

1.2 The Thief's Story

Warming Up!

1. Read the following incident.

Lokesh had always been a class-topper in tests and examinations. However, invariably, he used foul means during exams to gain those high marks.

Once, on the day of History examination, Lokesh realized that his classmate and friend Farhan came all prepared for Maths instead of History. Farhan had become desperate. So Lokesh offered to let him copy from his answer-sheet, since Farhan sat just behind him.

Farhan refused. He said, "It's all right even if I get a zero, but I can call it my own zero. I do not want to score a single mark, unearned. Cheating in exams is for cowards. Not me!"

These words were a turning point in Lokesh's life. He gave up cheating for ever. He worked hard for what he desired and never, ever used false measures to acquire anything.

(a) In the given story, which words/phrases can be replaced by the following ones?

- (i) became aware
- (ii) always
- (iii) very upset and helpless
- (iv) cheating
- (v) without working for it
- (vi) a sudden change
- (vii) gain/achieve

(b) Summarize the incident in 6 to 8 lines making Lokesh, the narrator :

Begin with : 'I was always a class topper.

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The Thief's Story



Ruskin Bond (1934) is an Indian author of British descent. He lives with his adopted family in Landour in Mussoorie, India. The Indian Council for Child Education has recognised his role in the growth of children's literature in India. He got the Sahitya Academy Award in 1992 for 'Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra', for his published work in English. He was awarded the 'Padmashri' in 1999 and 'Padmabhushan' in 2014.

◆ *What is the narrator quite successful at?*

◆ *Who does 'I' refer to in this story?*

● **flattery** : insincere praise

● **modestly** : without boasting, in a humble way

◆ *Why did the narrator change his name every month?*

● **grunting** : making low guttural sounds

● **appealing** : attention-getting attractive

I was still a thief when I met Anil. And though only 15, I was an experienced and fairly successful hand.

Anil was watching a wrestling match when I approached him. He was about 25 — a tall, lean fellow — and he looked easy-going, kind and simple enough for my purpose. I hadn't had much luck of late and thought I might be able to get into the young man's confidence.

"You look a bit of a wrestler yourself," I said. A little **flattery** helps in making friends.

"So do you," he replied, which put me off for a moment because at that time I was rather thin.

"Well," I said **modestly**, "I do wrestle a bit."

"What's your name?"

"Hari Singh," I lied. I took a new name every month. That kept me ahead of the police and my former employers.

After this introduction, Anil talked about the well-oiled wrestlers who were **grunting**, lifting and throwing each other about. I didn't have much to say. Anil walked away. I followed casually.

"Hello again," he said.

I gave him my most **appealing** smile. "I want to work for you," I said.

"But I can't pay you."

I thought that over for a minute. Perhaps I had misjudged my man.

I asked, "Can you feed me?"

"Can you cook?"

"I can cook," I lied again.

"If you can cook, then may be I can feed you."

He took me to his room over the Jumna Sweet Shop and told me I could sleep in the balcony. But the meal I cooked that night must have been terrible because Anil gave it to a stray dog and told me to be off. But I just hung around, smiling in my most appealing way, and he couldn't help laughing.

Later, he patted me on the head and said never mind, he'd teach me to cook. He also taught me to write my name and said he would soon teach me to write whole sentences and to add numbers. I was grateful. I knew that once I could write like an educated man there would be no limit to what I could achieve.

It was quite pleasant working for Anil. I made the tea in the morning and then would take my time buying the day's supplies, usually making a profit of about a rupee a day. I think he knew I made a little money this way but he did not seem to mind.

Anil made money **by fits and starts**. He would borrow one week, lend the next. He kept worrying about his next cheque, but as soon as it arrived he would go out and celebrate. It seems he wrote for magazines — a queer way to make a living!

One evening he came home with a small bundle of notes, saying he had just sold a book to a publisher. At night, I saw him tuck the money under the mattress.

I had been working for Anil for almost a month and, apart from cheating on the shopping, had not done anything in my line of work. I had every opportunity for doing so. Anil had given me a key to the door, and I could come and go as I pleased. He was the most trusting person I had ever met.

And that is why it was so difficult to rob him. It's easy to rob a greedy man, because he can afford to be robbed; but it's difficult to rob a careless man — sometimes he doesn't even notice he's been robbed and that takes all the pleasure out of the work.

Well, it's time I did some real work, I told myself; I'm out of practice. And if I don't take the money,

◆ *What favours did Anil do for the narrator?*

● **by fits and starts** : in short irregular intervals

◆ *What proves that the narrator still practised deceit?*

he'll only waste it on his friends. After all, he doesn't even pay me.

Anil was asleep. A beam of moonlight stepped over the balcony and fell on the bed. I sat up on the floor, considering the situation. If I took the money, I could catch the 10.30 Express to Lucknow. Slipping out of the blanket, I crept up to the bed. Anil was sleeping peacefully. His face was clear and **unlined**; even I had more marks on my face, though mine were mostly scars.

My hand slid under the mattress, searching for the notes. When I found them, I drew them out without a sound. Anil sighed in his sleep and turned on his side, towards me. I was startled and quickly crawled out of the room.

When I was on the road, I began to run. I had the notes at my waist, held there by the string of my pyjamas. I slowed down to a walk and counted the notes: 600 rupees in fifties! I could live like an oil-rich Arab for a week or two.

When I reached the station I did not stop at the ticket office (I had never bought a ticket in my life.) but dashed straight to the platform. The Lucknow Express was just moving out. The train had still to pick up speed and I should have been able to jump into one of the carriages, but I hesitated — for some reason I can't explain — and I lost the chance to get away.

When the train had gone, I found myself standing alone on the deserted platform. I had no idea where to spend the night. I had no friends, believing that friends were more trouble than help. And I did not want to make anyone curious by staying at one of the small hotels near the station. The only person I knew really well was the man I had robbed. Leaving the station, I walked slowly through the bazaar.

In my short career as a thief, I had made a study of men's faces when they had lost their goods. The greedy man showed fear; the rich man showed anger; the poor man showed acceptance. But I knew that Anil's face, when he discovered the theft, would show only a touch of sadness. Not for the loss of money, but for the loss of trust.

◆ **unlined** : showing no sign of worry or anxiety

◆ *What could have caused the scars on Hari's face?*

◆ *Why did Hari hesitate to board the train?*

◆ *Why does Hari believe that friends were more trouble than help?*

◆ *What is face reading?*

I found myself in the *maidan* and sat down on a bench. The night was chilly — it was early November — and a light drizzle added to my discomfort. Soon it was raining quite heavily. My shirt and pyjamas stuck to my skin, and a cold wind blew the rain across my face.

I went back to the bazaar and sat down in the shelter of the clock tower. The clock showed midnight. I felt for the notes. They were damp from the rain.

Anil's money. In the morning he would probably have given me two or three rupees to go to the cinema, but now I had it all. I couldn't cook his meals, run to the bazaar or learn to write whole sentences any more.

I had forgotten about them in the excitement of the theft. Whole sentences, I knew, could one day bring me more than a few hundred rupees. It was a simple matter to steal — and sometimes just as simple to be caught. But to be a really big man, a clever and respected man, was something else. I should go back to Anil, I told myself, if only to learn to read and write.

I hurried back to the room feeling very nervous, for it is much easier to steal something than to return it undetected. I opened the door quietly, then stood in the doorway, in clouded moonlight. Anil was still asleep. I crept to the head of the bed, and my hand came up with the notes. I felt his breath on my hand. I remained still for a minute. Then my hand found the edge of the mattress, and slipped under it with the notes.

I awoke late next morning to find that Anil had already made the tea. He stretched out his hand towards me. There was a fifty-rupee note between his fingers. My **heart sank**. I thought I had been discovered.

"I made some money yesterday," he explained. "Now you'll be paid regularly."

My **spirits rose**. But when I took the note, I saw it was still wet from the night's rain.

"Today we'll start writing sentences," he said.

He knew. But neither his lips nor his eyes showed anything. I smiled at Anil in my most appealing way. And the smile came by itself, without any effort.

— Ruskin Bond



◆ *What were Hari's regrets as he pondered over his theft?*

◆ *Why did Hari feel nervous?*

◆ *Does Anil realise that he has been robbed?*

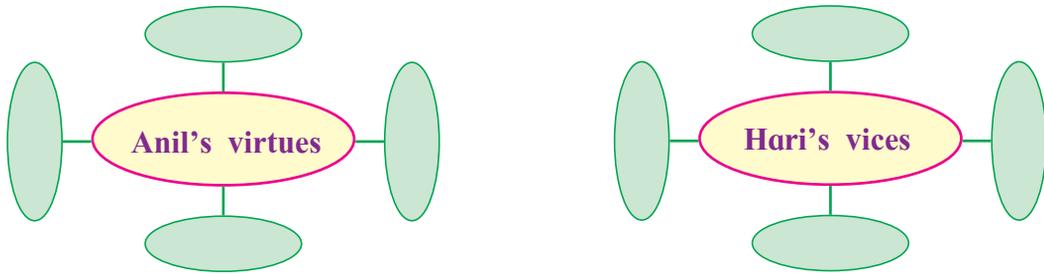
● **heart sank** : felt depressed

● **spirits rose** : became very hopeful

◆ *Why did Hari give a genuine appealing smile?*

ENGLISH WORKSHOP

1. Complete the web diagram.



2. Insert the appropriate word/phrase given below, in the sentences that follow.

(flattery, appealing, by fits and starts, dashed to, undetected, spirits rose)

- (a) I the school gate when I heard the school-bell ring.
- (b) After the death of my pet dog, my when dad got me a new pup.
- (c) Do not stoop to just to gain something from someone.
- (d) The artist completes his paintings
- (e) The crime went for 11 years.
- (f) When the baby saw its mother it gave an smile.

3. (a) Find from the text the collocation for the following.

- (i) dog
- (ii) man
- (iii) ticket
- (iv) slowly
- (v) drizzle
- (vi) sentences
- (vii) spirits.

Make of the students aware that collocations and compound words are different. Encourage them to use them in their writing.

(b) Complete the compound words from the story.

- (i) oil
- (ii) fifty
- (iii) easy
- (iv) tower
- (v) moon

(c) Pick out from the story 3 or 4 examples of Code-mixing (Indian words used in English).

4. Read the story carefully and complete the table.

Total no. of characters	Names	Age	Physical appearance	Earned money by	Qualities
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5. Complete the given sentences.

- (a) Anil kept Hari as a cook because
- (b) Hari was grateful
- (c) Hari continued making money
- (d) Anil didn't hand Hari over to the police
- (e) The moral of the story is

6. Think and write in your own words, in your notebook.

- (a) Why did Anil employ Hari as a cook, although he could not afford to pay him?
- (b) What did Hari learn from Anil in the beginning?
- (c) Why didn't Anil hand over Hari to the police? What effect would it have had on Hari?
- (d) Do you feel Anil's way of handling a thief like Hari was effective? Justify your answer.
- (e) What tact had Anil used to change Hari's dishonest ways?
- (f) 'And the smile came by itself without any effort.' Say why. When do people give fake smiles?

7. Write a character sketch of 'Hari Singh' with the help of the following points, using the paragraph format.

Hari Singh's background
His dishonesty
His aspirations
His courage to change himself

8. Frame 'Wh' questions to get the answers underlined below. (Change the first person pronouns to the second person where necessary.)

- (a) I hurried back to the room.
- (b) I had made a study of men's faces.
- (c) I drew them out, without a sound.
- (d) The poor man showed acceptance.
- (e) I made tea in the morning.

9. Imagine that Anil catches Hari red-handed when Hari is stealing the money from under the mattress. Compose a short dialogue between the two, which reflects Anil's shock and Hari's repeated apologies.

