

**Sharpening up Your Reading
and Comprehension Skills
by
Austin Mitchell**

**(A guide to help students understand comprehension questions
and word building.)**

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The stories in this book are primarily aimed at grade five and six students in Caribbean schools. I have included comprehension questions and also a list of words from the stories and their meanings. The stories make interesting reading.

About the author: Austin Mitchell first taught school as an assistant teacher at the Long Hill Primary School (now merged into the New Mount Industry All Age School) for two years. He was also an assistant teacher at the Grateful Hill Primary School. Since then he has been mostly involved in Accounting and Auditing.

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The Mother River

by Austin Mitchell

Once, hundreds of years ago, there was a great river. It was called the Mother river. Some people said that it was in the north of the island, others said that it was in the middle of the island, but others disagreed, saying that it was in the west. Although it was known as the Mother river, people also called it the Magic river, the Golden river and many other names. One of the main villages the river passed through was reportedly called Dunklet. The people of Dunklet worshipped the river. They depended on it for their very existence. They bathed, swam and caught fishes in its waters. They often wondered at the size of the fishes they caught. They were so big and full of flesh.

They used its waters to irrigate their fields. From these fields they got the finest crops. Nobody in Dunklet went hungry as there was always lots of food to be had. But there was a reason why the river was also called the Magic river. Whenever it rained, and the river became flooded, a lot of precious metals and stones were washed upon its banks. These the people used to make all kinds of jewelry to be worn by both men and women. People wondered where these precious metals came from. Some of them even tried to find the river head, but got lost and had to turn back.

The first village chief, realized how valuable this river was to his people appointed a man named Tull as the caretaker of the river. Together, they made certain rules to govern the people and their relationship with the river. The people were not to dump their refuse in the river, they were not to dig in the river or its banks looking for precious metals. They were also not to sell the the precious metals. Some of the people were dissatisfied with the village chief, Abucadizer and Tull's ruling. At a meeting in the village a week later, a man called Neddy got up and asked.

"They are people willing to give us good things for the precious metals. Why stop us from selling it and making a

profit?”

A young girl, Yashimaje, remarked. “We need things to fix up ourselves. We can’t eat the jewelry.”

But Abucadizer told them that it was the will of the gods that they did not sell the jewelry they found in the river. Several of the villagers, including Neddy and Yashimaje left the meeting dissatisfied.

Just like how people wondered where the river came from, they also wondered where it went when it left the village. They found out that it escaped into some canyons. Some people believed that after it left the canyons it went underground and into the sea.

The river also had healing qualities and people came from far and near to bathe in its waters. Some of the villagers, including a man called Lud, a woman called Selmaje and another young girl named Taroona were dissatisfied with what was happening. They said that all outsiders should pay to bathe in the river. However Abucadizer disagreed and said that the gods would be angry with them if they prevented people from bathing in the river.

After people like Abucadizer and Tull died others took their places. But persons from far away lands had heard about this river and the precious stones that were believed to be in it. They came in droves. At first they talked to the new chief, Balcome, but he refused to let them mine the river. Some of his own people, including Neddy, Yashimaje and Taroona tried to persuade him to negotiate with the newcomers but he refused.

But these men were determined to claim the precious metals they heard was lying at the bottom of the Mother river. One night with the aid of their friends they raided the village, killing several villagers including Balcome. They stole all the precious metals from the survivors and the dead.

They spent the following days digging up the river and its banks, gloating over the precious metals they found. The surviving villagers soon realized the mistake they had made in helping these men to kill Balcome and other people and steal their jewelry. When they told them that the gods would punish them for digging up the river, they laughed and ran them away from them.

Two weeks later when they thought they had mined all the precious metals, there was to be had, they woke up the next morning to find the river gone! It was just dry earth they found! When they went to pack up their bags of precious metals, it was just ordinary stones they found! Suspicions immediately fell on the villagers but only their friends were there as all the others had vanished overnight.

They decided to search all the villages to find the escapees from Dunklet. But to this day they never found the people from Dunklet and the Mother river never returned. People like Neddy, Taroon and Yashimaje went to nearby villages seeking shelter, but word had already gone out that they had connived with the strangers in what had happened in Dunklet. They therefore had to go to far away places to seek shelter. The strangers returned home empty handed. Many people believed that those who had fled Dunklet that night might have gone to another part of the island. Legend has it that they found another magic river down there, but this has never been proven. The End.

Comprehension Questions:

- 1. Apart from the Mother river what other names did the river have?**
- 2. Why was it given these names?**
- 3. What was the name of the main village through which the river flowed?**
- 4. Name two of the grievances the people had against their chiefs.**
- 5. Why didn't the chiefs want the people to barter with the precious metals for other goods and services?**
- 6. Name some of the things they could barter for with the precious metals.**
- 7. Why did people go in search of the river head?**
- 8. How did the river escape to the sea?**
- 9. Why were outsiders against the chief's rules?**
- 10. What happened to these outsiders in the end?**

Words and their meanings:

Village (N)-A cluster of human settlements, smaller than a town. The population usually ranges from a few hundred to a few thousand.

River (N)- A free flowing body of water that normally flows into the sea or another river.

Irrigate (V)- To use water to enable crops and plants to grow stronger.

Precious(Adj.)- Something of great value, rare

Jewelry (N)- Precious stones

Valuable (Adj.)-To be worth something, normally in monetary terms

Caretaker (N)-Person employed to take care of a building or property

Appoint(V) -To be formally given a job or responsibility

Refuse (V)-To turn down a request, **garbage (N)**, **trash(N)**

Mistake(N)-Unintentionally doing something wrong

Surviving(Adj.)-Someone who is still living, even after the death of another or the end of a situation or event, is said to be surviving.

Gloat (V)-To feel or express great pleasure or satisfaction because of your success or good luck

Determined (Adv.)-Certain that you are going to do something

Negotiate (V) -To have formal discussions with someone in order to reach an agreement

Newcomers (N) -Someone who has recently arrived in a place or recently become involved in an activity

Persuade (V) - To make someone do or believe something by giving them a good reason to do it

Canyon (N) - A large valley with very steep sides and usually a river flowing along the bottom

The Magic Marble
a short story by
Austin Mitchell

Kirk and Ricky were playing marbles outside their school gate one evening after school. Both boys were in Grade Five. They were about even as to who had won the more games.

An old man approached them. It was the first time either boy was seeing this old man. They wondered which village, he was from.

“Boys, I’m hungry. Help out an old man with some money.”

“We don’t have any money,” Kirk replied, looking at the old man.

The man’s clothes were untidy and looked to be in need of a good scrubbing. The man dipped into his pocket and took out a marble.

“This here’s a magic marble, you can’t miss with it.”

“How much will you sell it to me for?” Kirk asked.

The old man looked curiously at him.

“I thought you didn’t have any money.”

“I’ll buy it from you,” Ricky told him.

“For five hundred dollars, you can have it. As I said, you can’t miss with it. The marble is not to be played after six o’clock in the evenings. If you disobey my orders it will become useless to you.”

The old man handed Ricky the marble and Ricky handed him a five hundred dollar note. Immediately the old man rushed into a nearby shop to buy something to eat.

Ricky soon won all the remaining marbles Kirk had. Kirk bought some more marbles from Ricky but again lost all of them. Only when he was down to his bus fare did Kirk stop playing.

Ricky was so good at marbles that other boys refused to play against him. Kirk had told them about the magic marble Ricky had. Many of the boys wished they could have a marble like that. Ricky never missed with it, no matter the distance. He refused to tell anyone where he got the marble from.

But Ricky was always curious as he never saw the old man again. Nobody knew anything about him. But Ricky was a greedy boy and decided not to heed the old man's warning not to play after six o'clock. The first and second days he played after six o'clock, nothing happened. The third time he played, the marble did not work the next day.

The marble was now playing like a normal marble.

"It's no good. I'm sorry I ever listened to that old man. If I ever see him again, I'll demand back my money and give him back his useless marble."

"You've won lots more money than you paid for it," Kirk told him.

The next day Ricky flung the marble as far as he could throw it. Many boys asked him what he had done with the magic marble. Ricky told them that it had become useless and so he had thrown it away. He never told them that he had disobeyed the old man's warning.

All the boys in the village started looking for the magic marble. Ricky learned that the old man was from Westmoreland and his name was Josh. He made a lot of magical things which he sold to make his living. Ricky heard that he sold magic balloons, kites, balls among other things.

Two weeks after Ricky threw away the magic marble, a man named Carlton and his son, Keeble were in their field one Saturday afternoon. Keeble was helping his father cut callaloo to sell in the market. Suddenly, Carlton saw the marble on the ground. He picked it up and gave it to Keeble.

Keeble was in Grade Six and would do his high school entrance examinations in three months time. He played as little marble as possible. But it was soon noticed that he was winning a lot of games. He lived in a nearby village to Ricky but went to a different school.

One Saturday a few weeks later, Rick was passing a marble game. He couldn't help noticing, Keeble winning and it was with the magic marble! He asked Keeble where he got the marble from. Keeble told him that his father had found it and given it to him. Ricky said the marble belonged to him as he had lost it.

He made a complaint to his father. His father and Carlton were friends. His father told Carlton that he had seen Ricky with the marble before he lost it. He described the marble to Carlton. They agreed that it was the marble Carlton had found.

“How did it get into my field?” Carlton asked.

“I don't know, sir. It fell out of my pocket. Somebody probably found it and threw it into your field.”

So the marble was returned to Ricky.

Ricky was glad that he had gotten back the magic marble. He thought that it had stopped working because he had disobeyed Josh's warning not to play after six o'clock in the evenings.

Ricky was back to his winning ways again. But greed got the better of him and he again began playing after six o'clock. The first two times he tried it everything was okay. But after the third time the marble stopped working. He kept it for two more days but nothing happened. He was not a good player without the marble. He was soon losing a part of his lunch money buying marbles.

The next morning he got vexed with the marble and sent it sailing away from him.

"I never want to see Josh and his useless toys again. He's no magician."

A month later a boy by the name of Kelvin found the marble. He was from a village a mile from Ricky's village. He went to the same school as Keeble.

Keeble soon heard about Kelvin and his magic marble. He wondered if it was the same marble he had to give back to Ricky. He knew that Ricky had been telling lies. He had thrown away the marble. Maybe for some reason it had stopped working.

A month after Kelvin found the marble, Josh was passing through his village. He saw Kelvin with the marble. He wondered how this boy came to be in possession of the marble since he had sold it to a different boy. He waited until Kelvin had won all the other boys' marbles before he approached him.

"Young man, I'm hungry. Can you spare me some money?"

"Old man, I don't have any time for you. I'm off to catch another game," Kelvin told him and rushed past him.

Josh looked with amazement as Kelvin hurried up the road.

Two days later, Kelvin sat complaining. The magic marble had stopped working. The next morning, nothing happened. In the evening it was the same thing. In disgust, Kelvin sent the marble sailing into the sky.

The marble fell into a fast running river and was washed out to sea. It remains at the bottom of the sea to this day. The End.

Comprehension Questions

- 1. What game were Kirk and Ricky playing at the start of the story?**
- 2. Why do you think the old man was so dirty?**
- 3. Why didn't the old man want to sell Kirk the marble?**
- 4. What powers did the marble possess?**
- 5. What did the old man tell Ricky not to do with the marble?**
- 6. Why did Ricky throw away the marble?**
- 7. Where was the marble found?**
- 8. What lies did Ricky tell to get back the marble?**
- 9. What was the name of the last boy who found the magic marble?**
- 10. Why did the marble stop working for this boy?**

Words and their meanings:

Approach(V)-To come near or nearer to something or someone

Untidy(Adj.)-Dirty, not well kept

Scrub(V)-To rub something hard in order to clean it.

Scrubbing(N)

Curious(Adv.)-Interested in learning about people and things around you. **Curiously(Adv.)**

Immediate(Adj.)-Happening or done without delay.

Immediately(Adv.)

Nearby(Adj.)-Not far away in distance

Distance(N)-Amount of space between two places

Useless(Adj.)- Of no value

Disobey(V)-Refuse to obey an order or request

Normal(Adj.)-Ordinary or usual, the same as would be expected

Market (N) -A place where people go in order to buy and sell goods

Examination(N)-To test a person's ability or skill

Entrance (N)-A place where you can enter a building from

Complain(V)-To say that something is not satisfactory-

Complaint(N)

Amaze(V)-To cause someone to be extremely surprised-

Amazement(N)

One Good Turn.....

a short story by Austin Mitchell

Jacqueline shed a torrent of tears. She had left her purse with her lunch money in her bag and after she came inside from morning recess it was missing.

“My mother is going to punish me,” she wailed. “It’s her purse and she told me to take good care of it.”

None of us in the class had any idea as to who might have stolen the money. We had all left the room at the same time. We had returned at just about the same time too.

Miss West, our class teacher, was adamant that she was going to find the thief.

However, nobody owned up and she had to give Jacqueline money to buy her lunch at the canteen. There was another problem, the money stolen wasn’t only to buy lunch, but to buy groceries at Jackson Chung’s shop when school was over.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. She’s waiting for those groceries, make our dinner and breakfast, tomorrow.”

None of us grudged Jacqueline the prospect of going without dinner tonight and breakfast in the morning. Miss Ruby, her mother and Clifton, her father would be sure to punish her. They were both coal burners and casual workers, plus occasionally they got a little produce to sell off their small piece of land. We were in Grade Five at the time. At lunchtime we all went out and Jacqueline made her way to the canteen to get her lunch. Most of us didn’t eat at the canteen, instead we would buy fritters, dumplings, salt fish, patties and bag juice in Jackson Chung’s shop or from sellers at the school gate. Keeble Reid and Danny Cole were buying patties and soft drinks. I bought what I came for and sat on a bench in the school yard and ate it.

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