

Practice Comprehension 1- Pieces Of Silver

- 1 When, at five minutes to ten, the bell started to ring, a pall of silence settled over the noisy playfield. Reluctantly games of cricket and pick-ups were abandoned; climbers came slithering down from the old tamarind tree on the school grounds or dropped quickly from its branches, making haste to clear their mouths of the green, acid fruit they had been enjoying. The school of four hundred odd boys assembled in ranks across the pebbled playfield, waiting for inspection before they could file into the red-walled school. Some glanced apprehensively at their dusty, naked feet, while others tried feverishly to make their nails and hands presentable. 5
- 2 The teachers came from the schoolroom in a leisurely bunch, laughing and joking in quiet voices as they sauntered towards the boys. The stout, pompous, acting Headmaster came to the window that opened off his platform on to the playfield, still making an unnecessary clangour with his bell, and looked sternly over the assembled rows of scholars. 10
- 3 The smaller boys straightened and stiffened under his cold gaze.
- 4 As the teachers passed slowly along the ranks the boys turned their hands back and forth and grinned to show their teeth. A number of boys who failed to pass the teachers' inspection of health were hauled out of the ranks and ordered in to the acting Head. There were three strokes with his cane of plaited tamarind stalks for unclean hands; four for improperly brushed teeth and six for an uncombed head. 15
- 5 After the inspection the boys filed quietly into school and to their different classes. When you could have heard a pin drop the schoolmaster rapped out the order: 'Shun!' The entire school of boys - flung their hands to their foreheads and chanted: 'Good morning to our teachers.' 20
- 6 The schoolmaster announced a hymn, and emitting an untrue, faltering note, invited the scholars to take it. The boys rendered a rich improvement of the sound, and when the schoolmaster flung his hand up and stamped his foot they tore full-throatedly into the hymn. At the conclusion of the hymn the boys sang, 'Amen,' bringing their hands up to their faces in an attitude of prayer. The schoolmaster submitted a long, impromptu supplication, rambling and ill-worded, at the end of which the boys said 'Amen' once more. Again, the schoolmaster ordered: 'Shun!' The boys came to attention, and school was ready to begin. 25
- 7 But this morning the schoolmaster did not order the school to be seated as was the normal custom after prayers. Instead, he fixed the school with his cold eyes and said: 'Those who have brought contributions to Mr Megahey's purse will give them to their teachers.' Hands delved into pockets, while, in the lower classes, a number of small, moist fists closed still more tightly over the pieces of silver which had been wrapped in paper and pressed carefully into their palms. The teachers drew chairs and stools to their respective desks and sat down. Each produced a foolscap sheet on which were recorded the names of those of his class who had contributed to the purse for the retiring Head, Mr Megahey. 30 35
- 8 No commendation seemed due to the donor of threepence. A sixpence was held up between the thumb and forefinger of the receiving teacher and displayed before the class, while the name of the boy who had presented it was repeated some half a dozen times. Still more ado was made of the bestower of a shilling. In addition to being patted on the shoulder and beamed on by his teacher, and basking in the envy of his class, he was sent up to be thanked by the acting Head who shook his hand heartily and showed the gleaming gold of his teeth, and who, with a grave gesture, bestowed upon him the fag-end of a stick of chalk with the injunction that it be not used about the school. The receipt of the contributions was over, and the last boy had returned to his seat. On the platform the acting Head cleared his throat for attention and said: 'Those who have contributed to our retiring Head's purse will now sit. Those who have not will remain standing.' 40 45
- 9 When the scuffling tumult of a school of boys taking their seats had subsided, here and there about the schoolroom a scattered few stood with downcast eyes. The acting Head was a squat jug of a man, fierce-eyed and unsmiling. He now sauntered along the edge of his platform and fixed, one after the other, each of the standing boys with a look of complete scorn. Then, mopping his brow, he ordered those who had brought no gifts to come up and mount the platform where the dozen - of them were lined up. Taking a stick of chalk, he scrawled an X upon the forehead of each boy, to the huge delight of the rest of the school. When he had imprinted this symbol of shame upon the brow of each unhappy child, he turned to the laughing school, and holding his hand up to check the gusts of merriment, said: 'Look! They bear the symbol of ingratitude!' 50
- 10 The cruel laughter went up to the rafters. The schoolmaster permitted it free swell for a few moments before raising his hand once more. 'Ingratitude,' he went on, 'ingratitude, more strong than human hand... Come, Clement. You're in the fourth. Step forward and let's hear Mark Antony on ingratitude. Surely our old Head would expire if he knew that in his school he harboured so many thankless Brutuses. 55
- 11 Come, Clement, let us hear you recite the piece, and well? Clement stepped forward, shabby and barefoot, and with eyes downcast, began to recite the passage in a choked, monotonous tone. Now and again the schoolmaster threatened him with his rod, exhorting him to speak up. The boy would then raise his voice and quicken his words under the threat of the lash, but soon his voice sank back and the recitation resumed its muttered vein. 60 65
- 12 At last, however, the passage was finished. The acting Headmaster then spent some minutes more making the hapless boys the laughingstock of their school-friends. Only when he thought the school on the verge of becoming unmanageable did he dismiss the tormented boys with the words: Now go to your places. But bear in mind, every morning, until you show some appreciation for your resigning Headmaster, you shall come up here and stand in shame before the whole school." 70

Practice Comprehension # 2- The Lost Lagoon

- 1 Yellow and black, it was hiding among the sun-bleached branches at the water's edge. Our boat nudged closer to the island. I lifted my camera and pulled the creature's beady eyes into focus. Then, in a quarter of a second, measured by the camera's rapid frame-burst, the anaconda snapped open its jaws, sprang forward, and hissed in my face. In the Esteros del Iberá, I learned, it's hard to avoid getting up close and personal with nature.
 - 2 Our guide, Maximo, was smiling. There was no danger, he told me. Anacondas aren't poisonous - they squeeze their victims to death. I can't have looked convinced because he quickly edged the boat away from the bank, and soon we were threading our way through the streams and inlets that weave an unknowable pattern through the embalsados - hundreds of floating islands that bump and skitter across the surface of this vast lagoon system, in a kind of slowmotion game of dodgems.
 - 3 The Esteros del Iberá is the least known of Argentina's natural wonders. Its 63 lagoons are spread across an area the size of Wales and mark the former course of the Paraná River. In these vast wetlands an improbably rich ecosystem thrives, but until recently it received only a passing mention in many guidebooks. Only now, with a flurry of low-rise, eco-friendly development, is the Esteros finally opening up to tourism.
 - 4 To reach the Esteros from Buenos Aires we took an overnight coach to the dusty town of Mercedes. After a further hour's journey in a 4x4 truck down the dirt track otherwise known as 'provincial route 40' and as a red sun crawled over the horizon, we approached the makeshift bridge that serves as a gateway to the Laguna Iberá. Iberá means 'bright water' in Guaraní, and as we rattled over the bridge, the surroundings fell away as if we were driving across a gleaming ocean.
 - 5 The sweeping lawns of the Posada de la Laguna were dotted with a selection of multicoloured birds. One had a shock of bright red head feathers, as if it had been drowned headfirst in a pot of Day-Glo paint. The birds barely noticed us; it was hard not to trip over them as we rolled our luggage through the freshly cut grass. Later, at breakfast, I turned to see a pair of hummingbirds on the veranda. They would return every morning
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- 6** We were staying in the small town of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, an ideal base for exploring the Esteros. The Posada was built in 1997, and in recent years a number of other lodges that share its emphasis on conservation and tradition have opened nearby. But none has such a privileged position, right on the water.
- 7** Walking to the small jetty, it was difficult to see where the Posada's four acres of gardens ended and the water began, so dense was the covering of aguape and irupé: water hyacinths and lilies. As Máximo readied the boat, he told us that these plants spread so quickly he has to clear a new path through the water each morning.
- 8** We pushed away from the jetty, thrilled by a glimpse of a basking yacaré. Soon, sightings of this South American alligator would prompt little more than a nod of recognition. It seemed that every few metres you could spot a leathery snout and pair of prehistoric yellow eyes poking through the water.
- 9** The yacaré feast on the local fish. Fat and happy, they pose little threat to humans. And some say it's OK to swim, as long as you don't mind the odd nibble from the palometas, a type of piranha found in these parts. I decided that any swimming would be confined strictly to the hotel pool.
- 10** Due to their relatively small size, the yacaré are generally not considered to be fatally dangerous to humans.
- 11** When the Esteros became a natural reserve in 1983, hunting was banned and indigenous Guaranis like Máximo retrained as guides. Each day we explored a secluded new site offering an uncanny array of river otters, bizarre spiders, carpinchos, yacarés, snakes, butterflies and howler monkeys. We would hear rumours of a beautiful rare deer that constantly seemed to elude us. And then there were the birds. Almost 400 species call these marshes home. Some are difficult to miss, such as the chaja, which resembles an ugly turkey and emits a gurgling scream. Others take a little searching out: kingfishers, heron, ibis and eagles.
- 12** The lagoon system is so vast we rarely saw another boat. The wildlife here works in shifts, so when the daytime gang clocks off, many rarer creatures show their faces. Back among the water lilies where we had spent our first afternoon, we continued our search for the elusive marsh deer. Here the islands had
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rearranged themselves so extravagantly that, for the first time, even Máximo looked a little confused. As dusk turned to night and the darkness became inky black, he flicked on a powerful torch.

13 There was a movement in the reeds. We edged closer. The torch picked out a pair of eyes. And then, finally, there it was. A marsh deer standing glorious in the landscape, the furry tufts of its ears lit up by the tungsten glow of the torch.

It turned its gaze towards us for a moment and then, with a twitch of the nose, disappeared into the darkness. It had been worth the wait.

Question 1:

a) From paragraphs 1 and 2, give two facts that the writer gives about the anaconda. [1]

b) From paragraph 2, 'I can't have looked convinced because he quickly edged the boat away from the bank', suggest how do you think the writer must have felt. [1]

c) From paragraph 2, explain using your own words what the writer means by, "weave an unknowable pattern". [2]

d) By referring to paragraph 3: -i- Give two reasons why the writer says that the Esteros del Iberá is 'the least known of Argentina's natural wonders'. [2]

-ii- Explain, how the Esteros del Iberá was formed. [1]

e) What made the lodge in Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, in which the writer stayed, different from other lodges in the region? [1]

f) By referring closely to paragraph 9, explain, using your own words, what the writer says about swimming in the Esteros. [2]

g) Using your own words, explain what you learn about Máximo from paragraph 11. [1]

h) -i- Which word in paragraph 12 tells you that the marsh deer was difficult to find? [1]

-ii- Why do you think Máximo looked confused while searching for it? [1]

i) Explain, using your own words, the different feelings of the writer, during his visit. Give three details from the text to support your answer. [3]

Question 2:

a) Explain why the writer uses the word 'drowned' rather than the word 'dipped' in the expression 'One had a shock of bright red head feathers, as if it had been drowned headfirst in a pot of Day-Glo paint.' [1]

b) What two impressions does the writer want to convey to the reader in the sentence: Some are difficult to miss, such as the chaja, which resembles an ugly turkey and emits a gurgling scream. Others take a little searching out: kingfishers, heron, ibis and eagles. [2]

c) What does the writer want to suggest about the animals by using the words, 'uncanny array' in the expression, 'a secluded new site offering an uncanny array of river otters, bizarre spiders, carpinchos, yacarés, snakes, butterflies and howler monkeys' (paragraph 11) [2]

d) What does the writer want to suggest to us at this point in the story in paragraph 13, “There was a movement in the reeds. We edged closer. The torch picked out a pair of eyes. And then, finally, there it was. A marsh deer standing glorious in the landscape, the furry tufts of its ears lit up by the tungsten glow of the torch.” [1]

e) Give one example from the passage of how the writer has used language effectively to describe the situation, “The lagoon system is so vast we rarely saw another boat..with a twitch of the nose, disappeared into the darkness. It had been worth the wait.” (Paragraph 12 and 13). Explain what impression the writer creates in the expression that you have identified. [3]

