

By Stephen Leacock

**Theme**

Unknown Friend", is a short story about a man who meets a stranger in a train. The stranger starts talking to the man as if he has known him since the good old days. They have a long conversation about their old gang and the loss that the man has suffered.

The stranger pretended to know every detail about the man. The man tried to remember the stranger but couldn't remember and identify who the stranger was.

At last, the man comes to know that he was cheated by the stranger.

The theme of the chapter is that trying to be oversmart can cause loss.

**Message**

Nobody should try to be oversmart. If he/she does not recognize someone, then they should admit that they could not recognize the person.

**Understanding the text.**

**A. Answer these questions.**

Ans 1) The line in paragraph 6 " 'Who, indeed,' I thought to myself." indicates that something may not be quite right. It suggests that the speaker may not be quite so pleased to see the other man or that he may not have recognised the other man.

Ans 2) The speaker was talking about the situation where he could not recognise or remember the other person, although the latter claimed to be an old friend. He was going to deal with it by staying calm and acting confidently, as if he did know the other man. He was going to talk to the man and find out who he really was.

Ans 3) In paragraphs 27 to 36, the speaker tries to ask questions to the other man instead of responding to his questions and comments. This was a bold plan as he could have asked something that would show that he could not recognise the man, but he felt confident that he could ask safe questions. With the help of this plan, he hoped to recall who the other man was. His plan did not work because although the other man answered his questions, the speaker still could not recognise him.

Ans 4) The speaker is referring to his mistake in saying that the person who was supposed to have died used to smoke. It could be a stupid thing for him to say because he did not really know who the other man was referring to. He could have been referring to someone who would not smoke, like the speaker's grandmother. By making such a mistake, the speaker almost revealed that he still could not recognise the other man.

Ans 5) The stranger's face was agitated because he said that he had missed his stop. The train had arrived at the junction and he was supposed to have got down at the previous station. He needed to get down and send a telegram to someone saying that he had missed his stop. Yet he could not seem to open his suitcase to bring out the money. The train stopped at the junction for a very short time so he was in a hurry. The speaker did not feel very sympathetic towards the other man. He wanted the other man to go away, so he offered him some money to get down and send the telegram. He called him an idiot for forgetting to take his suitcase.

Ans 6) Yes, the speaker blames himself for his loss. He felt that since he had tried to be too clever and pretended to know the stranger instead of admitting that he could not recognise him, the stranger got the opportunity to take his money. The loss was of the money that the stranger took from him, pretending to be in a hurry to send a telegram.

**B. Mark these sentences as true (T) or not true (NT).**

- |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Not true | 4. Not true |
| 2. True     | 5. Not true |
| 3. True     | 6. True     |

**Appreciating the text.**

- a. The speaker spoke here with a note of sadness because he wanted to show the other man that he too, had suffered from the long separation from his supposed friend.
- b. The speaker said 'Never' firmly and flatly because he did not want the discussion to move towards 'the old place' till he could understand which place was being referred to.
- c. The speaker spoke gently here because the other man had said that he may not care to go back to the old place and from this the speaker guessed that there was some painful or delicate history attached to the place that the other man was talking about.
- d. The speaker struck in with great admiration when he planned to take a bold step and decided to ask questions himself to try and understand who the other person was. He was pretending to follow the conversation with interest.
- e. When the other man laughed and said that Pete was married, the speaker started to laugh as well. He was trying to show that if the other man found it funny that Pete had got married, then he too, understood why it was funny and was suitably amused.
- f. When the other man mentioned a loss, the speaker decided to remain quiet because he had no idea what it was that he was supposed to have lost.
- g. The speaker hiccupped with joy when he understood that the other man was talking about someone's death, because in his experience, talking about death in situations like this was very easy. If he waited a little, he could find out who had died and through that, who the other man was.

**Long question**

Why does the narrator describe his state in a single word 'stung'? What does this word mean and how was the narrator stung?

**Ans:-** The narrator describe his state in a single word 'stung' because here the single word is more appropriate and expressive than a lengthier description. It is more effective than providing an entire sentence or even a paragraph to describe the shock that the narrator felt.

Here, the word 'stung' means cheated. We saw that since the beginning of the chapter the narrator could not recognize the stranger who introduced himself as an old friend of the narrator. As the narrator could not recognise him, he should have told him about it. But, the narrator tried to show his cleverness by pretending to recognize him. The stranger taking the advantage of the situation took away all the money the narrator had. In this way the narrator was stung or cheated by the stranger.