

The Storyteller, by Saki
18 GRE words

It was a hot afternoon, and the next stop was at Templecombe, nearly an hour ahead.

The occupants of the railway carriage were a small girl, and a smaller girl, and a small boy. An aunt belonging to the children occupied one window seat, and the opposite window seat was occupied by a bachelor who was a stranger to their party, but the compartment was dominated by the small girls and the small boy.

Both the aunt and the children were conversational in a limited, **tenacious** way, reminding one of the attentions of a housefly that refuses to be discouraged. Most of the aunt's remarks seemed to begin with "Don't," and nearly all of the children's remarks began with "Why?" The bachelor said nothing out loud. "Don't, Cyril, don't," exclaimed the aunt, as the small boy began slapping the cushions of the seat, producing a cloud of dust at each blow.

"Come and look out of the window," she added.

1. **tenacious**

(adj) stubborn, persistent

- *Cigarette smoking is a tenacious habit that can be remarkably hard to quit.*

The child moved reluctantly to the window. "Why are those sheep being driven out of that field?" he asked.

"I expect they are being driven to another field where there is more grass," said the aunt weakly.

"But there is lots of grass in that field," protested the boy; "there's nothing else but grass there. Aunt, there's lots of grass in that field."

"Perhaps the grass in the other field is better," suggested the aunt **fatuously**.

"Why is it better?" came the swift, **inevitable** question.

"Oh, look at those cows!" exclaimed the aunt. Nearly every field along the line had contained cows or bullocks, but she spoke as though she were drawing attention to a rarity.

"Why is the grass in the other field better?" **persevered** Cyril.

2. fatuous

(adj) foolish or silly, especially in an unconscious and self-satisfied manner

- *The dog darted across the street.*

3. inevitable

(adj) unavoidable

- *The painting of a well-dressed man holding a skull intended to remind viewers of the inevitability of death.*

4. persevere

(v) to keep pursuing something despite setbacks or opposition

- *Students who persevere in the face of learning difficulties succeed in mastering their subject.*

Noun: Perseverance

The bachelor's growing displeasure at the situation was **patent** on his face. He was a hard, unsympathetic man, the aunt decided in her mind. She was utterly unable to come to any satisfactory decision about the grass in the other field.

The smaller girl created a **digression** by beginning to recite "On the Road to Mandalay." She only knew the first line, but she put her limited knowledge to the fullest possible use. She repeated the line over and over again in a dreamy but **resolute** and very loud voice; it seemed to the bachelor as though some one had had a bet with her that she could not repeat the line aloud two thousand times without stopping. Whoever it was who had challenged her so was likely to lose his bet.

"Come over here and listen to a story," said the aunt, when the bachelor had looked twice at her and once at the emergency chain that could be pulled to stop the train.

5. patent

(adj) plainly visible, obvious

- *The old laborer's patent delight at his daughter's graduation ceremony was charming to see.*

digression

(noun) a wandering away from the main topic

Done on [Day 9](#) of the Vocab Program.

6. resolute

(adj) firm and determined

Opposite: **irresolute**

(adj) unsure and undecided

- *He stood irresolute at the fork in the road, debating which of the two paths to take.*

The children moved **listlessly** towards the aunt's end of the carriage. Her reputation as a story-teller clearly did not rank high in their estimation.

In a low, hushed voice, interrupted at frequent intervals by loud, **petulant** questionings from her listeners, she began a **deplorably insipid** story about a little girl who was good, and made friends with every one on account of her goodness, and was finally saved from a mad bull by a number of rescuers who admired her moral character.

"Wouldn't they have saved her if she hadn't been good?" demanded the bigger of the small girls. It was exactly the question that the bachelor had wanted to ask.

"Well, yes," admitted the aunt lamely, "but I don't think they would have run quite so fast to her help if they had not liked her so much."

"It's the stupidest story I've ever heard," said the bigger of the small girls, with immense conviction.

7. listless

(adj) without energy or enthusiasm

- *By the window sat the sick woman, perfectly still, listless.*

8. petulant

(adj) easily irritated, especially over minor matters

- *A petulant and unreasonable family member forces everybody to walk on eggshells around him or her.*

9. deplorable

(adj) deserving strong criticism

- *Slaves were forced to work under deplorable conditions on plantations.*

10. insipid

(adj) dull and boring

"I didn't listen after the first bit, it was so stupid," said Cyril.

The smaller girl made no actual comment on the story, but she had long ago restarted a murmured repetition of her favorite line.

"You don't seem to be a success as a story-teller," said the bachelor suddenly from his corner.

The aunt **bristled** in instant defense at this unexpected attack.

"It's a very difficult thing to tell stories that children can both understand and appreciate," she said stiffly.

"I don't agree with you," said the bachelor.

"Perhaps you would like to tell them a story," was the aunt's **retort**.

"Tell us a story," demanded the bigger of the small girls.

11. bristle

(v) to show anger or irritation

- *The old scientist bristled at the suggestion that his lifetime's research had been fruitless.*

12. retort

(n) a quick sharp reply that wittily or angrily responds to a **perceived** verbal attack

perceive

(v) sense

Done on [Day 9](#) of the Vocab Program.

"Once upon a time," began the bachelor, "there was a little girl called Bertha, who was extra-ordinarily good."

The children's momentarily-aroused interest began to go down at once; all stories seemed dreadfully alike, no matter who told them.

"She did all that she was told, she was always truthful, she kept her clothes clean, ate milk puddings as though they were chocolate pastries, learned her lessons perfectly, and was polite in her manners."

"Was she pretty?" asked the bigger of the small girls.

"Not as pretty as any of you," said the bachelor, "but she was horribly good."

There was a wave of reaction in favor of the story; the word horrible in connection with goodness was an appreciable **novelty**. It seemed to introduce a ring of truth that was absent from the aunt's tales of child life.

13. novelty

(n) a new thing

- *Sub-zero temperatures are a novelty to people from hot places.*

Adjective: *novel* = new

"She was so good," continued the bachelor, "that she won several medals for goodness, which she always wore, pinned on to her dress. There was a medal for obedience, another medal for punctuality, and a third for good behavior. They were large metal medals and they clinked against one another as she walked. No other child in the town where she lived had as many as three medals, so everybody knew that she must be an extra good child."

"Horribly good," quoted Cyril.

"Everybody talked about her goodness, and the Prince of the country got to hear about it, and he said that as she was so very good she might be allowed once a week to walk in his park, which was just outside the town. It was a beautiful park, and no children were ever allowed in it, so it was a great honor for Bertha to be allowed to go there."

"Were there any sheep in the park?" demanded Cyril.

"No;" said the bachelor, "there were no sheep."

"Why weren't there any sheep?" came the **inevitable** question arising out of that answer.

inevitable
Done earlier in this story (Word #3)

The aunt permitted herself a smile, which might almost have been described as a grin.

"There were no sheep in the park," said the bachelor, "because the Prince's mother had once had a dream that her son would either be killed by a sheep or else by a clock falling on him. For that reason the Prince never kept a sheep in his park or a clock in his palace."

The aunt suppressed a gasp of admiration.

"Was the Prince killed by a sheep or by a clock?" asked Cyril.

"He is still alive, so we can't tell whether the dream will come true," said the bachelor **nonchalantly**; "anyway, there were no sheep in the park, but there were lots of little pigs running all over the place."

14. **nonchalant**
(adj) cool and unconcerned

"What color were they?"

"Black with white faces, white with black spots, black all over, grey with white patches, and some were white all over."

The storyteller paused to let a full idea of the park's treasures sink into the children's imaginations; then he resumed:

"Bertha was rather sorry to find that there were no flowers in the park. She had promised her aunts, with tears in her eyes, that she would not pick any of the kind Prince's flowers, and she had meant to keep her promise, so of course it made her feel silly to find that there were no flowers to pick."

"Why weren't there any flowers?"

"Because the pigs had eaten them all," said the bachelor promptly. "The gardeners had told the Prince that you couldn't have pigs and flowers, so he decided to have pigs and no flowers."

There was a murmur of approval at the excellence of the Prince's decision; so many people would have decided the other way.

"There were lots of other delightful things in the park. There were ponds with gold and blue and green fish in them, and trees with beautiful parrots that said clever things at a moment's notice, and hummingbirds that hummed all the popular tunes of the day. Bertha walked up and down and enjoyed herself immensely, and thought to herself:

'If I were not so extraordinarily good I should not have been allowed to come into this beautiful park and enjoy all that there is to be seen in it,'

and her three medals clinked against one another as she walked and helped to remind her how very good she really was.

Just then an enormous wolf came furtively into the park to see if it could catch a fat little pig for its supper."

"What color was it?" asked the children, amid an immediate quickening of interest.

"Mud-color all over, with a black tongue and pale grey eyes that shone with bloodthirstiness. The first thing that it saw in the park was Bertha; her dress was so spotlessly white and clean that it could be seen from a great distance.

Bertha saw the wolf and saw that it was crouching towards her, and she began to wish that she had never been allowed to come into the park. She ran as hard as she could, and the wolf came after her with huge leaps and bounds. She managed to reach a shrubbery of myrtle bushes and she hid herself in one of the thickest of the bushes.

The wolf came sniffing among the branches, its black tongue lolling out of its mouth and its eyes red with anger. Bertha was terribly frightened, and thought to herself:

'If I had not been so extraordinarily good, I should have been safe in the town at this moment.'

However, the scent of the myrtle was so strong that the wolf could not sniff out where Bertha was hiding, and the bushes were so thick that he might

have hunted about in them for a long time without catching sight of her, so he thought he might as well go off and catch a little pig instead.

Bertha was trembling very much at having the wolf **prowling** and sniffing so near her, and as she trembled the medal for obedience clinked against the medals for good conduct and punctuality.

The wolf was just moving away when he heard the medals clinking and stopped to listen; they clinked again in a bush quite near him.

He rushed into the bush, his eyes shining with bloodthirstiness and triumph, and dragged Bertha out and ate her up to the last piece. All that was left of her were her shoes, bits of clothing, and the three medals for goodness.”

"Were any of the little pigs killed?"

"No, they all escaped."

15. **prowl**

(v) to move secretively in order to hunt or to steal

- *While residents slept, thieves prowled their neighborhood, looking for unlocked cars.*

"The story began badly," said the smaller of the small girls, "but it had a beautiful ending."

"It is the most beautiful story that I ever heard," said the bigger of the small girls decisively.

"It is the only beautiful story I have ever heard," said Cyril.

A **dissenting** opinion came from the aunt.

"A most improper story to tell to young children! You have **undermined** the effect of years of careful teaching."

"At any rate," said the bachelor, collecting his belongings in preparation for leaving the carriage, "I kept them quiet for ten minutes, which was more than you were able to do."

16. dissent

(v) to disagree

Opposite: consent = to agree

17. undermine

(v) to weaken something secretly by gradually eroding the foundation on which it stands.

Origin: under+ mine

⇒ 'to mine under a structure'

⇒ 'to weaken the foundation on which the structure stands.'

"Unhappy woman!" he observed to himself as he walked down the platform of Templecombe station; "for the next six months or so those children will **assail** her in public with demands for an improper story!"

18. assail

(v) to trouble or to attack

- *Michaela's mind was assailed by self-doubt and guilt after the car that she was drunk-driving crashed into a tree, killing her best friend and passenger Evie on the spot.*

End Note: I have slightly modified the original story by Saki for the purposes of the Vocab Program.

The Storyteller, by Saki

18 GRE words

1. Tenacious
2. Fatuous
3. Inevitable
4. Persevere
5. Patent (adj)
6. Resolute, irresolute
7. Listless
8. Petulant
9. Deplorable
10. Insipid
11. Bristle (v)
12. Retort
13. Novelty
14. Nonchalant
15. Prowl
16. Dissent
17. Undermine
18. Assail

Help me help you better 😊

Did you learn new words more easily through this story? Would you like me to create more such stories?

Is my Vocab Program helping you?

To share your comments and feedback, write me a message on [LinkedIn](#) or a mail at grecoachjk@gmail.com.

Japinder Kaur

<https://grecoachjk.com>