

CHAPTER 03

Iswaran the Storyteller

by RK Laxman

Chapter Sketch

'Iswaran the Storyteller' is a story by RK Laxman. It revolves around a junior construction supervisor, Mahendra and his domestic help Iswaran. He is fond of telling exaggerated stories to his master. One evening Iswaran tells Mahendra a ghost story which Mahendra does not believe. But, on waking up at night, he thinks that he saw a ghost and he gets disturbed decides to leave the place the next day.

About the Characters

Mahendra He is a credible construction supervisor who gets scared by a ghost story told by Iswaran.

Iswaran He is a wonderful cook, domestic help and fascinating storyteller. He scares his own master with his ghost story.

Summary of the Chapter

Job of Mahendra

Mahendra was a junior construction supervisor in a firm. His job was to supervise the work at a construction site. Once the job would be over, he used to be shifted to another construction site. Thus, the nature of his job was to move from one place to another place.

Iswaran: Amazing Servant and Entertainer

Mahendra's needs were simple as he was a bachelor. He had kept a servant named Iswaran for domestic work. Iswaran followed Mahendra without any complaint. He cooked for Mahendra, washed his clothes and cleaned his shelter. In leisure time, Iswaran read Tamil thriller stories and this affected him so much that even a small incident like a fallen tree appeared to him a bushy beast. Iswaran described everything in detail and weaved a new story full of thrill and horror to Mahendra every day. He played the role of a TV in providing entertainment to Mahendra.

Iswaran Narrates Story of a Tusker

Once, Iswaran told Mahendra a story about his schooldays describing a tusker (wild elephant) and how he behaved when he got mad. The tusker escaped out of a timber yard, destroying everything that came in his way. It entered Iswaran's school. Everyone there was terrified but not Iswaran. He grabbed a cane from a teacher's hand and faced the mad tusker boldly. He hit sharply with the cane onto the third toe of one foot of the elephant and it shivered and collapsed. At this point, Iswaran would leave the story and Mahendra remained in a dangling situation.

Iswaran Narrates Story of a Ghost and Mahendra's Reaction

On another occasion, one auspicious day, he weaved a story about a ghost woman holding a foetus in her hands on a full moon night. Mahendra asked him to stop telling him such nonsense stories as Mahendra did not believe in ghosts and there are no such type of figures.

Mahendra's Encounter with Ghost

After a few days, Mahendra was woken up by some noise near his window sill during the night. First he thought that it was some sort of small animal like a cat, but the noise became louder and louder.

When he peeped through the window, he thought that he saw a cloudy figure clutching a bundle near his window sill. Mahendra could not sleep any more that night. In the morning, Iswaran smilingly asked about the sound and the woman ghost. He also complained about how Mahendra had chided him the other day. Mahendra was so upset that he resigned his site job immediately.

» Chapter Highlights

- 1 Mahendra, who was a junior construction supervisor in a firm, moved from site to site along with his cook Iswaran.
- 2 Iswaran cooked for Mahendra, washed his clothes and cleaned his shelter. In leisure time, Iswaran read Tamil thriller stories.
- 3 This made Iswaran a good storyteller because he described everything in detail and weaved a new story full of thrill and horror for Mahendra every day.
- 4 Iswaran told Mahendra a story about his schooldays describing how he had tamed a tusker (wild elephant) which had damaged much property in his school.
- 5 On an auspicious day, Iswaran weaved a story about seeing a ghost woman holding a foetus in her hand on a full moon night where they were living.
- 6 Mahendra asked him to stop telling him such stories as Mahendra did not believe in ghosts.
- 7 After a few days, Mahendra was woken up by moaning sounds near his window sill during the night.
- 8 When he looked out, he thought that he saw a cloudy figure clutching a bundle nearby. Mahendra could not sleep any more that night.
- 9 In the morning, Iswaran asked Mahendra whether he had seen the ghost. Mahendra got upset and resigned his site job immediately as he did not want to stay there any longer.

Word Meanings

The given page nos. correspond to the pages in the prescribed textbook.

Word	Meaning
PAGE 12	
keep an eye on	look after
coming up	being constructed

Word	Meaning
PAGE 13	
ill-equipped	not having proper facilities
makeshift	temporary
uncomplainingly	without any protest
conjure up	make
thriller	novel with an exciting plot
running to	consisting of
hold in thrall	captivate attention
sprawled	lie, spread out
PAGE 14	
mahout	person who controls an elephant
prologue	introduction
tusker	elephant with big tusks
emulation	imitation
smash	break something noisily
flatten	to level something
depredations	destruction/damage
not a soul	nobody
menacingly	frighteningly
trumpeted	cried loudly (for elephant)
PAGE 15	
revive	bring back to consciousness
shrug casually	raise shoulders uncaringly
recounting	telling
credible	can be believed
inimitable	typical
more than make up for	replace
culinary skills	cooking ability
garish	detailed and showy
reverie	daydreaming
PAGE 16	
matted	tangled in a thick mass
figment	made up
retired	went to sleep
unease	anxiety
PAGE 17	
ghost	spirit of dead
sea of darkness	total darkness
prowling	move in a quiet manner
guttural	sound produced from back of throat
feline	like a cat
panting	breathing with short quick breaths
ghastly	causing horror or fear
subconscious	part of mind which he was unaware of

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NCERT FOLDER

(Here we have covered questions given in the NCERT textbook along with their answers.)

Thinking About It (Page 18)

1 In what way is Iswaran an asset to Mahendra?

Or Why was Iswaran an asset to Mahendra?

Or Mention any two qualities of Iswaran which made him an asset to Mahendra.

Or Why was Iswaran called Mahendra's asset?

Or What sets Iswaran apart from other domestic helps?

Ans. Iswaran was a good domestic assistant for Mahendra. Apart from cooking and doing household chores, he was a great entertainer for his master. He was good at managing resources as he could find vegetables out of nowhere. Also, he never complained while accompanying his master.

2 How does Iswaran describe the uprooted tree on the highway? What effect does he want to create in his listeners?

Or How did Iswaran the storyteller describe the uprooted tree?

Ans. Iswaran describes the uprooted tree on the highway with eyebrows suitably arched (turned) and hands held out in a dramatic way. He would begin by saying that the road was deserted and he was all alone. Suddenly, he spotted something that looked like an enormous bushy beast lying sprawled across the road. He was half inclined to turn and go back. But, as he came closer he saw that it was a fallen tree, with its dry branches spread out. The effect he wants to create is suspense and a surprise ending to every small incident that he narrates to his listeners specially to his master.

3 How does he narrate the story of the tusker? Does it appear to be plausible?

Or How did Iswaran make himself the hero in the elephant story?

Or How did Iswaran manage to bring down the mad elephant?

Or How does Iswaran describe the story of the tusker? Does it appear to be plausible?

Or According to Iswaran how did he tackle the elephant in the school building?

Ans. He started the story of the elephant by giving a prologue in which he called elephants 'huge well-fed beasts.' He said that after escaping from the timber yard, the elephant started roaming about, stamped on bushes and tore up wild creepers. It then came to the main road of the town and smashed all the stalls selling fruits, mud pots and clothes. It then entered a school ground where the children were playing. It pulled out the football goal-post, tore down the volleyball net, flattened the drum kept for water and uprooted the shrubs.

All the teachers and students were so afraid that they climbed up to the terrace of the school building.

According to Iswaran, he was studying in the junior class at that time. He grabbed a cane from the hands of one of the teachers and ran into the open. The elephant continued grunting and stamping its feet. It looked frightening. However, he moved slowly towards it. When the elephant was ready to rush towards him, he moved forward and struck its third toe nail. It looked stunned and then collapsed.

This story does not appear to be plausible (believable).

4 Why does the author say that Iswaran seemed to more than make up for the absence of a TV in Mahendra's living quarters?

Ans. The author says so because Iswaran provided a great company to Mahendra. He would chat with Mahendra at night when he returned from his work. Iswaran would also entertain Mahendra by telling stories. Thus, with Iswaran around Mahendra never felt bored and never felt the necessity of having a TV for entertainment.

5 Mahendra calls ghosts or spirits a figment of the imagination. What happens to him on a full moon night?

Ans. Mahendra calls ghosts or spirits a figment of the imagination because Iswaran informed him that they were living on a burial site and kept narrating him stories of various ghosts he himself had encountered.

On one full moon night, Mahendra was woken up from his sleep by a low moan (crying in pain) close to his window. At first, he thought that it was a cat prowling around for mice. But, the sound was too deep and guttural (husky) for a cat. He resisted looking outside as he did not want to witness a sight that might stop his heartbeat. But, the crying became louder and less subtle. He could not resist the temptation any more. Lowering himself to the level of the windowsill, he looked out at the white sheet of moonlight outside. There, not too far away, was a dark cloudy form clutching (holding) a bundle. He broke into a cold sweat and fell back on the pillow, panting.

6 Can you think of some other ending for the story?

Ans. The story could have ended on a more positive note. Instead of resigning his job, Mahendra could have been shown as a courageous man and proving the ghost theory wrong. Another ending can be of both Mahendra and Iswaran leaving the place together and in turn continuing their bond which is depicted earlier in the story. Iswaran has been explained as a man of all seasons for Mahendra.

7 Is Iswaran a fascinating storyteller? Discuss with your friends the qualities of a good storyteller. Try to use these qualities and tell a story.

Ans. Yes, Iswaran is a fascinating storyteller. He knows how to build up suspense in his stories. He uses dramatic gestures to make his stories sound realistic.

A good storyteller should have the following qualities:

- (i) He should have good oratorical skills, acting out what he is telling.
- (ii) He should be able to vary the tone of his voice according to the situation.
- (iii) He should be able to create and maintain the interest of the listeners through the use of suspense.
- (iv) He should have a vivid imagination to think up interesting stories.
- (v) He should have a sense of humour which he should use effectively for making his stories enjoyable.

Tell a story: Do it yourself

Exam Practice

Extract Based Questions

[4 Marks each]

Read the following extracts carefully and choose the correct option.

1 He had to keep moving from place to place every now and then as ordered by his head office: from a coal mining area to a railway bridge construction site, from there after a few months to a chemical plant which was coming up somewhere.

- Who is 'he' in the above extract?
 - Mahendra
 - Iswaran
 - The ghost
 - The moon
- Why did 'he' have to keep moving from place to place every now and then?
 - Because he liked doing so
 - Because he wanted to experiment
 - Because his parents were unwell
 - Because of his job profile
- What word in the extract is a synonym of 'factory'?
 - Mining area
 - Site
 - Plant
 - Industry
- What does 'every now and then' mean?
 - Occasionally
 - Often
 - Always
 - Regularly

Ans. (i) (a) Mahendra (ii) (d) Because of his job profile
(iii) (c) Plant (iv) (b) Often

2 "The road was deserted and I was all alone. Suddenly I spotted something that looked like an enormous bushy beast lying sprawled across the road."

- Who is speaking these words in the above extract?
 - Iswaran
 - The ghost
 - The tusker
 - Mahendra
- What was the 'enormous bushy beast' actually?
 - The tusker
 - The ghost
 - The shadow of the moon
 - A fallen tree
- Find a word in the extract which is a synonym of 'noticed'.
 - Spotted
 - Spotted
 - Deserted
 - Sprawled
- What does 'deserted' mean?
 - Without any animals
 - Without any ghosts
 - Without any people
 - With a lot of people

Ans. (i) (a) Iswaran (ii) (d) A fallen tree
(iii) (b) Spotted (iv) (c) Without any people

3 "It came into the main road and smashed all the stalls selling fruits, mud pots and clothes. People ran helter-skelter in panic!"

- Who is speaking these words to whom in the above extract?
 - Mahendra to Iswaran
 - The tusker to Iswaran
 - Iswaran to the fallen tree
 - Iswaran to Mahendra
- Who is 'it' referred to by the speaker in the extract?
 - A fallen tree
 - A tusker
 - A ghost
 - A bus
- Find a word in the extract which means the same as 'broken violently into pieces'.
 - Wretched
 - Gashed
 - Smashed
 - Stalled
- What does 'helter-skelter' mean?
 - Slowly and in all directions
 - Quickly and to the North
 - Quickly and in all directions
 - Slowly and to the South

Ans. (i) (d) Iswaran to Mahendra
(ii) (b) A tusker
(iii) (c) Smashed
(iv) (c) Quickly and in all directions

4 "I am not easily frightened by these things, sir. I am a brave fellow."

- Who is speaking these words to whom in the above extract?
 - The tusker to Iswaran
 - The tusker to Mahendra
 - Mahendra to Iswaran
 - Iswaran to Mahendra
- What are 'these things' referred to by the speaker?
 - Seeing a tusker at night
 - Seeing an old woman at night
 - Seeing a few ghosts during the day
 - Seeing some ghosts during the night
- Which word in the extract is a synonym of 'person'?
 - Lad
 - Fellow
 - Chap
 - Man
- What part of speech is 'easily'?
 - Adverb
 - Verb
 - Adjective
 - Noun

Ans. (i) (d) Iswaran to Mahendra
(ii) (d) Seeing some ghosts during the night
(iii) (b) Fellow (iv) (a) Adverb

Short Answer (SA) Type Questions

[2 Marks each]

- 1 Why did Iswaran want to cook something special for dinner?

Or Why did Iswaran want to make something special for dinner?

Ans. Iswaran wanted to make something special for dinner because that day was an auspicious day. According to tradition, various delicacies are prepared to feed the spirits of the ancestors on this auspicious day. Iswaran believed in all these hence he wanted so.

- 2 What were Iswaran's duties in Mahendra's house?

Or Who was Iswaran? What all he did for his master?

Ans. Iswaran was Mahendra's cook. He cooked for him, washed his clothes and kept his house clean. Besides, he kept Mahendra entertained at night with his imaginative stories. He was a substitute for the TV. Also, he was a man of all seasons for him.

- 3 Why Mahendra had to keep moving from one place to another?

Ans. Mahendra was a junior supervisor in a firm which offered supervisors on hire at various types of construction sites. His job was to keep an eye on the activities at the work site. As one site's work was over, he moved to another site. Thus, he had to keep moving from place to place.

- 4 What made Iswaran so imaginative and a good narrator?

Ans. Imagination is an outcome of deep thinking, sharp insight and extensive (wide) reading. Iswaran loved reading very much and he never missed any chance of reading. Iswaran used to read popular Tamil thrillers in his spare time which helped his imagination to grow. So, he was able to become imaginative and a good narrator.

- 5 How did Iswaran show his usefulness to the narrator?

Ans. Iswaran showed his usefulness to the narrator by somehow getting vegetables and cooking ingredients even when no shops were there for miles around. He could also prepare most delicious dishes with fresh vegetables soon after the arrival at a new site.

- 6 What destruction did the elephant cause in the town?

Ans. The elephant caused major destruction in the town by breaking tree branches and fences, smashing (destroying) fruit stalls, and entering the school playground by breaking a brick wall. There, he pulled out a football goal post, tore down the volleyball net and flattened the water drum.

- 7 Why did Mahendra become fond of Iswaran?

Ans. Mahendra became fond of Iswaran because Iswaran was a resourceful person. Besides being a good cook, Iswaran could arrange things even at desolate (far off) places while taking care of Mahendra's requirements. He was also a very imaginative storyteller, keeping Mahendra entertained in the evenings.

- 8 Do you think the ghost Mahendra saw on the night of the full moon was a real ghost?

Ans. No, the ghost was the creation of an affected mind. Iswaran had affected Mahendra's thinking by telling him the ghost story. When Mahendra rebuked him for believing in ghosts, he felt offended. To prove that he was right, he probably posed as a ghost. That was how he could now say that Mahendra had seen a ghost at night.

- 9 What impact did Iswaran's story of a female ghost have on Mahendra?

Ans. The impact of Iswaran's story was that Mahendra avoided looking out of the window when the moon was full. He went to bed with some unease. He peered into the darkness to make sure there was no movement of dark shapes outside. In the end, he was compelled to leave that place.

- 10 When did Mahendra expect Iswaran to be bad-tempered? Did it really happen?

Ans. Mahendra expected Iswaran to be bad-tempered after Mahendra had scolded him for believing in ghosts and spirits. However, next morning, Mahendra found Iswaran as cheerful and talkative as ever. Iswaran never mind the rebukes of his master and remained devoted to him.

- 11 Why did Mahendra listen to Iswaran's stories without interrupting him?

Ans. Mahendra listened to Iswaran's stories without interrupting him because of the interesting and inimitable (special) way that the stories were told. He had replaced the entertainment value of a TV in Mahendra's living quarters. He, himself, was good enough for the TV.

- 12 What did Mahendra decide after he had seen the ghost?

Or Why did Mahendra decide to leave the haunted place?

Ans. Mahendra saw cloudy figure outside the window. He was convinced (sure) that there were ghosts there. He was scared and did not want to live there any longer. So he resigned his job to stay away from the 'haunted' place.

Long Answer (LA) Type Questions

[8 Marks each]

1 Iswaran was a fascinating storyteller. What other skills he had? How was he an asset to Mahendra?

Or How was Iswaran, the cook, an asset to Mahendra?

Ans. When a person with all the resources comes handy then it is really an asset. An asset can be used as and when needed by the owner of it. Such was the case with Iswaran who was a man of all seasons for the owner Mahendra. He was so resourceful that wherever Mahendra went, he took Iswaran along with him. Iswaran had excellent cooking abilities. Besides, he could find vegetables and other cooking ingredients (material) even at isolated spots. He would cook food for Mahendra and was an asset for him because he looked after all of the Mahendra's household needs like washing his clothes and keeping his living quarters clean. Besides, Iswaran was a fascinating storyteller too. He would read a lot of story books and narrate incidents in a very vivid (clear) manner to Mahendra. He would perform all kinds of actions and gestures (signs) to make the story more interesting. Mahendra loved his stories and his excellent way of telling stories.

2 What qualities of Iswaran make him a fascinating storyteller?

Or How can you say that Iswaran was a fascinating storyteller?

Ans. The qualities of Iswaran that make him a fascinating storyteller are as follows:-

- (i) He gives an imaginative descriptions of events.
- (ii) He uses dramatic language and gestures to describe any event.
- (iii) He changes a simple event into a story full of suspense.
- (iv) He creates surprising endings or unexpected twists and turns in his narration.
- (v) All his stories have some elements of adventure, horror and suspense in them.

3 'Iswaran was a good cook as well as a good storyteller.' Elaborate with the help of examples.

Or Write a brief character sketch of Iswaran.

Ans. When a person with all the resources comes handy then it is really an asset. An asset can be used as and when needed by the owner of it. Such was the case with Iswaran who was a man of all seasons for the owner Mahendra. He was so resourceful that wherever Mahendra went, he took Iswaran along with him.

Iswaran, the cook of Mahendra, had an amazing capacity to produce vegetables and cooking ingredients seemingly out of nowhere. He looked after all of Mahendra's domestic needs satisfactorily, including his evening entertainment. He could cook delicious dishes. He was a good storyteller and his descriptions were influenced by the Tamil thriller novels he read. Even while narrating the smallest of incidents, he would try to make the account thrilling and full of suspense. Mahendra enjoyed listening to him because of the way he told his stories. Thus, Iswaran was really an asset for Mahendra.

4 If you had been Mahendra, how would you have reacted when you saw the female ghost?

Ans. I am a believer in reality. What is obscure (unclear) to me, I would not believe it any way. Reality is important to me over fictions. A figment (illusion) can't make me believe what I can't see in the frames of reality. Above all ghosts are none other than the creations of human mind. It is the impression and outcome of a tired mind and exhausted thoughts. If I had been Mahendra, an educated person who does not believe in ghosts, I would feel that it was a human being out there. I would have gone outside to understand the reality. I could have called out for Iswaran if I felt that some thief was prowling (crawling) around. Next morning also, I would have discussed the matter with Iswaran to find out whether he had any hand in what had happened. I would never have started believing in ghosts because of such an isolated appearance which also was not clarified.

5 How did Iswaran build up his ghost story?

Ans. Iswaran did not start his stories right away. Instead, he prepared the ground by cooking something special for the 'spirits' of his ancestors. Then, he gave some background information like the site being a graveyard earlier. All this was to build up suspense in the story. He also interrupted (stopped in between) his stories to go about his domestic work which left his listener hanging. When he resumed his story, he gave some more information about ghosts by telling that he had seen a woman ghost carrying a foetus with her. Thus, he built up the suspense and probably 'acted' as the woman ghost to make his story appear true. He was an amazing story teller as well as an actor. He had both the skills to a level next to everything. When he mixed his narratives with the acts then it became the core element of reality though it remained fictitious in nature. He was just a make-up for the TV for Mahendra. Undoubtedly, he was a great storyteller.

Self Assessment

Extract Based Question

Read the following extract carefully and choose the correct option.

- 1 He would miraculously conjure up the most delicious dishes made with fresh vegetables within an hour of arriving at the zinc-sheet shelter at the new workplace.
- (i) Who is referred to as 'he' in the above extract?
- (a) Iswaran (b) Ravindra (c) Mahendra (d) The ghost
- (ii) What is referred to as 'the new workplace'?
- (a) Mining area (b) Site (c) Industry (d) Plant
- (iii) Which word in the extract mean the same as 'lodging'?
- (a) Zinc-sheet (b) Shed (c) Shatter (d) Hut
- (iv) What does 'conjure up' mean?
- (a) Cook (b) Imagine (c) Narrate (d) Make

Short Answer (SA) Type Questions

- 2 Describe Iswaran's daily routine.
- 3 How does Iswaran's description of the uprooted tree on the highway affect his listeners?
- 4 How did Iswaran control the wild elephant?
- 5 How did Iswaran describe the female ghost to Mahendra?
- 6 Why did Mahendra expect that Iswaran will sulk?
- 7 How did Iswaran's reading of Tamil thrillers affect his behaviour?
- 8 Was Iswaran's story of how he tackled the wild elephant real? Why or why not?
- 9 How did Iswaran's story of the female ghost affect Mahendra's behaviour?
- 10 What values in Mahendra's character impress us the most and why?
- 11 Why did Mahendra resign his post?

Long Answer (LA) Type Questions

- 12 List the events that occurred after the elephant entered the school playground till the time it collapsed.
- 13 Describe Iswaran's style of telling stories which entertained his listeners.
- 14 Do you agree that Iswaran was a great cook as well as a good entertainer? Justify with examples.
- 15 How can you explain the female ghost that Mahendra thought he saw? Suggest two alternatives.
- 16 Could the story have ended differently after Mahendra thought that he 'saw' a female ghost? Give details of how you would have ended the story.