

# The Snake and the Mirror

## Introduction

'*The Snake and the Mirror*' is a humorous story which was originally written in Malayalam by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. It has been translated by V. Abdulla. This story is about a doctor, a snake and a mirror. This story highlights the change in human nature when faced with crisis.

## Summary

A group of friends were discussing about snakes, when one of them, a homeopathy doctor, shared his experience. Some years back, on a hot summer night, at around ten o'clock, the doctor returned to his room after his meal at the restaurant. As he opened the door, he heard a noise. The doctor thought that it was made by the rats, who were frequent visitors to his humble abode. The doctor, at that time, lived in a small rented room which had a tiled roof with long supporting gables. It was an outer room with one wall facing the open yard. It was not even electrified. On entering the room he lighted a kerosene lamp and laid down on his bed, but he could not sleep. He got up and went out. But there was no wind. He came back into the room, sat down on the chair and began to read '*Materia Medica*, a book on homeopathy. While reading the book, the doctor looked into the mirror. At that time he gave much importance to human beauty. So, he started inspecting his face. He combed his hair and decides that he will shave regularly and support a thin moustache. Then, he starts making plans for his marriage. Just then he heard a dull thud as if a rubber tube had fallen to the ground. No sooner had he turned, than a fat snake wriggled to the back of the chair and landed on his shoulder. The doctor was petrified. The snake coiled around his left arm above the elbow. Its hood was spread out. Its head was hardly three or four inches from the doctor's face.

The doctor felt some pain in his left arm as the snake started tightening its grip. The doctor prayed to God. The snake turned its head. It looked into the mirror and saw its reflection. On seeing himself, the snake crept onto the table and moved towards the mirror. Perhaps it wanted to enjoy its reflection at closer quarters.

The doctor taking advantage of such a situation, ran to the house of his friend. On reaching there, he immediately rubbed oil all over himself and took a bath. The next morning he took his friend and one or two others to his room to move his things from there. But in the night some thief had stolen most of doctor's things except his dirty vest. The doctor said that he had not seen another snake which is taken in by its own beauty.

## Message

The story conveys the message that one should not be vain. It also brings forth the fact that the true nature of a human being comes forth only at the time of crisis.



**1. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:**

It was a hot summer night; about ten o'clock. I had my meal at the restaurant and returned to my room. I heard a noise from above as I opened the door. The sound was a familiar one. One could say that the rats and I shared the room. I took out my box of matches and lighted the kerosene lamp on the table.

The house was not electrified; it was a small rented room. I had just set up medical practice and my earnings were meagre. I had about sixty rupees in my suitcase. Along with some shirts and *dhotis*, I also possessed one solitary black coat which I was then wearing.

- (a) The narrator was familiar to the noise coming from above so he:
- (i) began to shout
  - (ii) went upstairs to see
  - (iii) did not react
  - (iv) called his family members
- (b) The doctor lighted the kerosene lamp with a match box as there was .....
- (c) State whether the given statement is True or False.  
The narrator was a famous doctor.
- (d) Complete the analogy with a word from the extract.  
familiar : known : : scarce : .....

**Answers**

- (a) (iii) did not react
  - (b) no light in his room
  - (c) False
  - (d) meagre
- 2. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:**
- I took off my black coat, white shirt and not-so-white vest and hung them up. I opened the two windows in the room. It was an outer room with one wall facing the open yard. It had a tiled roof with long supporting gables that rested on the beam over the wall. There was no ceiling. There was a regular traffic of rats to and from the beam. I made my bed and pulled it close to the wall. I lay down but I could not sleep. I got up and went out to the veranda for a little air, but the Wind God seemed to have taken time off.
- (a) The beam on which the gable was supported was:
- (i) full of rats
  - (ii) facing the garden
  - (iii) having tiles on it
  - (iv) going to be broken
- (b) The room that the narrator had taken on rent was on the .....
- (c) 'The Wind God seemed to have taken time off' means:
- (i) wind was not blowing
  - (ii) the narrator had no cooler in his room
  - (iii) the narrator was feeling very hot
  - (iv) the narrator had gone out to get some fresh air

**(d) Substitute the word 'regular' with one word similar in meaning in the following sentence:**

There was a regular traffic of rats to and from the beam.

**Answers**

- (a) (i) full of rats
- (b) outside of the house
- (c) (i) wind was not blowing
- (d) consistent

**3. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:**

I got up, paced up and down the room. Then another lovely thought struck me. I would marry. I would get married to a woman doctor who had plenty of money and a good medical practice. She had to be fat; for a valid reason. If I made some silly mistake and needed to run away she should not be able to run after me and catch me!

With such thoughts in my mind I resumed my seat in the chair in front of the table. There were no more sounds from above. Suddenly there came a dull thud as if a rubber tube had fallen to the ground.

- (a) The doctor sat down on the chair with the thoughts that he would:
- (i) marry a beautiful woman doctor
  - (ii) marry a fat girl with no medical practice
  - (iii) marry a rich, fat girl with a good medical practice
  - (iv) marry a woman having cats for a valid reason
- (b) The sudden sound made was felt like some ..... had fallen and the doctor did not bother about it.
- (c) Which of the following is similar in meaning to 'resumed'?
- (i) Recommenced
  - (ii) Halt
  - (iii) Cease
  - (iv) Obstructed
- (d) Complete the analogy with a word from the extract.  
pace : march : : foolish : .....

**Answers**

- (a) (iii) marry a rich, fat girl with a good medical practice
- (b) rubber tube
- (c) (i) Recommenced
- (d) silly

**4. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:**

I didn't jump. I didn't tremble. I didn't cry out. There was no time to do any such thing. The snake slithered along my shoulder and coiled around my left arm above the elbow. The hood was spread out and its head was hardly three or four inches from my face!

It would not be correct to say merely that I sat there holding my breath. I was turned to stone. But my mind was very active. The door opened into darkness. The room was surrounded by darkness. In the light of the lamp I sat there like a stone image in the flesh.



- (a) As the snake wrapped around the doctor's left arm, he was not only holding his breath but:
- he thought about what to do next
  - his mind was very active
  - had turned into a stone like a statue
  - sat on the chair like a statue
- (b) 'There was no time to do any such thing', means, all happened so fast that the narrator didn't have .....
- (c) The synonym of 'surrounded' is:
- unfenced
  - free
  - encircled
  - exposed
- (d) State whether the given statement is True or False. The snake wrapped itself on the doctor's left arm like a coil.

### Answers

- (a) (iii) had turned into a stone like a statue  
 (b) any time to react  
 (c) (iii) encircled  
 (d) True

5. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

I felt then the great presence of the creator of this world and this universe. God was there. Suppose I said something and he did not like it...I tried in my imagination to write in bright letters outside my little heart the words, 'O God'.

There was some pain in my left arm. It was as if a thick leaden rod... no, a rod made of molten fire... was slowly but powerfully crushing my arm. The arm was beginning to be drained of all strength. What could I do?

At my slightest movement the snake would strike me! Death lurked four inches away. Suppose it struck, what was the medicine I had to take? There were no medicines in the room. I was but a poor, foolish and stupid doctor. I forgot my danger and smiled feebly at myself.

- (a) The doctor felt himself a poor, foolish and stupid doctor because he was:
- near to his death
  - feeling weak and helpless at that moment
  - bitten by the snake and there was no medicine
  - coiled by the snake and was praying to God
- (b) As the doctor was in trouble, he started feeling the presence of .....
- (c) The antonym of 'feebly' is:
- mildly
  - strongly
  - weekly
  - little
- (d) Complete the analogy with a word from the extract.  
 lurked : sneaked :: exhausted : .....

### Answers

- (a) (ii) feeling weak and helpless at that moment  
 (b) God  
 (c) (ii) strongly  
 (d) drained

6. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

'I ran and ran till I reached a friend's house. Immediately I smeared oil all over myself and took a bath. I changed into fresh clothes. The next morning at about eight-thirty I took my friend and one or two others to my room to move my things from there. But we found we had little to carry. Some thief had removed most of my things. The room had been cleaned out! But not really, the thief had left behind one thing as a final insult!'

'What was that?' I asked.

The doctor said, 'My vest, the dirty one. The fellow had such a sense of cleanliness...!'

- (a) The thief had stolen most of the things from doctor's room except the vest because:
- he didn't see it
  - it was dirty
  - he wanted to insult the doctor
  - he didn't require it
- (b) On reaching the friend's house, the doctor took an oil massage, took bath and .....
- (c) Choose the word which is opposite in meaning to the word 'removed'.
- Detached
  - Inserted
  - Ejected
  - Eliminated
- (d) The doctor did not know if the snake had chased him or not because he did not .....

### Answers

- (a) (ii) it was dirty  
 (b) wore fresh clothes  
 (c) (ii) Inserted  
 (d) look behind him



### Short Answer Type Questions

- Q 1. What did the narrator do for his livelihood? What was his condition like in the beginning?

Ans. The narrator was a homeopathy doctor. In the beginning, his earnings were meagre. He had been able to save only sixty rupees. He had some shirts and dhotis. He only had one black coat. He was forced to live in a small rented room which was not even electrified.

- Q 2. What sound did the doctor hear? Why did he think the sound was familiar?

Ans. The doctor heard the sound of the snake. He thought it was the sound of rats. He called it a familiar sound because he had heard that sound many times before.

- Q 3. What two 'important' and 'earth-shaking' decisions did the doctor take while he was looking into the mirror?

Ans. While the doctor was looking into the mirror, he took the following two important and earth-shaking decisions:

- He would shave daily and grow a thin moustache to look more handsome.
- He would always keep the attractive smile on his face to look more handsome.



**Q 4. What kind of a woman did the doctor want to marry?**

**Ans.** The doctor wanted to marry a fat woman doctor who had plenty of money and a good medical practice. She had to be fat so that she won't be able to catch him if he ran after doing something foolish.

**Q 5. What happened when the doctor was sitting on his chair?**

**Ans.** As the doctor was sitting on his chair, he heard a dull thud sound as if a rubber tube had fallen on the ground. He turned around to take a look. No sooner had he turned, than a fat snake wriggled over the back of the chair and landed on the doctor's shoulder and coiled around his left arm above the elbow.

**Q 6. How did the doctor react when he encountered the snake?**

**Ans.** The doctor was scared but he showed great presence of mind. He neither jumped nor cried. He sat on the chair holding his breath. His body was as still as a stone but his mind was active.

**Q 7. When did the doctor felt the presence of God?**

**Ans.** The doctor felt the presence of God when the snake was coiled on doctor's arm with its hood spread out and its head at hardly three or four inches from his face. The doctor thought that he might have said something which God did not like and therefore, he was being punished for his sins.

**Q 8. What did the doctor think when the snake was looking into the mirror?**

**Ans.** The doctor thought that the snake was admiring its beauty. He thought that if it was a male snake then, he might be thinking of growing a moustache. If it was a female then, it might be thinking about using eye shadow, mascara or to wear a bindi on her forehead.

**Q 9. 'I looked into the mirror and smiled,' says the doctor. A little later he says, 'I forgot my danger and smiled feebly at myself.' What is the doctor's opinion about himself when: (i) he first smiles, and (ii) he smiles again? In what way do his thoughts change in between, and why?**

**Ans.** (i) The doctor's opinion about himself when he first smiles is that he is handsome. He also thinks that since he is a doctor as well as a bachelor, therefore he should make efforts to look more handsome.

(ii) When he smiles again, then it was a helpless smile. The snake had coiled itself on his arm and death lurked just four inches away. The doctor realised that if the snake bit him then he had no medicine in his room. He thought that he was a poor, foolish and stupid doctor and this thought, which was in sharp contrast to his earlier thought, made him smile feebly.

His thoughts changed in between the two smiles because he has faced death.



## Long Answer Type Questions

**Q 1. The snake has been compared to three objects. What are they? How are the objects similar to the snake?**

**Ans.** The snake has been compared to three objects; namely, a rubber tube, a thick leaden rod and a rod made of molten fire. There is a close similarity between these things and the snake.

The snake falls on the floor with a dull thud. When a rubber tube falls on the ground, it also produces a similar sound. Hence, a snake is compared to a rubber tube.

When the snake tightens its grip around the doctor's arm, it is compared to a thick leaden rod. Lead is heavy, so is the snake. The doctor felt the load of the snake like that of a lead.

Thirdly, the snake is compared to a rod made of molten fire. The doctor felt that the snake was slowly but powerfully crushing his arm. He felt that the strength of his arm was being drained off and a rod of molten fire had coiled itself on his arm.

Hence, all the three comparisons are apt and most suitable.

**Q 2. Describe the role of the mirror in the story 'The Snake and the Mirror'.**

**Ans.** The mirror plays a very important role in the story 'The Snake and the Mirror'. It attracts both, the doctor and the snake.

The doctor looks into the mirror. He admires himself. He decides to shave daily and to grow thin moustache to look more handsome. He also finds his smile attractive so he decides to always keep that attractive smile on his face.

When the snake looks into the mirror, it sees its reflection. It leaves the doctor and sits on the table looking in the mirror. It forgets the doctor. The doctor makes good use of this opportunity and escapes quietly thus saving his life.

Thus, the mirror plays a very important role in the story.

**Q 3. Why does the doctor think of himself as poor, foolish and stupid?**

**Ans.** Prior to his encounter with the snake, the doctor admires his reflection in the mirror. He thinks that he is handsome and decides that in future he will shave daily, support a moustache and even keep smiling, to appear more handsome. But after the snake coils himself on his arm, he realises that he has no protection from him. In spite of his being a doctor, there was not even one medicine in his room which he can take on being bitten by the snake. This vulnerability makes him realise that he is poor, stupid and foolish.