36. so-called	121. kites
37. a grim chuckle	122. toucans
38. tight	123. tiger-bitterns
39. sharply	124. brush turkeys
40. the gooseberry garden	125. ibises
41. grandly	126. golden pheasants
42. stubborn	127. a whole gallery
43. determined	128. unimaginable creatures
44. forbidden	129. admired
45. artichokes	130. mandarin duck
46. raspberry canes	131. rang out
47. bushes	132. grown suspicious
48. spent	133. long absence
49. ing	134. lilac bushes
50. forbidden garden	135. noisily and hopelessly searching
51. enormous powers of concentration	136. among the artichokes and raspberries
52. suspicious-looking	137. at once
53. attempts	138. s no point
54. creeping stealthily	139. ing
55. managing to escape	140. turned into
56. watchful eye	141. a shriek
57. had no intention of going	142. sprinkled dust over it
58. It suited him perfectly	143. crept out
59. kept her standing guard	144. wandered calmly
60. her suspicions were fully established	145. the rainwater tank
61. slipped quietly	146. luckily
62. put into action	147. slippery
63. had been thinking	148. the ladder
64. reach	149. impatient voice
65. the lumber-room	150. tempt
66. unauthorised children	151. give in
67. accessible	152. Fetch
68. privileged adults	153. innocently
69. locks	154. jars

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70. to rely too much on luck	155. given yourself away
71. turned stiffly	156. wonderfully satisfying
72. carefully sealed	157. Eventually
73. lived up to his expectations	158. parsley
74. dim	159. in complete silence
75. lit	160. tide
76. incredible treasures	161. overlooked
77. aunt-by-assertion	162. punishment
78. ruined	163. thoroughly unenjoyable
79. preserved	164. undignified imprisonment
80. gather dust	165. feasted on the wounded stag
81. damp	
82. his eyes were met with wonders	
83. a framed piece of tapestry	
84. meant to be a fire screen	
85. a roll of Indian hangings	