1

A SIMPLE PHILOSOPHY

Seathl - Chief Seattle

About the Author and Text

In 1854, Seathl, the chief of the Native American Suquamish tribe of the State of Washington, addressed the letter reproduced below to President Franklin Pierce of the United States. The pioneering white people were taking over more and more of the North American continent from the Native Indian tribes as they progressed westward. This letter expresses the 'simple philosophy' of Chief Seathl's people. It also describes the decline and resignation of the Native American people (earlier known as 'Red Indians'), and indirectly warns the white people of the future environmental and social consequences of human recklessness.

These days we speak of living with nature and the need to maintain an environmental balance almost as though these were new ideas. The truth is that many aboriginal cultures have always lived in harmony with nature, while their more 'civilised' and 'developed' counterparts have destroyed the earth in attempting to mine its wealth. Nothing illustrates this fact better than this letter.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN . . .

1. Who was Chief Seathl? Whom do you understand the letter was addressed to? Why was it written?
2. Think of two points that the chief could have included in the letter.

♦

The Great Chief in Washington[1] sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The Great Chief also sends us words of friendship and good will. This is kind of him, since we know that he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer, for we know if we do not do so, the white man may come with guns and take our land. What Chief Seathl says, the Great Chief in Washington can count on as truly as our white brothers can count on the return of the seasons. My words are like the stars—they do not set.

How can you buy or sell the sky—the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? We will decide in our time. Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his fathers' graves behind and he does not care. He kidnaps the earth from his children. He does not care. His fathers' graves and his children's birthright is forgotten. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red man. But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage and does not understand . . .

There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect wings. But perhaps because I am a savage and do not understand—the clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of the **whippoorwill**[2] or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond, and the smell of the wind itself cleansed by the mid-day rain, or scented with pine. The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath—the beasts, the trees, and man. The white man

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1 *The Great Chief in Washington:* reference to President Franklin Pierce, fourteenth president of the United States (1853–57)

2 *whippoorwill:* a nocturnal bird commonly found in North America

does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the smell.

If I decide to accept your offer, I will make one condition. The white men must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. I am a savage and I do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the **prairie**[3], left by the white men who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive. What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit; for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever **befalls**[4] the earth, befalls the sons of the earth.

Our children have seen their fathers humbled in defeat. Our warriors have felt shame. And after defeat they turn their days to idleness and **contaminate**[5] their bodies with sweets, food and drink. It matters little where we pass the rest of our days—they are not many. A few more hours, a few more winters and none of the children of the great tribes that once lived on the earth, or that roamed in small bands in the woods, will be left to mourn the graves of a people once as powerful and hopeful as yours.

One thing we know which the white man may one day discover. Our God is the same God. You may think now that you own him as you wish to own our land. But you cannot. He is the God of men. This earth is precious to him. And to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. The whites, too, shall pass—perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the sacred corner of the forest heavy with scent of many men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires, where is the **thicket**[6]? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the **swift**[7] and the **hunt**[8]—the end of living and the beginning of dying.

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[3] *prairie:* a treeless grassy plain
[4] *befall:* happen to
[5] *contaminate:* make impure in a bad way; make something harmful, especially by the addition of some unwanted substance
[6] *thicket:* a dense growth of bushes
[7] *swift:* a small bird with pointed wings that can fly very fast
[8] *hunt:* a chase or search for a wild animal or bird

We might understand if we knew what it was that the white man dreams, what hopes he describes to his children on long winter nights, what visions he burns into their minds, so that they will wish for tomorrow. But we are savages. The white man's dreams are hidden from us. And because they are hidden, we will go on our own way. If we agree, it will be to secure the reservation you have promised. Then perhaps we may—live out our brief days as we wish. When the last red man has vanished from the earth, and the memory is only a shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people for they love this earth as the new born loves its mother's heartbeat. If we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land, as it is when you take it, and with all your strength, with all your might, and with all your heart—preserve it for your children, and love it as God loves us all. One thing we know—our God is the same God. This earth is precious to Him. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny.

Points to Ponder

In the context of the many pandemics and environmental calamities we face today, the Chief's words sound prophetic. He says, 'When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the sacred corner of the forest heavy with scent of many men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires, where is the thicket ? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the swift and the hunt—the end of living and the beginning of dying.' Environmentalists have long warned the world of the dangers of environmental degradation and the rate at which humans have been consuming its resources. It is time we took firm action to protect our environment. As Chief Seathl suggests, we will find answers and solutions in our environment: '. . . love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land, as it is when you take it, and with all your strength, with all your might, and with all your heart—preserve it for your children.'

COMPREHENSION

A. *Answer the following questions in one sentence each.*

1. On what condition does Chief Seathl agree to accept the offer of the president?
2. What is the 'smoking iron horse'?
3. When will men 'die from great loneliness of spirit'?
4. When do the warriors turn to idleness and contaminate their bodies with sweets, food and drink?

B. *Answer the following questions in about 30–40 words.*

1. Why does the chief set a condition on accepting the president's offer?
2. 'Like a man dying for many days . . . ': What does the chief mean by this?
3. What does the Native American chief mean when he says 'I am a savage and do not understand'?
4. How does the chief compare the cruelty of the white people towards animals as well as towards the Native Americans?
5. In the last paragraph, the chief states, 'The white man's dreams are hidden from us.' What makes him say so?

C. *Answer the following questions in about 150 words.*

1. Describe the way the Native Americans lived close to nature. Contrast this with the white people's attitude towards nature.
2. Which is the better approach to nature: that of the Native Americans or that of the white people? Why do you think so?.
3. The chief repeats 'I am a savage and do not understand . . . ' several times in his letter: Who is/ are the real savage(s)? Do you think the chief is being sarcastic in his attitude towards so-called civilised people?
4. The chief rues the damage caused in many ways by the white people to nature and fellow beings. What are the important ones that he mentions? Why do you consider them important?

2

THE HOMECOMING

Rabindranath Tagore

About the Author

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is a renowned Bengali poet, musician and playwright. The first Asian to win the Nobel Prize, he is widely known to have modernised Bengali literature by liberating it from rigid classical structures. He is best known for his collections of poetry, *Gitanjali* in particular. *Ghare Baire*, *Jogajog* and *Gora* are some of his famous novels focusing on issues that range from Indian nationalism and religious zeal to enslavement of women and the bondage of tradition and custom. Most of his work was originally written in Bengali although he later translated some of it to English and made it more accessible to an international audience. His writing conveys sympathy for the poor and upholds universal human values. Tagore also wrote musical dramas and two autobiographies. He also started an experimental school at Santiniketan, where he tried his Upanishadic ideals of education.

About the Story

The story, 'The Homecoming', recounts the tragic tale of Phatik. The story moves from a light-hearted and playful tone to a heart-wrenching climax, as it tells the boy's journey from his village home and family to the city, Calcutta. Phatik is a mischievous boy, and he has come to dislike his mother's efforts to discipline him. So, when the opportunity comes to go to Calcutta with his uncle, he jumps at it. But life in the city, in the midst of strange, jeering school mates and an indifferent aunt, turns out to be tragic. Phatik now learns the value of what he has left behind, and yearns to go back. A story of growing-up, 'The Homecoming' contrasts the innocence and frivolity of youth with the tragic seriousness of unpredictable occurrences.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN . . .

1. Think of an unforgettable incident from your childhood. Do you think the incident shaped your life in any way?
2. Look up the word 'nostalgia' in a dictionary. Use online sources to learn the etymological roots of the word.

♦

Phatik Chakravorti was **ringleader**[1] among the boys of the village. A new mischief got into his head. There was a heavy log lying on the **mud-flat**[2] of the river waiting to be shaped into a **mast**[3] for a boat. He decided that they should all work together to shift the log by main force from its place and roll it away. The owner of the log would be angry and surprised, and they would all enjoy the fun. Every one **seconded**[4] the proposal, and it was carried unanimously.

But just as the fun was about to begin, Makhan, Phatik's younger brother, **sauntered**[5] up, and sat down on the log in front of them all without a word. The boys were puzzled for a moment. He was pushed, rather **timidly**[6], by one of the boys and told to get up but he remained quite unconcerned. He appeared like a young philosopher meditating on the **futility**[7] of games. Phatik was furious. 'Makhan,' he cried, 'if you don't get down this minute I'll thrash you!'

Makhan only moved to a more comfortable position.

Now, if Phatik was to keep his regal dignity before the public, it was clear he ought to carry out his threat. But his courage failed him at the crisis. His fertile brain, however, rapidly seized upon a new manoeuvre which would discomfit his brother and afford his followers an added amusement. He gave the word of command to roll the log and Makhan over together. Makhan heard the order, and made it a point of honour to stick on. But

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1 *ringleader:* leader of a small group
2 *mud-flat:* a flat area of mud at the side of a river
3 *mast:* a vertical pole on a boat for supporting sails
4 *second:* to agree to something or support a proposal
5 *saunter:* to walk slowly in a leisurely manner
6 *timidly:* in a shy or unsure manner
7 *futility:* uselessness

he overlooked the fact, like those who attempt earthly fame in other matters, that there was **peril**[8] in it.

The boys began to heave at the log with all their might, calling out, 'One, two, three, go,' At the word 'go' the log went; and with it went Makhan's philosophy, glory and all.

All the other boys shouted themselves **hoarse**[9] with delight. But Phatik was a little frightened. He knew what was coming. And, sure enough, Makhan rose from Mother Earth blind as Fate and screaming like the **Furies**[10]. He rushed at Phatik and scratched his face and beat him and kicked him, and then went crying home. The first act of the drama was over.

Phatik wiped his face, and sat down on the edge of a sunken barge on the river bank, and began to chew a piece of grass. A boat came up to the landing, and a middle-aged man, with grey hair and dark moustache, stepped on shore. He saw the boy sitting there doing nothing, and asked him where the Chakravortis lived. Phatik went on chewing the grass, and said: 'Over there,' but it was quite impossible to tell where he pointed. The stranger asked him again. He swung his legs to and fro on the side of the barge, and said; 'Go and find out,' and continued to chew the grass as before.

But now a servant came down from the house, and told Phatik his mother wanted him. Phatik refused to move. But the servant was the master on this occasion. He took Phatik up roughly, and carried him, kicking and struggling in impotent rage.

When Phatik came into the house, his mother saw him. She called out angrily: 'So you have been hitting Makhan again?'

Phatik answered **indignantly**[11]: 'No, I haven't; who told you that?'

His mother shouted: 'Don't tell lies! You have.'

Phatik said suddenly: 'I tell you, I haven't. You ask Makhan!' But Makhan thought it best to stick to his previous statement. He said: 'Yes, mother. Phatik did hit me.'

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8 *peril:* danger

9 *hoarse:* deep and harsh sounding as if from shouting, illness or emotion

10 *Furies:* Greek goddesses who brought danger to men

11 *indignantly:* angered at something unjust or wrong

Phatik's patience was already exhausted. He could not hear this injustice. He rushed at Makhan, and hammered him with blows: 'Take that' he cried, 'and that, and that, for telling lies.'

His mother took Makhan's side in a moment, and pulled Phatik away, beating him with her hands. When Phatik pushed her aside, she shouted out: 'What are you little villain! would you hit your own mother?'

It was just at this critical juncture that the grey-haired stranger arrived. He asked what was the matter. Phatik looked sheepish and ashamed.

But when his mother stepped back and looked at the stranger, her anger was changed to surprise. For she recognised her brother, and cried: 'Why, Dada! Where have you come from?' As she said these words, she bowed to the ground and touched his feet. Her brother had gone away soon after she had married, and he had started business in Bombay. His sister had lost her husband while he was in Bombay. Bishamber had now come back to Calcutta, and had at once made enquiries about his sister. He had then hastened to see her as soon as he found out where she was.

The next few days were full of rejoicing. The brother asked after the education of the two boys. He was told by his sister that Phatik was a **perpetual**[12] nuisance. He was lazy, disobedient, and wild. But Makhan was as good as gold, as quiet as a lamb, and very fond of reading, Bishamber kindly offered to take Phatik off his sister's hands, and educate him with his own children in Calcutta. The widowed mother readily agreed. When his uncle asked Phatikif he would like to go to Calcutta with him, his joy knew no bounds, and he said; 'Oh, yes, uncle!' In a way that made it quite clear that he meant it.

It was an immense relief to the mother to get rid of Phatik. She had a **prejudice**[13] against the boy, and no love was lost between the two brothers. She was in daily fear that he would either drown Makhan some day in the river, or break his head in a fight, or run him into some danger or other. At the same time she was somewhat distressed to see Phatik's extreme eagerness to get away.

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12 *perpetual:* continuing forever or indefinitely

13 *prejudice:* finding fault with or disliking a person or thing without careful or impartial consideration of the situation

Phatik, as soon as all was settled, kept asking his uncle every minute when they were to start. He was **on pins and needles**[14] all day long with excitement, and lay awake most of the night. He bequeathed to Makhan, in perpetuity, his fishing-rod, his big kite and his marbles. Indeed, at this time of departure his generosity towards Makhan was unbounded.

When they reached Calcutta, Phatik **made the acquaintance of**[15] his aunt for the first time. She was by no means pleased with this unnecessary addition to her family. She found her own three boys quite enough to manage without taking anyone else. And to bring a village lad of fourteen into their midst was terribly upsetting. Bishamber should really have thought twice before committing such an **indiscretion**[16].

In this world of human affairs there is no worse nuisance than a boy at the age of fourteen. He is neither **ornamental**[17], nor useful. It is impossible to shower affection on him as on a little boy; and he is always getting in the way. If he talks with a childish lisp he is called a baby, and if he answers in a grown-up way he is called **impertinent**[18]. In fact any talk at all from him is **resented**[19]. Then he is at the unattractive, growing age. He grows out of his clothes with indecent haste; his voice grows hoarse and breaks and quavers; his face grows suddenly **angular**[20] and **unsightly**[21]. It is easy to excuse the shortcomings of early childhood, but it is hard to tolerate even unavoidable lapses in a boy of fourteen. The lad himself becomes painfully **self-conscious**[22]. When he talks with elderly people he is either **unduly**[23] forward, or else so unduly shy that he appears ashamed of his very existence.

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14 *on* pins and needles: in an agitated state of suspense
15 *make* the acquaintance of: to get to know
16 *indiscretion:* an unwise action
17 *ornamental:* here, good-looking
18 *impertinent:* improperly cheeky or bold; disrespectful
19 *resent:* to feel bitter towards someone or about something
20 *angular:* having angles or corners
21 *unsightly:* unpleasant to look at
22 *self-conscious:* here, excessively and uncomfortably conscious of your appearance or behaviour
23 *unduly:* unnecessarily

Yet it is at this very age when in his heart of hearts a young lad most craves for recognition and love; and he becomes the devoted slave of anyone who shows him consideration. But none dare openly love him, for that would be regarded as undue indulgence, and therefore bad for the boy. So, what with scolding and chiding, he becomes very much like a stray dog that has lost his master.

For a boy of fourteen his own home is the only Paradise. To live in a strange house with strange people is little short of torture, while the height of bliss is to receive the kind looks of women, and never to be slighted by them.

It was anguish to Phatik to be the unwelcome guest in his aunt's house, despised by this elderly woman, and slighted, on every occasion. If she ever asked him to do anything for her, he would be so overjoyed that he would overdo it; and then she would tell him not to be so stupid, but to get on with his lessons.

The cramped atmosphere of neglect in his aunt's house oppressed Phatik so much that he felt that he could hardly breathe. He wanted to go out into the open country and fill his lungs and breathe freely. But there was no open country to go to. Surrounded on all sides by Calcutta houses and walls, be would dream night after night of his village home, and long to be back there. He remembered the glorious meadow where he used to fly his kite all day long; the broad river-banks where he would wander about the day singing and shouting for joy; the narrow brook where he could go and dive and swim at any time he liked. He thought of his band of boy companions over whom he was **despot**[24]; and, above all, the memory of that tyrant mother of his, who had such a prejudice against him, occupied him day and night. A kind of physical love like that of animals; a longing to be in the presence of the one who is loved; an inexpressible **wistfulness**[25] during absence; a silent cry of the inmost heart for the mother, like the lowing of a calf in the twilight; this love, which was almost an animal instinct, agitated the shy, nervous, lean, uncouth and ugly boy. No one could understand it, but it preyed upon his mind continually.

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[24] *despot:* dictator

[25] *wistfulness:* a feeling of sadness because you are thinking about something that is impossible or in the past

There was no more **backward**[26] boy in the whole school than Phatik. He gaped and remained silent when the teacher asked him a question, and like an overladen ass patiently suffered all the blows that came down on his back. When other boys were out at play, he stood wistfully by the window and gazed at the roofs of the distant houses. And if by chance he saw children playing on the open terrace of any roof, his heart would ache with longing.

One day he summoned up all his courage, and asked his uncle: 'Uncle, when can I go home?'

His uncle answered; 'Wait till the holidays come.' But the holidays would not come till November, and there was a long time still to wait.

One day Phatik lost his lesson-book. Even with the help of books he had found it very difficult indeed to prepare his lesson. Now it was impossible. Day after day the teacher would cane him unmercifully. His condition became so abjectly miserable that even his cousins were ashamed to own him. They began to **jeer**[27] and insult him more than the other boys. He went to his aunt at last, and told her that he had lost his book.

His aunt pursed her lips in contempt, and said: 'You great **clumsy**[28], country **lout**[29]. How can I afford, with all my family, to buy you new books five times a month?'

That night, on his way back from school, Phatik had a bad headache with a fit of shivering. He felt he was going to have an attack of malarial fever. His one great fear was that he would be a nuisance to his aunt.

The next morning Phatik was nowhere to be seen. All searches in the neighbourhood proved futile. The rain had been pouring in torrents all night, and those who went out in search of the boy got **drenched**[30] through to the skin. At last Bishamber asked help from the police.

At the end of the day a police van stopped at the door before the house. It was still raining and the streets were all flooded.

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26 *backward:* here, unsophisticated and not very clever
27 *jeer:* to mock at, to make fun of
28 *clumsy:* here, showing a lack of skill or aptitude
29 *lout:* an awkward stupid person
30 *drenched:* very wet

Two constables brought out Phatik in their arms and placed him before Bishamber. He was wet through from head to foot, muddy all over, his face and eyes **flushed**[31] red with fever, and his limbs all trembling. Bishamber carried him in his arms, and took him into the inner apartments. When his wife saw him, she exclaimed; 'What a heap of trouble this boy has given us. Hadn't you better send him home?'

Phatik heard her words, and sobbed out loud: 'Uncle, I was just going home; but they dragged me back again.'

The fever rose very high, and all that night the boy was **delirious**[32]. Bishamber brought in a doctor. Phatik opened his eyes flushed with fever, and looked up to the ceiling, and said vacantly: 'Uncle, have the holidays come yet? May I go home?'

Bishamber wiped the tears from his own eyes, and took Phatik's lean and burning hands in his own, and sat by him through the night. The boy began again to mutter. At last his voice became excited: 'Mother,' he cried, 'don't beat me like that! Mother! I am telling the truth!'

The next day Phatik became conscious for a short time. He turned his eyes about the room, as if expecting someone to come. At last, with an air of disappointment, his head sank back on the pillow. He turned his face to the wall with a deep sigh.

Bishamber knew his thoughts, and, bending down his head, whispered: 'Phatik, I have sent for your mother.' The day went by. The doctor said in a troubled voice that the boy's condition was very critical.

Phatik began to cry out; 'By the mark!—three **fathoms**[33]. By the mark—four fathoms. By the mark—.' He had heard the sailor on the river-steamer calling out the mark on the **plumb-line**[34]. Now he was himself **plumbing**[35] an unfathomable sea.

Later in the day Phatik's mother burst into the room like a whirlwind, and began to toss from side to side and moan and cry in a loud voice.

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31 *flushed:* red in appearance

32 *delirious:* disturbed state of mind characterised by restlessness

33 *fathom:* here, a unit of measurement (equal to 6 feet) for water depth

34 *plumb-line:* a line with a plumb attached to it, used for finding the depth of water or determining the vertical on an upright surface

35 *plumb:* measure the depth of something

Bishamber tried to calm her agitation, but she flung herself on the bed, and cried: 'Phatik, my darling, my darling.'

Phatik stopped his restless movements for a moment. His hands ceased beating up and down. He said: 'Eh?'

The mother cried again: 'Phatik, my darling, my darling.'

Phatik very slowly turned his head and, without seeing anybody, said: 'Mother, the holidays have come.'

Points to Ponder

Lady Bird Johnson, former first lady of the United States, once said, 'Children are likely to live up to what you believe of them.' Children often crave attention and recognition from the adults around them. They need love, care and encouragement to realise their potential. In the story, Phatik feels abandoned by his mother. He is lost in the hubbub of a city where no one has any time or sympathy for him. He craves for his aunt's attention and for friendship with his peers. A little more care and empathy would have ensured a better fate for Phatik.

COMPREHENSION

A. Answer the following questions in one sentence each.

1. What did Phatik and his friends do to Makhan?
2. How did Makhan react to this?
3. How did Phatik behave with the middle-aged man who asked him for directions?
4. Who were the members of Bishamber's family?
5. How did Bishamber's wife react upon learning that Phatik would be staying with them?
6. Who did Phatik confess to when he lost his lesson-book?

B. Answer the following questions in about 30–40 words.

1. Why had Bishamber come in search of his sister?
2. Why did Bishamber offer to take Phatik to Calcutta?
3. Was Phatik happy to go to Calcutta? Why?

4. How and why did Phatik's attitude to his brother change after he learnt that he would be leaving for Calcutta?
5. Describe the relationship between Phatik and Bishamber's wife.
6. Why did Phatik decide to leave his uncle's house?
7. What was Phatik's reaction when his mother reached his bedside?

C. *Answer the following questions in about 150 words.*

1. Write a note on Phatik's experiences at school.
2. Did Phatik miss his village? Illustrate with examples from the story.
3. Compare Phatik's life in the village with his life in the city.
4. With the story as your reference, discuss the situation of a young, care-free boy of fourteen caught in the expectations of his elders and the personal circumstances of his life.
5. How did the general atmosphere of neglect affect Phatik, and how did he get into the bad books of his teacher?
6. Comment on the significance of the line, 'Mother, the holidays have come.'

3

THE VERGER

W. Somerset Maugham

About the Author

William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) was a prominent figure in English literature in the first half of the twentieth century. He was born in Paris, and educated at Canterbury (England) and Heidelberg (Germany). Though he qualified for the medical profession, Maugham gave up the idea of becoming a doctor after the success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, in 1897. He soon established his reputation as a novelist, short-story writer and playwright. The best known among his novels are *Of Human Bondage* (1915), which is semi-autobiographical in nature, *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), which is the fictionalised life of a painter, *Cakes and Ale* (1930), and *The Razor's Edge* (1944), the story of a young man's search for God and belief.

About the Story

In most of his stories Maugham appears as a cynic, laughing at the follies of his fellow men. However, his stories do not lack compassion for human weakness. In 'The Verger', a story taken from the collection of stories called *Cosmopolitan*, Maugham ridicules one of modern man's most cherished institutions: education. The verger may not have the benefit of a formal education, but he displays unusual problem solving skills. Instead of getting bogged down in the problem and wallowing in self-pity he turns calamity – in his case a loss of job – into an opportunity for growth and development.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN . . .

Discuss these questions in groups of four or five. The group leader may then present the answers to the class.

1. What is the name given to a person who rings bells in churches?

2. Why does everyone want to have a secure job?
3. When job security is under threat what do people do?
4. When do drastic changes appear in an organisation?
5. What happens when employees are unable to update their skills?

♦

There had been a christening that afternoon at St Peter's, Neville Square, and Albert Edward Foreman still wore his **verger's**[1] gown. He wore it with **complacence**[2], for it was the dignified symbol of his office, and without it (when he took it off to go home) he had the **disconcerting**[3] sensation of being somewhat insufficiently clad. He took pains with it; he pressed it and ironed it himself. During the sixteen years he had been verger of this church he had had a succession of such gowns, but he had never been able to throw them away when they were worn out. The complete series, neatly wrapped up in brown paper, lay in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe in his bedroom.

The verger waited for the vicar to have finished in the **vestry**[4] so that he could tidy up in there and go home. Presently he saw him walk across the **chancel**[5], **genuflect**[6] in front of the high altar and come down the aisle; but he still wore his **cassock**[7].

'What's he **'anging about**[8] for?' the verger said to himself. 'Don't 'e know I want my tea?'

The vicar had been but recently appointed, a red-faced energetic man in the early forties, and Albert Edward still regretted his predecessor, a clergyman of the old school who preached leisurely sermons in a silvery voice and dined out a great deal with his more aristocratic parishioners. He liked

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1 *verger:* attendant in a church
2 *complacence:* self-satisfaction
3 *disconcerting:* upsetting
4 *vestry:* a room in a church where sacred vessels and vestments are kept or meetings are held
5 *chancel:* part of the church where the altar stands
6 *genuflect:* bend the knees and bow in church or before a religious superior or image
7 *cassock:* gown worn by a priest when he performs religious ceremonies in the church
8 *anging about:* (hanging about) staying on

things in church to be just so, but he never fussed. He was not like this new man who wanted to **have his finger in every pie**[9]. But Albert Edward was tolerant. St Peter's was in a very good neighbourhood and the parishioners were a very nice class of people. The new vicar had come from the East End and he couldn't be expected to fall in all at once with the discreet ways of his fashionable **congregation**[10].

'All this **'ustle**[11],' said Albert Edward. 'But give 'im time, 'e'll learn.'

When the vicar had walked down the aisle so far that he could address the verger without raising his voice more than was becoming in a place of worship he stopped.

'Foreman, will you come into the vestry for a minute? I have something to say to you.'

'Very good, sir.'

The vicar waited for him to come up and they walked up the church together.

The vicar preceded Albert Edward into the vestry. Albert Edward was a trifle surprised to find the two **church-wardens**[12] there. He had not seen them come in. They gave him pleasant nods.

'Good afternoon, my lord. Good afternoon sir,' he said to one after the other.

They were elderly men, both of them, and they had been church-wardens almost as long as Albert Edward had been verger. Albert Edward faced them, and wondered with slight uneasiness what was the matter.

'He's been **naggin'**[13] them, he 'as,' said the verger to himself. 'He's jockeyed them into doin' something, but they don't 'alf like it. That's what it is, you mark my words.'

But his thoughts did not appear on Albert Edward's clean-cut and distinguished features. He stood in a respectful but not obsequious attitude. He had been in service before he was

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9 *(has) his finger in every pie:* interfered in every matter

10 *congregation:* people who take part in religious worship

11 *'ustle:* (hustle) noisy activity

12 *Church-wardens:* elected representatives of the people worshipping in a church; they help in the administration

13 *nagging:* worrying

appointed to his ecclesiastical office, but only in very good houses, and his deportment was irreproachable. He was tall, spare, grave and dignified. He looked, if not like a duke, at least like an actor of the old school who specialised in dukes' parts. He had tact, firmness, and self-assurance. His character was **unimpeachable**[14].

The vicar began briskly.

'Foreman, we've got something rather unpleasant to say to you. You've been here a great many years and I think his lordship and the general agree with me that you've fulfilled the duties of your office to the satisfaction of everybody concerned.'

The two church-wardens nodded.

'But a most extraordinary circumstance came to my knowledge the other day and I felt it my duty to impart it to the church-wardens. I discovered to my astonishment that you could neither read nor write.'

The verger's face betrayed no sign of embarrassment.

'The last vicar knew that, sir,' he replied. 'He said it didn't make no difference. He always said there was a great deal too much education in the world for 'is taste.'

'It's the most amazing thing I ever heard,' cried the general. 'Do you mean to say that you've been verger of this church for sixteen years and never learned to read or write?'

'I went into service when I was twelve, sir. The cook in the first place tried to teach me once, but I didn't seem to have the knack for it, and then what with one thing and another I never seemed to 'ave the time. I've never really found the want of it. I think a lot of these young fellows waste a rare lot of time reading when they might be doing something useful.'

'But don't you want to know the news?' said the other church-warden. 'Don't you ever want to write a letter?'

'No, me lord, I seem to manage very well without. And of late years now they've all these pictures in the papers I get to know what's goin' on pretty well. My wife's quite a scholar and if I want to write a letter she writes it for me.'

'Well, Foreman, I've talked the matter over with these gentlemen and they quite agree with me that the situation is

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[14] *unimpeachable:* that which cannot be questioned or doubted

impossible. At a church like St Peter's, Neville Square, we cannot have a verger who can neither read nor write.'

Albert Edward's thin, **sallow**[15] face reddened and he moved uneasily on his feet, but he made no reply.

'Understand me, Foreman, I have no complaint to make against you. You do your work quite satisfactorily; I have the highest opinion both of your character and of your capacity; but we haven't the right to take the risk of some accident that might happen owing to your lamentable ignorance.'

'But couldn't you learn, Foreman?' asked the general.

'No, sir, I'm afraid I couldn't now. You see I'm not as young as I was and if I couldn't seem able to get the letters in me 'ead when I was a **nipper**[16] I don't think there's much chance of it now.'

'We don't want to be harsh with you, Foreman,' said the vicar. 'But the church-wardens and I have quite made up our minds. We'll give you three months and if at the end of that time you cannot read and write I'm afraid you'll have to go.'

Albert Edward had never liked the new vicar. He'd said from the beginning that they'd made a mistake when they gave him St Peter's.

He wasn't the type of man they wanted with a **classy**[17] congregation like that. And now he straightened himself a little. He knew his value and he wasn't going to allow himself to be put upon.

'I'm very sorry, sir, I'm, afraid it's no good. I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. I've lived a good many years without knowin' 'ow to read and write, and if I could learn now I don't know as I'd want to.'

'In that case, Foreman, I'm afraid you must go.'

'Yes, sir, I quite understand. I shall be 'appy to 'and in my resignation as soon as you've found somebody to take my place.'

But when Albert Edward with his usual politeness had closed the church door behind the vicar and the two church-wardens he could not sustain the air of unruffled dignity with which he had borne the blow inflicted upon him and his lips quivered.

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15 *sallow:* unhealthy looking
16 *nipper:* (colloquial) small child
17 *classy:* aristocratic

He walked slowly back to the vestry and hung up on its proper peg his verger's gown. He sighed as he thought of all the grand funerals and smart weddings it had seen. He tidied everything up, put on his coat, and hat in hand, walked down the aisle. He locked the church door behind him. He strolled across the square, but deep in his sad thoughts he did not take the street that led him home, where a nice strong cup of tea awaited him; he took the wrong turning.

He walked slowly along. His heart was heavy. He did not know what he should do with himself. He did not fancy the notion of going back to domestic service. He had saved a tidy sum, but not enough to live on without doing something, and life seemed to cost more every year. He had never thought to be troubled with such questions. The vergers of St Peter's, like the popes of Rome, were there for life.

Albert Edward was a non-smoker and a total abstainer, but with a certain latitude; that is to say, he liked a glass of beer with his dinner and when he was tired he enjoyed a cigarette. It occurred to him now that one would comfort him, and since he did not carry them he looked about him for a shop where he could buy a packet of Gold Flakes. He did not at once see one and walked on a little. It was a long street, with all sorts of shops in it, but there was not a single one where you could buy cigarettes.

'That's strange,' said Albert Edward.

To make sure, he walked right up the street again. No, there was no doubt about it. He stopped and looked reflectively up and down.

'I can't be the only man as walks along this street and wants a **fag**[18],' he said. 'I shouldn't wonder but what a fellow might do very well with a little shop here. Tobacco and sweets, you know.'

He gave a sudden start.

'That's an idea,' he said. 'Strange 'ow things come to you when you least expect it.'

He turned, walked home, and had his tea.

'You're very silent this afternoon, Albert,' his wife remarked.

' I'm thinkin',' he said.

He considered the matter from every point of view and next day he went along the street and by good luck found a little shop to let that looked as though it would exactly suit him. Twenty-

four hours later he had taken it, and when a month after that he left St Peter's, Neville Square, for ever, Albert Edward Foreman set up in business as a tobacconist and news agent. His wife said it was a dreadful **come-down**[19] after being verger of St Peter's, but he answered that you had to move with the times, the church wasn't what it was, and 'enceforward he was going to **render unto Caesar what was Caesar's**[20].

Albert Edward did very well. He did so well that in a year or so it struck him that he might take a second shop and put a manager in. He looked for another long street that hadn't got a tobacconist in it and when he found it, and a shop to let, took it and stocked it. This was a success too. Then it occurred to him that if he could run two he could run half a dozen, so he began walking about London, and whenever he found a long street that had no tobacconist and a shop to let he took it. In the course of ten years he had acquired no less than ten shops and he was making money **hand over fist**[21]. He went round to all of them himself every Monday, collected the week's takings, and took them to the bank.

One morning when he was there paying in a bundle of notes and a heavy bag of silver, the cashier told him that the manager would like to see him. He was shown into an office and the manager shook hands with him.

'Mr Foreman, I wanted to have a talk with you about the money you've got on deposit with us. D'you know exactly how much it is?'

'Not within a pound or two, sir; but I've got a pretty rough idea.'

'Apart from what you paid in this morning it's a little over thirty thousand pounds. That's a very large sum to have on deposit and I should have thought you'd do better to invest it.'

'I wouldn't want to take no risk, sir. I know it's safe in the bank.'

'You needn't have the least anxiety. We'll make you out a list of absolutely **gilt-edged securities**[22]. They'll bring you in a better rate of interest than we can possibly afford to give you.'

A troubled look settled on Mr Foreman's distinguished face. 'I've never 'ad anything to do with stocks and shares and I'd 'ave to leave it all in your 'ands,' he said.

The manager smiled. 'We'll do everything. All you'll have to do next time you come in is just to sign the transfers.'

'I could do that all right,' said Albert uncertainly. 'But 'ow should I know what I was signin'?'

'I suppose you can read,' said the manager a trifle sharply.

Mr Foreman gave him a **disarming**[23] smile.

'Well, sir, that's just it. I can't. I know it sounds funny like, but there it is, I can't read or write, only me name, an' I only learnt to do that when I went into business.'

The manager was so surprised that he jumped up from his chair.

'That's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard.'

'You see, it's like this, 'sir, I never 'ad the opportunity until it was too late and then some'ow I wouldn't. I got obstinate like.'

The manager stared at him as though he were a prehistoric monster.

'And do you mean to say that you've built up this important business and amassed a fortune of thirty thousand pounds without being able to read or write? Good God, man, what would you be now if you had been able to?'

'I can tell you that, sir,' said Mr Foreman, a little smile on his still aristocratic features. 'I'd be verger of St Peter's, Neville Square.'

Points to Ponder

As they say, 'failure is the stepping stone to success'. Something similar seems to have happened to Mr Foreman in the story. The ousted verger walks out of the church and accidentally enters a street he had never seen earlier. A desire to smoke a cigarette makes him discover that the long street did not have even one tobacconist. That sets him thinking and he returns the next morning to hire a small shop on that street to set up a tobacconist's shop. From then on he goes on to become a highly successful tobacconist, eventually owning a string of shops in London. The story depicts the twist in the verger's fate and how failure in one sphere leads to his becoming a wealthy businessman. He was able to turn a tragedy into an opportunity. He refused to sink into despair, or give up hope.

COMPREHENSION

A. Answer the following questions in one sentence each.

1. Who is Albert Edward Foreman?
2. How long has Foreman been working at his job?
3. What is Foreman's attitude to the new vicar?
4. What had the vicar 'jockeyed' the churchwardens into doing?
5. How did Foreman receive the vicar's announcement?
6. What did Foreman look for in the street he had taken by mistake?
7. What was the bank manager's proposition?
8. Why was the bank manager surprised?

B. Answer the following questions in about 30–40 words.

1. Foreman wore his verger's gown with complacence. He liked being a verger. Indeed, he was proud of being one. What other words and actions of his show you he loved his job?

2. In what ways was the new vicar of St Peter's different from the old one? How did these differences change the course of the story?
3. Walking out of the church, deep in his sad thoughts, Foreman took the wrong turning. How did this mistake change his life?
4. 'You are very silent this afternoon, Albert,' said his wife. 'I'm thinkin,' he said. What was he thinking about? Did he act soon? How did his business grow into a big one?
5. What was the surprised bank manager's final question? What was Mr Foreman's answer?

C. *Answer the following questions in about 150 words.*

1. You see the new vicar of St Peter's mostly through the eyes of Foreman. What kind of picture do you get of him through Foreman? Do you think it is distorted because Foreman is prejudiced against him? What do you think of him and his decision to send Foreman away?
2. Foreman, an uneducated man, amasses a large fortune. Is education necessary for financial success? How do you think education helps a person?
3. Is a man who can read and write 'educated'? What aspect of education is Maugham laughing at?