Name: _____ Date: _____

The Jackal's Judgment

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 986 words

Once upon a time, in India, a tiger had been terrifying the villagers by stealing cattle from the fields beside the forest. At last the villagers built a strong wooden cage, and they set it on the path where the tiger liked to walk. One night the hungry tiger wandered inside to investigate, and the door dropped shut behind him with a loud clatter. When morning came, he discovered that he was well and truly trapped.

The tiger pushed at the bars and bit at the bars, and he rolled across the floor of the cage, roaring with rage and sorrow. But the bars were strong, and the door would not move, however hard he struggled. By chance, a poor traveler happened to be walking along the path that morning, and he stopped when he heard the terrible noise. "Please, kind friend," cried the tiger, "will you let me out of this cage?"

The traveler took a careful step backward. "No, my friend," he said gently. "I think that if I let you out, you would probably eat me." "Never!" swore the tiger. "I would be grateful to you for the rest of my life. I would be your servant and carry all your bundles." He sobbed and sighed so pitifully, and he made so many solemn promises, that the traveler's heart began to soften, and at last he reluctantly lifted the latch.

Out sprang the tiger, and in a single bound he had the poor man by the shoulders. "What a fool you are!" he growled. "Do you imagine that I will wait for my dinner after being shut up for so long? I am dreadfully hungry, and you are the only meal in sight." The traveler begged and pleaded for his life, and the most he could win was a promise that they would ask the first three things they met whether the tiger's behavior was fair.

Not far away they came to an old tree standing beside the path, and the traveler asked it for its opinion. "What are you complaining about?" said the tree coldly. "I give shade and shelter to everyone who passes, and in return they tear off my branches to feed their cattle. Do not whimper. Be brave!" The traveler sighed, and the two of them walked on, until they reached a well where a buffalo was plodding in a circle, turning the great wheel that raised the water.

The buffalo looked at them wearily. "You are foolish to expect gratitude," it said. "When I gave milk, they fed me on the best seeds and oil cake, but now that I am old and my milk has dried up, they harness me to this wheel and give me nothing but scraps." The traveler felt more miserable than ever. Then he asked the road, which stretched across the open plain, whether there was any justice in what the tiger planned to do.

"My dear sir," said the road with a long sigh, "how foolish you are to expect anything different. I am useful to everybody, rich and poor, big and small. Yet every one of them tramples on me as they pass, and all I receive in return is dust and husks." The traveler turned back sadly. He

had asked three questions and received three unkind answers, and now his knees began to shake.

On the way back he met a jackal, who trotted out of the long grass with his ears pricked up. "Why, whatever is the matter?" cried the jackal. "You look as miserable as a fish out of water." The traveler explained the whole story from beginning to end, and the jackal listened with a puzzled expression and scratched his head. "How very confusing," he said. "Would you mind telling it again? Everything has gone in at one ear and out at the other."

The traveler told it again, slowly and patiently, but the jackal still shook his head in a muddled way. "It is most peculiar," he said. "I have a very poor head for details. I think I must go to the place where it all happened, and then perhaps I shall be able to give you a judgment." So the three of them walked back to the cage, where the tiger was waiting with his claws sharpened, feeling hungrier than ever.

"You have been a long time," growled the tiger. "Now we can begin our dinner." The traveler shivered. "Our dinner!" he thought. "What a delicate way of putting it." Aloud he said, "Please give me five minutes, my lord, so that I can explain everything to this jackal, who is rather slow in his wits." The tiger agreed, and the traveler told the story once again, taking as long as possible over every single detail.

"Oh, my poor brain!" cried the jackal, wringing his paws. "Let me think. How did it all begin? You were in the cage, and the tiger came walking by..." "Fool!" snapped the tiger. "I was in the cage!" "Of course," said the jackal, pretending to tremble. "Yes, I was in the cage. No, I was not. Dear me, where are my wits?" The tiger was growing steadily more impatient. "Look here," he said. "I am the tiger, and that is the traveler, and that is the cage. Do you understand?"

"Almost," said the jackal humbly. "But please, my lord, how did you get into the cage?" "In the usual way, of course!" said the tiger. "But what is the usual way?" asked the jackal, looking more bewildered than before. The tiger lost patience. "This way!" he roared, and he sprang into the cage. "Now do you understand?" "Perfectly," said the jackal, and with one push of his paw he swung the door shut and dropped the latch. "And if you will allow me to say so," he added politely, "I think everything should stay exactly as it was."

Questions

1. Why did the traveler open the cage?

A. The tiger promised to be grateful

B. He wanted the tiger's fur

C. He was afraid of the tiger

2. What did the tree, the buffalo and the road all say?

A. That the tiger was kind
B. That people give nothing back for kindness
C. That the traveler should run

3. Why did the jackal keep asking the tiger to explain?

A. He was truly confused
B. He wanted to trick the tiger back into the cage
C. He was bored

4. How did the jackal end the story?

A. He chased the tiger away
B. He shut the cage door with the tiger inside
C. He ate the tiger's dinner

5. In this story, to be bewildered is to be

A. very confused
B. very angry
C. very hungry

Words to know

latch: door catch
plodding: walking heavily
gratitude: thankfulness
bewildered: very confused
husks: dry grain coverings

Answer key: The Jackal's Judgment

1. A. The tiger promised to be grateful
2. B. That people give nothing back for kindness
3. B. He wanted to trick the tiger back into the cage
4. B. He shut the cage door with the tiger inside
5. A. very confused