Chapter 7: Madam Rides the Bus

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Exercise 7.1 — Oral Comprehension Check 1 (Page 97)

Q1 What was Valli's favourite pastime?

SOLUTION

Valli's favourite pastime was standing in the front doorway of her house, watching what was happening in the street outside.

There were no playmates of her own age on her street, so this was about all she had to do. Yet for her, standing at the front door was every bit as enjoyable as the elaborate games other children played, because watching the street gave her many new and unusual experiences.

Answer: Standing in the front doorway of her house and watching the street outside.

Q2 What was a source of unending joy for Valli? What was her strongest desire?

SOLUTION

The bus that travelled between her village and the nearest town was a source of unending joy for Valli. It passed through her street each hour, once going to the town and once coming back, and the sight of the bus, "filled each time with a new set of passengers," delighted her.

Her strongest desire was to ride on that bus, even if just once. This wish crept into her head, grew there, and became "an overwhelming desire."

Answer: The bus was her source of joy, and her strongest desire was to ride on it at least once.

Q3 What did Valli find out about the bus journey? How did she find out these details?

SOLUTION

Valli found out that the town was six miles from her village, the fare was thirty paise one way, and the trip took forty-five minutes. She also learnt that if she stayed in her seat and paid another thirty paise, she could return home on the same bus.

She found out these details by listening carefully to conversations between her neighbours and people who regularly used the bus, and by asking a few discreet questions here and there.

Answer: She learnt the distance, fare, and duration of the trip by overhearing conversations and asking discreet questions.

Q4 What do you think Valli was planning to do?

SOLUTION

Valli was planning to make a bus journey to the town all by herself and return home on the same bus.

The text shows her calculating and recalculating, planning and replanning the times — she worked out that she could take the one-o'clock afternoon bus, reach town at one forty-five, and be back home by about two forty-five.

Answer: She was planning to secretly ride the bus to town and back all by herself.

Exercise 7.2 — Oral Comprehension Check 2 (Page 100)

Q1 Why does the conductor call Valli 'madam'?

SOLUTION

The conductor was a jolly sort, fond of joking. He called Valli 'madam' in fun, teasing her because she was behaving in a very grown-up manner.

She had insisted on getting on the bus by herself, refused his help, paid her own fare and travelled to town all alone — so he mockingly addressed her as 'madam' and even said, "make way for madam."

Answer: He calls her 'madam' jokingly, teasing her for behaving in a grown-up, independent way.

Q2 Why does Valli stand up on the seat? What does she see now?

SOLUTION

Valli's view was cut off by a canvas blind that covered the lower part of her window, so she stood up on the seat and peered over the blind to see outside.

She saw that the bus was going along the bank of a canal. On one side there was the canal and, beyond it, palm trees, grassland, distant mountains, and the blue sky; on the other side was a deep ditch and then acres and acres of green fields, "green, green, green, as far as the eye could see."

Answer: She stands up because a canvas blind blocked her view, and she sees a canal, palm trees, mountains, sky and endless green fields.

Q3 What does Valli tell the elderly man when he calls her a child?

SOLUTION

When the elderly man, concerned for her safety, told her not to stand and called her a child, Valli was annoyed by his attention.

She said haughtily, "There's nobody here who's a child. I've paid my thirty paise like everyone else." Later she added irritably, "I'm not a child, I tell you. I'm eight years old."

Answer: She haughtily insists she is not a child, saying she has paid her thirty paise like everyone else.

Q4 Why didn't Valli want to make friends with the elderly woman?

SOLUTION

Valli found the elderly woman absolutely repulsive. The woman had big holes in her ear lobes with ugly earrings in them, and she was chewing betel nut, so Valli could smell it and see the betel juice threatening to spill over her lips.

The woman also kept prying with questions about where Valli was going, which Valli disliked. She thought, "who could be sociable with such a person?" and answered curtly.

Answer: Because she found the woman repulsive and prying, and disliked her ugly earrings and betel-chewing.

Exercise 7.3 — Oral Comprehension Check 3 (Page 102)

Q1 How did Valli save up money for her first journey? Was it easy for her?

SOLUTION

Valli thriftily saved whatever stray coins came her way, resisting every temptation to buy peppermints, toys, balloons and the like, until she had saved a total of sixty paise.

It was not easy for her. It was especially difficult that day at the village fair, when she had the money but "resolutely stifled a strong desire to ride the merry-go-round."

Answer: She saved stray coins by resisting all temptations to spend; it was very difficult, especially at the fair.

Q2 What did Valli see on her way that made her laugh?

SOLUTION

Valli saw a young cow, tail high in the air, running very fast right in the middle of the road, right in front of the bus.

The bus slowed to a crawl and the driver honked loudly again and again, but the more he honked the more frightened the animal became and the faster it galloped, always right in front of the bus. This seemed very funny to Valli, and she laughed until there were tears in her eyes.

Answer: A frightened young cow galloping fast right in front of the bus made her laugh till she cried.

Q3 Why didn't she get off the bus at the bus station?

SOLUTION

Valli did not get off because her plan was only to enjoy a bus ride, not to visit the town. She told the conductor, "I'm going back on this same bus," and handed him another thirty paise.

She said, "I just felt like having a bus ride, that's all." She was also too afraid to look at the sights all by herself.

Answer: Because she only wanted a bus ride and planned to return on the same bus, not to explore the town.

Q4 Why didn't Valli want to go to the stall and have a drink? What does this tell you about her?

SOLUTION

When the conductor offered to bring her a cold drink, Valli refused firmly, saying she did not have enough money and telling him, "No, no, please, no." Even when he said it would be his treat and cost her nothing, she still refused.

This tells us that Valli was a self-respecting, independent girl. She did not want to accept favours or charity from others and preferred to manage with what she could afford herself.

Answer: She refused out of self-respect; it shows she was independent and would not accept favours or charity.

Exercise 7.4 — Thinking about the Text

Q1 What was Valli's deepest desire? Find the words and phrases in the story that tell you this.

SOLUTION

Valli's deepest desire was to ride on the bus that travelled between her village and the town, even if just once.

The words and phrases that tell us this are: "a tiny wish crept into her head and grew there: she wanted to ride on that bus, even if just once"; "This wish became stronger and stronger, until it was an overwhelming desire"; and she would "stare wistfully at the people who got on or off the bus," whose faces "would kindle in her longings, dreams, and hopes."

Answer: Her deepest desire was to ride the bus; phrases like "an overwhelming desire" and "stare wistfully" show this.

Q2 How did Valli plan her bus ride? What did she find out about the bus, and how did she save up the fare?

SOLUTION

Valli planned her ride carefully. She found out that the town was six miles away, the fare was thirty paise one way, and the trip took forty-five minutes, and that by paying another thirty paise she could return on the same bus. She learnt all this by listening to conversations and asking a few discreet questions.

She worked out that she could take the one-o'clock afternoon bus and be back home by about two forty-five, during the hours her mother napped from one to four. To save the sixty-paise fare, she thriftily saved every stray coin, resisting all temptations, including the merry-go-round at the village fair.

Answer: She learnt the fare, distance and timing by listening and asking, timed her trip to her mother's nap, and saved sixty paise coin by coin.

Q3 What kind of a person is Valli? To answer this question, pick out the following sentences from the text and fill in the blanks. The words you fill in are the clues to your answer. (i) "Stop the bus! Stop the bus!" And a tiny hand was raised _____. (ii) "Yes, I _____ go to town," said Valli, still standing outside the bus. (iii) "There's nobody here _____," she said haughtily. "I've paid my thirty paise like everyone else." (iv) "Never mind," she said, "I can _____. You don't have to help me." "I'm not a child, I tell you," she said, _____. (v) "You needn't bother about me. I _____," Valli said, turning her face toward the window and staring out. (vi) Then she turned to the conductor and said, "Well, sir, I hope _____."

SOLUTION

The blanks are filled from the text as follows:

(i) ...a tiny hand was raised "commandingly."
(ii) "Yes, I "simply have to" go to town."
(iii) "There's nobody here "who's a child.""
(iv) "I can "get on by myself."" ... she said "irritably."
(v) "I "can take care of myself.""
(vi) "...I hope "to see you again.""

These clues show that Valli is a bold, confident, self-reliant and determined girl. She is curious, independent, self-respecting, and does not like being treated as a child, yet she is also innocent and immature for her age.

Answer: The clues (commandingly, simply have to, who's a child, get on by myself, irritably, take care of myself, see you again) show Valli is bold, independent, self-reliant and determined.

Q4 Why does the conductor refer to Valli as 'madam'?

SOLUTION

The conductor, who was jolly and fond of joking, refers to Valli as 'madam' to tease her in a good-humoured way.

He is amused that a mere girl could pay her own fare and travel to the city all alone and behave in such a grown-up, self-important manner. He asks, "Do you think a mere girl could pay her own fare and travel to the city all alone?" and so mockingly treats her as a grown lady.

Answer: He teasingly calls her 'madam' because she behaves like a grown-up, travelling and paying her own fare alone.

Q5 Find the lines in the text which tell you that Valli was enjoying her ride on the bus.

SOLUTION

Several lines show Valli enjoying the ride:

"Valli devoured everything with her eyes." She stood on the seat and peered over the blind to see the canal, palm trees, mountains and green fields, and thought, "Oh, it was all so wonderful!"

"Suddenly Valli clapped her hands with glee" at the running cow, and "She laughed and laughed until there were tears in her eyes." On the way back, "Valli wasn't bored in the slightest and greeted everything with the same excitement she'd felt the first time."

Answer: Lines like "Valli devoured everything with her eyes," "Oh, it was all so wonderful!" and "clapped her hands with glee" show she enjoyed the ride.

Q6 Why does Valli refuse to look out of the window on her way back?

SOLUTION

On the way back, Valli saw the same young cow lying dead by the roadside, struck by some fast-moving vehicle. The creature that had been lovable and beautiful a little while ago had now lost its charm and its life and looked horrible and frightening.

She was overcome with sadness, and "the memory of the dead cow haunted her, dampening her enthusiasm." So she no longer wanted to look out of the window.

Answer: Because the sight of the same cow now lying dead saddened her and haunted her, killing her enthusiasm.

Q7 What does Valli mean when she says, "I was just agreeing with what you said about things happening without our knowledge."

SOLUTION

Valli's mother had been saying that there are so many things in the world that we cannot possibly know about, and that even when we do know something, we often cannot understand it completely.

By agreeing, Valli secretly means her own bus adventure. She had made the whole journey to town and back without her mother's knowledge, so it was one of those things that had happened without anyone knowing. She hides her secret smile, not wanting them to understand what she really means.

Answer: She is slyly hinting at her own secret bus journey, which happened without her mother's knowledge.

Q8 The author describes the things that Valli sees from an eight-year-old's point of view. Can you find evidence from the text for this statement?

SOLUTION

Yes, the author repeatedly describes sights as an eight-year-old would imagine them.

For example, "Trees came running towards them but then stopped as the bus reached them and simply stood there helpless for a moment by the side of the road before rushing away in the other direction." The bus "seemed on the point of gobbling up another vehicle," and the train grew from "a speck of a train... growing bigger and bigger."

Such childlike, imaginative descriptions clearly show Valli's eight-year-old point of view.

Answer: Yes; childlike images such as trees "running towards them" and the bus "gobbling up" vehicles reflect an eight-year-old's viewpoint.

Exercise 7.5 — Thinking about the Poem — The Tale of Custard the Dragon

Q1 Who are the characters in this poem? List them with their pet names.

SOLUTION

The characters in the poem are Belinda and her four pets.

The pets and their names are: the little black kitten named Ink; the little grey mouse called Blink; the little yellow dog called Mustard; and the little pet dragon called Custard. There is also a pirate who climbs in through the window.

Answer: Belinda; her kitten Ink, mouse Blink, dog Mustard and dragon Custard (plus a pirate).

Q2 Why did Custard cry for a nice safe cage? Why is the dragon called "cowardly dragon"?

SOLUTION

Custard cried for a nice safe cage because he was timid and easily frightened. Unlike the others, who boasted of their bravery, he wanted a safe place to hide from danger.

He is called the "cowardly dragon" because, in spite of having big sharp teeth, spikes, scales and daggers on his toes, he seemed afraid and kept asking for a safe cage. The others, Belinda, Ink, Blink and Mustard, mocked him for this apparent cowardice.

Answer: He cried for a cage because he seemed timid, and is called cowardly for wanting safety despite his fierce looks.

Q3 "Belinda tickled him, she tickled him unmerciful..." Why?

SOLUTION

Belinda tickled Custard unmercifully to tease and make fun of him because he was thought to be a coward who cried for a nice safe cage.

Since the dragon seemed cowardly, Belinda and the other pets did not take him seriously. They laughed at him, rudely called him "Percival," and made fun of his fearfulness by tickling and teasing him.

Answer: To tease and mock him because they thought he was a coward.

Q4 The poet has employed many poetic devices in the poem. For example: "Clashed his tail like iron in a dungeon" — the poetic device here is a simile. Can you, with your partner, list some more such poetic devices used in the poem?

SOLUTION

The poem is full of poetic devices:

Similes: "Belinda was as brave as a barrel full of bears," "Mustard was as brave as a tiger in a rage," "He went at the pirate like a robin at a worm," "snorting like an engine."

Alliteration (repetition of initial sounds): "Clashed his tail like irons in a dungeon," "a clatter and a clank," "brave as a barrel full of bears."

Onomatopoeia (sound words): "Meowch!", "Weeck!", "clatter," "clank." There is also repetition/refrain in "a nice safe cage" and "realio, trulio."

Answer: Similes ("brave as a barrel full of bears"), alliteration ("clatter and a clank"), onomatopoeia ("Meowch!", "Weeck!") and refrain.

Q5 Read stanza three again to know how the poet describes the appearance of the dragon.

SOLUTION

In stanza three the poet describes Custard as a fearsome-looking dragon.

He had "big sharp teeth, and spikes on top of him and scales underneath," a "mouth like a fireplace, chimney for a nose," and "realio, trulio daggers on his toes."

This description makes the dragon appear ferocious and dangerous, which is comically at odds with his timid, cowardly nature.

Answer: Stanza three shows Custard with sharp teeth, spikes, scales, a fiery mouth, a chimney-like nose and dagger-like toes — fierce in looks though timid in nature.

Q6 Can you find out the rhyme scheme of two or three stanzas of the poem?

SOLUTION

The poem is written in rhyming couplets, so the rhyme scheme of each stanza is aabb.

For example, in the first stanza "house" rhymes with "mouse" (a a) and "wagon"

rhymes with "dragon" (b b). In the second stanza "Ink" rhymes with "Blink" (a a) and "Mustard" rhymes with "Custard" (b b).

So the rhyme scheme throughout the poem is aabb.

Answer: The rhyme scheme is aabb (rhyming couplets) in each stanza.

Q7 Writers use words to give us a picture or image without actually saying what they mean. Can you trace some images used in the poem?

SOLUTION

The poet creates several vivid images:

"Mouth like a fireplace, chimney for a nose" and "daggers on his toes" give a picture of the dragon's fierce appearance. "Belinda was as brave as a barrel full of bears" pictures great courage.

"Ink and Blink chased lions down the stairs," "up jumped Custard, snorting like an engine," and "He went at the pirate like a robin at a worm" all paint lively images of action in the reader's mind.

Answer: Images like "mouth like a fireplace, chimney for a nose," "brave as a barrel full of bears" and "snorting like an engine" paint vivid pictures.

Q8 Do you find The Tale of Custard the Dragon to be a serious or a light-hearted poem? Give reasons to support your answer.

SOLUTION

The Tale of Custard the Dragon is a light-hearted, humorous poem, close to a parody of a heroic ballad.

The funny names of the pets (Ink, Blink, Mustard, Custard), the comic sound words ("Meowch!", "Weeck!"), and coined words like "realio, trulio" and "winda" create humour. The irony that the fierce-looking dragon is a coward while the boastful pets flee from the pirate is also comic.

Thus the poem entertains rather than deals with any serious theme, making it clearly light-hearted.

Answer: It is a light-hearted, humorous poem — shown by funny names, comic sound words and the irony of the brave-looking coward dragon.