



Learn English Through Stories

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False Dawn

No one knows what will happen tonight.

The Earth is trembling and weak—

Waiting, restless, wide awake;

And we, born from the Earth,

Feel our Mother's pain.

—From *In Durance*

The full truth of this story will never be known. Women might whisper it after a dance, fixing their hair and gossiping about the evening's triumphs. Men cannot join these private moments, so this tale is told from the outside—imperfectly, in the dark.

It's unwise to praise one sister to another, hoping your words will reach the right ears and aid your romantic plans. Sisters are women first, their bond second. Flattering one might harm your chances. Saumarez knew this when he resolved to propose to the elder Miss Copleigh, Maud.

Saumarez was an odd man. Men saw little to admire, but women found him alluring. He was resolute, brimming with confidence, and worked as a civilian official in colonial India. His sharp, almost rude manner with women sparked curiosity, like a horse tapped on the nose that watches you closely. Maud Copleigh was kind, pleasant, and pretty, her warmth drawing people in. Her younger sister, Edith, was less striking and seemed aloof, especially to men who ignored the advice about sisters. Both had similar builds and voices, but Maud's charm was undeniable.

When the Copleigh sisters arrived at our station from Behar, everyone assumed Saumarez would marry Maud. She was 22, he 33, earning nearly 1,400 rupees a month—a fine salary. It seemed a perfect match. Saumarez, decisive by nature, took his time, weighing his choice carefully. In our station's slang, the sisters “hunted in pairs.” You couldn't spend time with one without the other nearby. Their closeness, though loving, could be awkward.

Saumarez treated both sisters equally, leaving everyone on tenterhooks, guessing he preferred Maud. He rode and danced with them but never

separated them for long. Some women whispered the sisters stayed together out of mistrust, each fearing the other might win Saumarez. That was no man's concern. Saumarez stayed quiet, focusing on work and polo, and both girls clearly adored him.

As the hot weather loomed and Saumarez made no proposal, the sisters looked weary and anxious. Men rarely notice such subtleties unless unusually sensitive. The April heat drained their energy, a storm in a teacup for some, but exhausting nonetheless. They should have gone to the hill stations earlier. No one feels joyful in the hot season's exasperation. Edith grew sharp and sarcastic, while Maud's charm seemed forced, less natural.

Our station was small, far from the railway, with no gardens or entertainments. A trip to Lahore for a dance took a day. Any distraction was a treasure.

In early May, before most left for the hills, Saumarez planned a moonlight riding picnic at an old tomb six miles away, near the riverbed. It was a "Noah's Ark" picnic, couples riding in pairs, spaced to avoid dust. Six couples came, including chaperones—older women supervising young ladies. Moonlight picnics were cherished at season's end, often sparking proposals. Chaperones encouraged them, especially for girls radiant in riding outfits.

We called it the "Great Pop Picnic," expecting Saumarez to propose to Maud. Another budding romance heightened the excitement. The atmosphere was tumultuous, ready to burst.

We met at the parade ground at 10 p.m. The night was swelteringly unbearable, horses sweating even at a walk. Anything beat staying in our dark houses. Under the full moon, we set off: four couples, one trio, and Saumarez between the Copleigh sisters. I trailed behind, wondering who Saumarez would ride home with. Everyone was cheerful, yet we sensed something ephemeral was brewing. We rode slowly, reaching the tomb near midnight, in ruined gardens by a dry water tank.

As I arrived, I saw a faint brownish cloud in the north—a dust storm's warning. I kept quiet, not wanting to spoil the picnic. A storm wasn't usually dangerous.

We gathered by the tank. Someone played a banjo, and we sang, relishing our station's simple joys. We talked or lay under trees, rose petals falling, until supper—cold and refreshing—was ready. We lingered, savouring the moment.

The air grew hotter, unnoticed until the moon vanished, and a scorching wind whipped the trees, roaring like waves. A dust storm struck, plunging us into tumultuous darkness. The supper table blew into the tank. Fearing the tomb's collapse, we stumbled to the orange trees where horses were tied. Light vanished, dust clogging our boots and throats, coating faces. It was a dreadful storm.

We huddled near jittery horses, thunder booming, lightning flashing wildly. There was no danger unless the horses broke free. I stood, head down, hands over my mouth, trees thrashing. A lightning flash showed me beside Saumarez and Maud, her scarf-covered helmet distinct; Edith had none. The electric air made me tingle. The wind seemed to hurl earth away, the ground scorching.

The storm eased after half an hour, and I heard a desperate voice: "Oh my God!" Edith stumbled into me, crying, "Where's my horse? I want to go home!" Thinking the storm scared her, I said she must wait. "It's not that! Take me away!" she pleaded. I said she couldn't leave until lighter, but she slipped away. A massive lightning flash lit the sky, women screaming.

Saumarez grabbed my shoulder, shouting, "I've proposed to the wrong one! What do I do?" Stunned, I wondered why he confided in me—we weren't close. In the heat of the moment, I said, "You fool for proposing now!" He yelled, "Where's Edith?" I asked, "Why her?" We shouted like madmen, him insisting he meant Edith, me saying he'd erred. It was chaos, a nightmare of stamping horses and howling wind.

As the storm calmed, faint light revealed a dust cloud. The worst was over. A dim "false dawn" glowed before sunrise. I wondered where Edith had gone. Then I saw Maud's smiling face approach Saumarez, whispering, "George," linking arms, radiant with love. Saumarez looked shocked. Fifty yards away, Edith, in her brown riding habit, mounted a horse.

I pushed Saumarez back, saying, "Stay and clear the air. I'll get her!" I ran to my horse, feeling order was vital. Saumarez had to tell Maud the truth. I chased Edith, who galloped, shouting, "Go away! I'm going home!" I had to catch her.

The ride was nightmarish. Rough ground and dust clouds swirled. A foul wind carried a burnt smell. In dim light, I saw Edith's brown habit on her grey horse. She rode toward the station, then the river, crossing treacherous burnt jungle grass. Normally, I'd avoid such a ride, but it felt right. I shouted, she whipped her horse, wind pushing us.

The hooves, wind, and faint moon in dust felt endless. Sweat soaked me when my horse went lame. Edith, dusty, helmet gone, sobbed, "Why won't you leave me? I want to go home!"

"You must come back," I said. "Saumarez has something to say." Clumsy, but I barely knew her. Her protests faded, and she sobbed, hair blowing. She wasn't the sharp Edith I knew.

I explained Saumarez loved her. Biting the bullet, she urged her lame horse, and we returned as rain fell. Edith said she'd heard Saumarez propose to Maud and fled to cry alone, as an English girl would, her heart too fragile to quell her tears.

At dawn, everyone waited at the tomb. Saumarez, pale, helped Edith off her horse and kissed her before all. It was theatrical, the dusty group clapping. It felt un-British.

Saumarez said we should return before the station searched. He asked me to ride with Maud, and I agreed. We rode back in pairs, Saumarez beside Edith. As the sun rose, the night felt like a dream, the "Great Pop Picnic" gone with the storm.

I was exhausted, ashamed, as I bathed and slept. There's a woman's version of this story, but it won't be told—unless Maud Copleigh shares it.

Comprehension Questions and Answers

Question 1: Why did everyone call the moonlight picnic the “Great Pop Picnic”?

Question 2: What made the Copleigh sisters appear tired and anxious as the hot weather approached?

Question 3: How did Saumarez’s manner with women affect their interest in him?

Question 4: What does the phrase “hunted in pairs” mean about the Copleigh sisters?

Question 5: Why did the narrator choose not to mention the brownish cloud he saw during the picnic?

Question 6: What mistake did Saumarez make during the dust storm, and how did he react?

Question 7: Why did Edith try to flee the picnic, and what did she say to the narrator?

Question 8: How did the narrator describe the atmosphere of the storm during the picnic?

Question 9: What does the “false dawn” symbolize in the story?

Question 10: How did the picnic end, and what was the narrator’s role in the resolution?

Answers

Answer 1: It was called the “Great Pop Picnic” because people expected Saumarez to propose to Maud Copleigh, creating excitement.

Explanation: The nickname reflects the anticipation of a significant romantic event, central to the story’s tension.

Answer 2: The April heat and Saumarez’s delay in proposing made the sisters look tired and anxious.

Explanation: The story links their emotional strain to both the weather and romantic uncertainty.

Answer 3: Saumarez’s sharp, almost rude manner made women curious about him, like a horse tapped on the nose.

Explanation: His unconventional approach paradoxically increased his appeal, as described in the story.

Answer 4: “Hunted in pairs” means the sisters always stayed together, making it hard to spend time with one alone.

Explanation: The slang highlights their close bond, which complicates Saumarez’s courtship.

Answer 5: The narrator didn’t mention the brownish cloud, a sign of a dust storm, to avoid spoiling the picnic’s enjoyment.

Explanation: This decision reflects the group’s desire to maintain the festive mood.

Answer 6: Saumarez proposed to Maud instead of Edith and shouted to the narrator in exasperation, asking what to do.

Explanation: His impulsive proposal in the chaotic storm leads to the story’s central conflict.

Answer 7: Edith fled to cry alone after hearing Saumarez propose to Maud, shouting, “I want to go home!”

Explanation: Her emotional reaction reveals her feelings for Saumarez and her distress.

Answer 8: The narrator described the storm as tumultuous, with roaring darkness, thrashing trees, and electric air that made him tingle.

Explanation: The vivid description underscores the chaotic setting that mirrors the characters' emotions.

Answer 9: The "false dawn" symbolizes mistaken hopes, like Maud's belief that Saumarez loved her.

Explanation: The term, a pre-sunrise glow, parallels the story's theme of misguided expectations.

Answer 10: The picnic ended with Saumarez kissing Edith publicly and asking the narrator to ride home with Maud, while the narrator helped by bringing Edith back to resolve the misunderstanding.

Explanation: The narrator's actions and Saumarez's public gesture clarify the romantic outcome.