

**Whims of Nature, Human Limitations and the Reversal of Fate in
The Interlopers by Saki**

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Abstract:

The Interlopers by Saki (H. H. Munro) is a thrilling short story that deals with the multi-generational feuds between the heads of two families. The setting of the story is the harsh, isolated Carpathian Mountains of Eastern Europe. The story centres on the events in a dark dense forest that has been at the centre of the feuds between the families. The two characters namely, Ulrich von Gradwitz and Georg Znaeym appear in the forest each hoping to kill the other and their failure to do this as overpowering Nature disarms each of them, forms the story. This paper examines the overpowering influence of Nature and the reversal of Fate in association with the two characters of the story. It also reflects on the limitations of the human potentials in front of Nature, which is dark, mysterious and inscrutable. The wild, dark, dense forest in the vast mountain range along with the bitter cold and terrible storm symbolises the Nature with its retributive aspects that seems not to forgive the human hatred and malignity. The paper also makes an analysis of the deep transformation the characters undergo as they are under the mysterious influence of Nature and how at last, they would die becoming well wishing friends.

Keywords: Multi-generational feuds, reversal of fate, limitations of the human potentials, retributive aspects, deep transformation.

Scope of the Article: The paper studies deeply the story *The Interlopers* with a thorough examination of the role of Nature and the reversal of Fate along with the human limitations in association with the two characters of the story. Within this scope it also includes textual quotations to make a thorough analysis of these themes of the story.

Introduction:

Hector Hugh Munro, mostly known by his penname Saki, is aptly described by *The Dictionary of National Biography* in this manner - "...in the art of the unexpected phrase

Munro was a past master” (Davis and Weaver, *Dictionary of National Biography* 397). He is well known for his unconventional themes, dark humours, macabre settings and ironical twists in his writings. He often surprises the reader by subverting the reader’s expectations by unexpected words, phrases or dialogues or even by surprising turns that may occur a number of times in his fictional work or at the end of his story. After his mother’s death Munro was brought up by his grandmother and aunts and his harsh upbringing by them seems to have its reflection in his writings. The harsh treatment of him by his family members is reverberated in his seemingly unsympathetic handling of the characters and situations with recourse to dark humour and ironic twists.

The two characters of the story Ulrich von Gradwitz and Georg Znaeym has been quarrelling since long over a disputed strip of land. One stormy night they come to the forest and wait there holding rifle with their armed men with the hope of killing the other as a poacher. They meet face to face and waits for the sake of civilization to speak first before attacking each other. But before they are ready to attack, they are disabled as “A fierce shriek of the storm had been answered by a splitting crash over their heads, and ere they could leap aside a mass of falling beech tree had thundered down on them” (Saki, *The Interlopers* 507). Even though gradually they become friends they are too late in making reconciliation to be allowed to live and Nature takes its revenge on them.

The Titular Interlopers:

The title of the story is relevant in the sense that there are a number of interlopers in the story – both the human and non-human. The first interloper is Georg Znaeym as he wants to take possession of the land though the fact remains that it was given to the family of Ulrich von Gradwitz by a lawsuit in the time of their grandfathers. Then both of these two lifelong bitter enemies become interlopers as they along with their armed force enter into the forest. As they are human beings with their so-called civilizing instincts, they are not allowed to interfere in anything associated with Nature or natural surroundings. Again, to delve deep into the story, they do not want to be interlopers into the established codes of civilization by breaking the norms as they are not ready to attack each other without speaking anything. But ironically, they become the interlopers in the way of true civilization as they are fighting over a land without any human conscience. Again, they are not authorised to do anything with the forest. But they become the trespassers and so ultimately, they are punished by Nature. Again, the terrible storm along with the beech tree becomes the interloper as these hinder them (Ulrich and Georg) from making an end to their lifelong fight by making peace. Later this same beech tree becomes an obstacle interrupting reconciliation. Then the wolves come and they become the final interlopers who totally disrupt any prospect for Ulrich and Georg of continuing their friendly relationship after their newfound human feelings for each other.

Human Limitations and the Overpowering Influence of Nature:

Saki composed the story *The Interlopers* before World War 1. The feuds and conflicts amongst the nations led to the Great War that was more impactful than the feuds between two individuals as is described in the story. But probably Saki was too much conscious of the fact that human hatred, Ill will, pride and greed are responsible for all kinds of conflicts and also had in his mind the broader conflicts amongst the nations and the result was the composition of this story. He was of the opinion that these negative traits inherent in mankind are responsible for the destruction of peace and happiness. The way Saki represents the characters with all their negative traits (and at last some positive traits also) along with human mortality can remind the reader the line by Thomas Hobbes in the Part I, Chap. 13 of his *Leviathan* – “...the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, *Leviathan* 65).

In *The Interlopers* Nature is a mighty force which the characters find overwhelming. The gigantic beech tree making them helpless by falling upon them brings light to the fact that how wretched, insignificant and powerless man is in front of mighty Nature. Likewise, the storm and the strong wind also represent the dangerous impact of Nature that is so powerful that “...the trees can’t even stand upright in a breath of wind” (Saki, *The Interlopers* 510). The wolves represents the power of Nature and its indifference to the human will as when Ulrich and Georg are about to make peace they (the wolves) thwart all their hopes. The two people had become so blind to reality because of their spirit of vengeance that they were unable to see the dangers of the storm struck dense forest. So, all these forces including the beech tree, the wind, the storm and the wolves are representative of the all-powerful Nature that is totally indifferent to the human wills and aspirations.

It is important to note what Georg says to Ulrich – “...I can scarcely see anything; there is so much blood cakes round my eyes...” (Saki, *The Interlopers* 509). Again, Ulrich says to Georg – “I can’t see distinctly” (Saki, *The Interlopers* 511). Indeed, they lack wisdom and fortitude. They have been unable to realise the ultimate fact regarding human life that is so fragile in front of an omnipotent force like Nature and that is why they have been quarrelling meaninglessly on the trifling matter like the possession of a land. They are able to realise at last with too much difficulty that the living beings coming towards them are the wolves and not their men but become late in seeing them clearly. In the same way they are too late in their realisation of the ultimate fact regarding life.

Here in the story Nature seems mysterious as it plays an ambiguous role. It is benevolent but at the same time it can be deduced that it is destructive also. It is benevolent because it teaches them lesson by punishment so that they can become aware of the destructive nature of their act of vengeance and be friends. But just as they can realise their

faults they are destroyed for ever by the vengeful Nature in a way, they are in no position to continue their new life of wisdom and understandings.

The Sudden Turn, Ironical Twist and the Reversal of Fate:

The Interlopers by Saki is a Balkan gothic romance that consists of sudden turns and ironical twists characteristic of his writings. The tone of the story changes from something thrilling to hopeful and ultimately to tragic. The turns and twists become responsible for the reversal of the Fate of Ulrich and Georg.

The story begins with a description of a certain legal battle over a disputed woodland and also how by a lawsuit the land is given to Ulrich as a result of which the concerned families become great enemies of each other. But then it is seen that the enmity between the two families changes into the personal hatred and malice as the narrator says – “The feud might, perhaps, have died down or been compromised if the personal ill-will of the two men had not stood in the way” (Saki, *The Interlopers* 506). Thus at the very beginning the reader can notice a certain turn in the course of the events as the legal battle and the feuds between the families turns into a deeply personal vendetta and their personal spite finds its reflection in their manner of cursing each other while both of them lie helpless being pinned by the twigs of the giant beech tree.

The reader can notice the second turn or ironical twist when instead of shooting each other they are disarmed by the beech tree which is itself affected by the dreadful storm. With this outward change the two persons also experience a deep inner change or transformation in their mind and heart under the mysterious influence of Nature. And their physical wounds is transformed into the mental shocks. And this turn is steeped with an intense ironical twist as the sworn enemies turn to friends suddenly with their realisation of the futility of all their hatred and feuds that have led them to this wretched predicament. Ulrich is the first to feel his hatred for his enemy to be dying down and also to ponder deeply over their present predicament with bitterness and as he says to Georg – “If my men are the first to come you shall be the first to be helped, as though you were my guest. We have quarrelled like devils all our lives over this stupid strip of forest...” And then Georg also begins to think in the same manner. As they share the same wretched condition they are deeply moved from within and this sense of vulnerability in front of mighty Nature leads to their regret and reconciliation. They change as they realise that all these disputes over such trifling matter are useless when the fact remains that a man is prone to mortality anytime. Each of them came to the woodland with an intense desire to wreck his vengeance onto the other. But now, each in the same place wants to help the other as they turn from selfishness and egoism to altruism and humanitarianism. But irony is in the fact that they are too late in their well-intended reconciliation and they are ill-fated.

The ultimate turn comes with the most unexpected twist that becomes quite ironical. It happens after they are on friendly terms and are anticipating their future lives together and also thinking about the reaction of their communities after seeing their friendship not knowing that in fact they are anticipating the end of their lives. The last word “Wolves” is struck with the bitter ironic twist and dark humour as Ulrich utters it as all their late found sense and friendship come to nothing as the wolves come. At first, they were anticipating their enemy and now while they are anticipating their men to relieve them thus enabling them to lead their friendly relationship, the wolves come in the form of different type of hunters. And this unexpected twist leads to the unexpected ending while the reader is at a loss to know about the future happenings regarding the two persons though in a way it becomes clear that they would become the hunted who have been hunters since long. Such is the irony of their Fate.

There is another turn or twist in the overall story level. The story is about the conflict between two families that gradually gives way to the spite and hatred of the two persons of the respective families. But again, this conflict between these two persons gives its way to the conflict between men and the all-powerful Nature in the hands of which they become utterly helpless and from whose clutch they can have no liberation. Thus, the conflict between the families gives way to that of the two persons which again in its turn gives place to that of men and mighty Nature. Earlier each of them wanted to take Fate in his control and they ends being controlled by Fate which is under guise of Nature that is all-powerful.

Such is the irony of the Fate that at the end the hunters become the hunted. The enemies are trapped on the very land over which they has been quarrelling and though they continue to remain enemies in the public eyes, they become friends unknown to others except these two people. Thus, their realisation that it is futile to quarrel over a land when the fact remains that they are nothing but the helpless puppets in the hands of Fate comes too late. As a result, they suffer in the hands of Fate in the guise of Nature. And the men who like a predatory animal tried to take the other under their control, come under the control of the rushing wolves and the story ends just at this moment. So, their Fate is reversed they are totally in control of the mysterious and predatory Nature.

Mask of Civilization and Nature as a Retributive Force:

As a member of the Victorian society Saki was well acquainted with the Victorian hypocritical societal norms characterised by the huge gap between the social norms and the reality famously termed by G. K. Chesterton as the “Victorian Compromise”. The characters’ sense of the code of civilization with regard to the attacking the other without a word becomes quite ironical and self-contradictory when they are engaged in bloody feuds over the dispute on a land. Irony is lurking in these words – “...a man who has been brought up

under the code of a restraining civilization cannot easily nerve himself to shoot down his neighbour in cold blood and without word spoken..." (Saki, *The Interlopers* 507). And it becomes quite absurd of the persons who conscious of the codes of civilization while they themselves cannot overcome their passion for bloody feuds – "...as boys they had thirsted for one another's blood, as men each prayed that misfortune might fall on the other..." (Saki, *The Interlopers* 506-507). So it might be that Saki had in his mind the sense of the hypocritical Victorian norms as he attacks the code of civilization in this story.

In the story Nature plays an active role whose motives are not very clear. It is an all-powerful force that is dark, mysterious, retributive and inscrutable. The narrator's words at the end of the very first paragraph is worth quoting – "Ulrich von Gradwitz patrolled the dark forest in quest of a human enemy." Ulrich keeps a close watch on the forest and on the people who might come within its periphery. But quite unknown to him, it becomes ironical that the all-powerful Nature itself guards the forest and works as a watchful vigil on everyone with a motive of doing retaliation to those who cross the limit in respect of humanitarian ideals or whatever it may be. Again, it is as if the people prone to hypocrisy are destroyed by Nature which does not permit anything artificial or hypocritical. It does not permit any man-made trouble within its territory and that is why "...a deed of Nature's own violence overwhelmed them both" (Saki, *The Interlopers* 507). Again, Nature brings the enemies to understandings and reconciliation through punishment, and the same Nature separates them by death. Indeed, the Nature presented in the story is not only retributive, but also mysterious and inscrutable and acts according to its own whims.

Conclusion:

Thus, the story *The Interlopers* by Saki is about the all-powerful and mysterious Nature that helps the humans to realise their own faults and limitations, but sooner had they become aware of their limitations than they were destroyed by the whims of Nature. It is as if the all-powerful Nature does not allow anyone to bring troubles within its periphery and that is why it destroys the interlopers Ulrich and Georg. In a way Georg's words "no cursed interlopers to come between us" (Saki, *The Interlopers* 509) become ironical as at the end even when they are on friendly terms, the wolves come as the interlopers turning all their hopes to ashes. The two individuals becomes too late in their understandings and that is why the story becomes a grim tragedy with a hint of the end of their lives.

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