



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E58

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1. The Four Feathers

By Ruskin Bond

Our school dormitory was a very long room with about thirty beds, fifteen on either side of the room. This was good for pillow fights. Class V would take on Class VI (the two senior classes in our Prep school) and there would be plenty of space for leaping, struggling small boys, pillows flying, feathers flying, until there was a cry of 'Here comes Fishy!' or 'Here comes Olly!' and either Mr Fisher, the Headmaster, or Mr Oliver, the Senior Master, would come striding in, cane in hand, to put an end to the general mayhem. Pillow fights were allowed, up to a point; nobody got hurt. But parents sometimes complained if, at the end of the term, a boy came home with a pillow devoid of cotton-wool or feathers.

In that last year at Prep school in Shimla, there were four of us who were close friends—Bimal, whose home was in Bombay; Riaz, who came from Lahore; Bran, who hailed from Vellore; and your narrator, who lived wherever his father (then in the Air Force) was posted.

We called ourselves the 'Four Feathers', the feathers signifying that we were companions in adventure, comrades-in-arms, and knights of the round table. Bimal adopted a peacock's feather as his emblem—he was always a bit showy. Riaz chose a falcon's feather—although we couldn't find one. Bran and I were at first offered crow's or murghi feathers, but we protested vigorously and threatened a walkout. Finally, I settled for a parrot's feather (taken from Mrs Fisher's pet parrot), and Bran found a woodpecker's, which suited him, as he was always knocking things about.

Bimal was all thin legs and arms, so light and frisky that at times he seemed to be walking on air. We called him 'Bambi', after the delicate little deer in the Disney film. Riaz, on the other hand, was a sturdy boy, good at games though not very studious; but always good-natured, always smiling.

Bran was a dark, good-looking boy from the South; he was just a little spoilt—hated being given out in a cricket match and would refuse to leave the crease!—but he was affectionate and a loyal friend. I was the 'scribe'—good at inventing stories in order to get out of scrapes—but hopeless at sums, my highest marks being twenty-two out of one hundred.

On Sunday afternoons, when there were no classes or organized games, we were allowed to roam about on the hillside below the school. The Four Feathers would laze about on the short summer grass, sharing the occasional food parcel from home, reading comics (sometimes a book), and making

plans for the long winter holidays. My father, who collected everything from stamps to seashells to butterflies, had given me a butterfly net and urged me to try and catch a rare species which, he said, was found only near Chotta Shimla. He described it as a large purple butterfly with yellow and black borders on its wings. A Purple Emperor, I think it was called. As I wasn't very good at identifying butterflies, I would chase anything that happened to flit across the school grounds, usually ending up with Common Red Admirals, Clouded Yellows, or Cabbage Whites. But that Purple Emperor—that rare specimen being sought by collectors the world over—proved elusive. I would have to seek my fortune in some other line of endeavour.

One day, scrambling about among the rocks, and thorny bushes below the school, I almost fell over a small bundle lying in the shade of a young spruce tree. On taking a closer look, I discovered that the bundle was really a baby, wrapped up in a tattered old blanket.

'Feathers, feathers!' I called, 'come here and look. A baby's been left here!'

The feathers joined me and we all stared down at the infant, who was fast asleep. 'Who would leave a baby on the hillside?' asked Bimal of no one in particular. 'Someone who doesn't want it,' said Bran.

'And hoped some good people would come along and keep it,' said Riaz. 'A panther might have come along instead,' I said. 'Can't leave it here.' 'Well, we'll just have to adopt it,' said Bimal.

'We can't adopt a baby,' said Bran. 'Why not?'

'We have to be married.' 'We don't.'

'Not us, you dope. The grown-ups who adopt babies.'

'Well, we can't just leave it here for grows-ups to come along,' I said. 'We don't even know if it's a boy or a girl,' said Riaz.

'Makes no difference. A baby's a baby. Let's take it back to school.' 'And keep it in the dormitory?'

'Of course not. Who's going to feed it? Babies need milk. We'll hand it over to Mrs Fisher. She doesn't have a baby.'

'Maybe she doesn't want one. Look, it's beginning to cry. Let's hurry!'

Riaz picked up the wide-awake and crying baby and gave it to Bimal who gave it to Bran who gave it to me. The Four Feathers marched up the hill to school with a very noisy baby.

‘Now it’s done potty in the blanket,’ I complained. ‘And some, of it’s on my shirt.’

‘Never mind,’ said Bimal. ‘It’s in a good cause. You’re a Boy Scout, remember?

You’re supposed to help people in distress.’

The headmaster and his wife were in their drawing room, enjoying their afternoon tea and cakes. We trudged in, and Bimal announced, ‘We’ve got something for Mrs Fisher.’

Mrs Fisher took one look at the bundle in my arms and let out a shriek. ‘What have you brought here, Bond?’

‘A baby, ma’am. I think it’s a girl. Do you want to adopt it?’

Mrs Fisher threw up her arms in consternation, and turned to her husband. ‘What are we to do, Frank? These boys are impossible. They’ve picked up someone’s child!’

‘We’ll have to inform the police,’ said Mr Fisher, reaching for the telephone. ‘We can’t have lost babies in the school.’

Just then there was a commotion outside, and a wild-eyed woman, her clothes dishevelled, entered at the front door accompanied by several menfolk from one of the villages. She ran towards us, crying out, ‘My baby, my baby! Mera bachcha! You’ve stolen my baby!’

‘We found it on the hillside,’ I stammered. ‘That’s right,’ said Bran. ‘Finder’s keepers!’

‘Quiet, Adams,’ said Mr Fisher, holding up his hand for order and addressing the villagers in a friendly manner. ‘These boys found the baby alone on the hillside and brought it here before...before...’

‘Before the hyenas got it,’ I put in.

‘Quite right, Bond. And why did you leave your child alone?’ he asked the woman.

‘I put her down for five minutes so that I could climb the plum tree and collect the plums. When I came down, the baby had gone! But I could hear it crying up on the hill. I called the menfolk and we come looking for it.’

‘Well, here’s your baby,’ I said, thrusting it into her arms. By then I was

glad to be rid of it! 'Look after it properly in future.'

'Kidnapper!' she screamed at me.

Mr Fisher succeeded in mollifying the villagers. 'These boys are good Scouts,' he told them. 'It's their business to help people.'

'Scout Law Number Three, sir,' I added. 'To be useful and helpful.'

And then the Headmaster turned the tables on the villagers. 'By the way, those plum trees belong to the school. So do the peaches and apricots. Now I know why they've been disappearing so fast!'

The villagers, a little chastened, went their way.

Mr Fisher reached for his cane. From the way he fondled it, I knew he was itching to use it on our bottoms.

'No, Frank,' said Mrs Fisher, intervening on our behalf. 'It was really very sweet of them to look after that baby. And look at Bond—he's got baby-goo all over his clothes.'

'So he has. Go and take a bath, all of you. And what are you grinning about, Bond?'

'Scout Law Number Eight, sir. A Scout smiles and whistles under all difficulties.'

And so ended the first adventure of the Four Feathers.

Comprehension Questions and Answers

Question 1: What nickname was given to Bimal, and why was he called that?

Question 2: What did the Four Feathers find on the hillside below the school?

Question 3: Why did the Four Feathers decide to take the baby back to the school?

Question 4: How did the villagers react when they saw the Four Feathers with the baby?

Question 5: Which Scout Law did the narrator mention when grinning at the Headmaster, and what does it mean?

Answers

Answer 1: Bimal was nicknamed "Bambi" because he was light and frisky, resembling the delicate deer from the Disney film.

Answer 2: They found a baby wrapped in a tattered blanket, lying under a spruce tree.

Answer 3: They took the baby to school because they couldn't leave it alone on the hillside, where it could be in danger (e.g., from a panther), and planned to hand it over to Mrs. Fisher.

Answer 4: The villagers, led by the baby's mother, were initially upset, with the mother accusing the boys of kidnapping her child.

Answer 5: The narrator mentioned Scout Law Number Eight, which states that a Scout smiles and whistles under all difficulties.

3. Grammar Page

Prepositions with Adjectives, Verbs or Nouns

Prepositions are used with some **adjectives**. The adjectives in these examples are printed in color.

Dad was **angry** with us.

We were **afraid** of the big dog.

She's not very **interested** in sports.

John is very **good** at drawing.

Mr. Lee is **pleased** with our work.

The teachers are always **kind** to us.

What's **wrong** with the computer?

Prepositions are used with some **verbs**. The verbs in these examples are printed in color.

I'm **looking** for my pencil. Have you seen it?

Can you **think** of another word for 'pleased'?

Does this book **belong** to you?

We're **listening** to CDs.

I **agree** with you.

I **lent** my skateboard to Sue.

Tell me **about** the show you saw.

Cut the cake **into** five pieces.

They **borrowed** money **from** the bank.



Prepositions are used with some **nouns**. The nouns in these examples are printed in color.

What's the **answer** to this question?

Is there a **reason** for this delay?

What's the **matter** with you?

Here's an **example** of good behavior.

Congratulations on winning the competition!

Traffic can cause **damage** to the environment.

