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PRÉCIS
PRACTICE
for
OVERSEAS
STUDENTS

Précis Practice

for

Overseas Students

BY

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PREFACE

WE believe that to be able to read and understand and then summarise a longer passage is an important part of the English course of any student. There are, of course, a number of books which provide hints and material for this sort of exercise, but in our experience in the Sudan, we felt the lack of a book approaching the problem from the point of view of the overseas student. In this book we have tried to fulfil this need.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first will be found short passages of narrative. We have emphasised throughout that the first need is *to understand*. For this reason most of the pieces are suitable, not only for summary by the student, but for comprehension questions of the sort which we have generally included. The master may want to add questions of his own to the ones we have asked. The material in Part One will be found suitable for first or second year secondary work.

In Part Two the passages are more difficult. The questions asked are more searching; again we encourage the teacher to supplement them with questions of his own. We have included also a number of exercises which should help the student to approach the understanding of any passages which are suitable for summary, but we believe that in the work of a third year, for which this section is primarily intended, comprehension is more important than anything else.

Part Three is intended to provide material suitable for the Fourth Year, with some examination, like School Certificate, in view. Comprehension exercises are still included but each passage is suitable also for summary or précis.

This book is suitable for overseas students because of its careful avoidance of difficult words and phrases, at least until the Third Part. And also because the material has been carefully selected to provide the sort of interest which will appeal to such students. For too long English examiners have expected overseas students to write summaries of passages which they cannot possibly be expected to understand or appreciate. Here, if the interest is local, it is not essentially English; and if the background to any passage is English, its interest is nevertheless general.

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

NARRATIVE

This part of the book deals with stories; that is all that is meant by narrative.

Let us see what happens to a story when it is told several times. For example, Ali may say to you:

"I was going across the bridge the other day when an extraordinary thing happened. You know how you come round the corner to cross the bridge and suddenly meet the wind which comes sweeping down the river? On this day the wind was especially strong, so strong that people half turned their backs on it, and walked across sideways. I was making my way across in this manner when I saw the wind catch the hat of the man who was just in front of me. He tried to seize it before the wind had blown it away, but of course he was too late, and, before he could say a word, there it was high above the river. We all rushed to the edge of the bridge to see what would happen when the hat landed in the water. But instead, it came floating back and landed on the bridge at my feet. We all laughed; especially the owner of the hat; he took it from me and held it firmly in his hand until he reached the other side of the river."

You think that Abdullah would like to hear the story and so you tell him:

"Ali told me that, the other day, as he was going across the bridge over the river, the wind blew off a man's hat. It blew for miles down the river, and then suddenly it came sailing back and landed at Ali's feet. He picked it up and handed it back to its owner."

In the end the story may be reduced to:

"Ali saw a man's hat blow off when he was crossing the bridge; it sailed out over the river and then came back and landed on the man's head."

We shall notice several things:

(1) Ali's story is rather more interesting because it contains several details that the other stories miss out. For instance, people half-turning their backs on the wind and walking across the bridge sideways, or rushing to the edge of the bridge to see what happened to the hat. When the story is re-told these details are missed out because they make no difference to the main point.

(2) Other points may be added to make the story sound even more extraordinary. For instance, the hat went "miles down the river," and in the last version it even returned to its owner's head. The first of these statements is an exaggeration (that is to say it contains some truth), the second is just a lie.

(3) Ali says: "I was going." When you repeat the story you say: "Ali said that he was going." This is what is called Reported Speech, and we often use it.

(4) The later versions of the story are shorter than the first one. This is largely because the details have been missed out. In fact when you re-tell the story you make a summary (or *précis*) of it.

Let us add one or two more words about each of these points.

Detail

Detail often makes a story more interesting, even makes it sound more likely. If Ali had said that his friend Amin was with him we might find it easier to believe his story; there is someone else who will tell us if the story is true or not. But Amin's presence does not really make any difference to the story itself. There is nothing wrong with bringing detail into a story, in fact it is a good thing. But we shall always notice that when a story is re-told by someone else the details seem to disappear. A very good example of this is in the old poems which we call ballads.

These were stories which were told by one man to another, and by that man to a third, and so on, long before they were ever written down. When in the end they were written down there was hardly any detail in them at all. It was left to a man's imagination.

Adding Fresh Points

You may sometimes be allowed to exaggerate in order to make a story sound more wonderful. You may say, if you are very rich, "I have tons of money." You haven't, but we know what you mean. You may say, "The hat blew miles out over the river." It didn't, but we know what you mean. But to give a story a different ending is wrong if you are really trying to tell us what Ali saw. If you are telling the police about a motor car accident you must tell them what happened, even if it would be more fun to invent a few details. So, if the truth matters, you must not invent; you must keep to the story as you heard it.

Reported Speech

Reported Speech is quite easy to understand when you have had a little practice. For instance you say, "I am going to my house." By the time your friend tells someone else about it, it has all happened and it is no longer in the present tense, it is in the past. When you re-tell a story you do so quite naturally in Reported Speech.

Summary (or Précis)

This book is largely about summary or précis. They are really the same thing. Later on we shall say what a précis is, in more detail. For the present let us talk about it as, "a short version of a longer story, a short version which does not miss out any of the important points of the longer story."

To make a summary or précis two things are necessary:

(1) You must clearly *understand* what the story is about and what happens in it. Therefore a lot of the questions in this book will make sure that you do *understand*.

(2) You must be able to re-tell the story in your own words, briefly and clearly.

CHAPTER I

Read the following extracts (1-9) and then answer the questions which follow them. Be careful when you are asked "What is the passage about?" If you were asked this question about Number 1 the answer would NOT be, "It is about a storm." A rather longer answer is needed. Like this:

"It is about someone who is going by coach to Yarmouth. A storm is beginning. It gets worse and worse, and sometimes even stops the coach."

(1) It was evening when I set out in the coach along the road to Yarmouth.

"Don't you think," I said to the coachman, "that that is a very strange sky? I don't remember ever to have seen one like it." "Nor I," said the coachman. "That sky shows that there will be wind, sir. There will be damage done at sea."

The sky was thickly covered with clouds, here and there touched with yellow, like smoke from wet wood. There were flying clouds, and clouds built up in mountains that seemed higher than their distance from the earth; and the moon drove through all as if she had lost her way and was very frightened. There had been wind all day. It was rising with a strange and fearful sound. In another hour it was blowing harder.

As night came on the clouds closed in and covered the whole sky; it was very dark and the wind blew harder. It increased until our horses could hardly face it; several times they turned about and stopped and we feared that the coach would be turned over.

(Adapted from *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens.)

- (a) When the coachman saw that there was going to be a wind of what did he immediately think?
- (b) What was queer about the clouds?

- (c) What did the moon appear to be doing? What does this tell you about the clouds?
- (d) Did the storm come suddenly?
- (e) Why was it very dark in spite of the moon?
- (f) Why were they afraid that their coach might be turned over?
- (g) The coachman said, "There will be damage done at sea." Put this in reported speech, beginning "the coachman said that . . ."

(2) When day came the wind blew harder and harder. I had been in many storms but I had never known anything like this. We came to Ipswich, very late, having had to fight every inch of the ground. We found people standing in the market place; they had got out of bed for fear of falling chimneys. While the horses were being changed they told us of roofs being torn off, and of trees torn out of the earth. Still the storm increased.

As we came struggling on, nearer and nearer the sea from which this great wind was blowing, its force became greater and greater. Long before we came to the sea its salt was on our lips and salt rain showered upon us. When we came in sight of the sea the waves looked like another shore with towers and buildings on it.

(Adapted from *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens.)

- (a) Why were they late in reaching Ipswich? What had they been fighting against?
- (b) Why were the people standing in the market place?
- (c) From which direction did the wind come?
- (d) Why does the writer say that the salt was "on our lips"? How did it get there?

- (e) Why did the waves look as though they were a shore with towers on it?
- (f) "They told of roofs being torn off." What were the actual words which may have been spoken by the bystanders? (In other words put this into direct speech.)
- (g) What is the passage all about? (Answer in two or three sentences.)

(3) *The Captain*

His stories were what frightened people worst of all. Dreadful stories they were; about hanging, and murder, and storms at sea, and wild deeds. My father was always saying the Inn would be ruined, for people would soon cease coming there; but I really believe his presence did us good. People were frightened at the time, but on looking back they rather liked it, it was a fine excitement in a quiet country life. In one way, indeed, it did seem that he might ruin us; for he kept on staying week after week, and at last month after month, so that all the money had been long used up; and still my father never had the courage to demand more.

(Adapted from *Treasure Island*, by R. L. Stevenson.)

- (a) "My father was always saying the Inn would be ruined, for people would cease coming there." This is an example of reported speech; what did the writer's father actually say? Give his own words as he would have spoken them.
- (b) Why did his father think the Inn would be ruined?
- (c) Why were the people frightened?
- (d) Why, later, were the same people rather pleased?
- (e) How did the man nearly ruin the Inn in fact?

- (f) What can you say about the Captain's character from these few lines?
- (g) What is the passage all about?

(4) *The Blind Man*

About three o'clock of a cold, misty, frosty afternoon, I was standing at the door for a moment, full of sad thoughts about my father, when I saw someone drawing slowly near along the road. He was blind, for he felt before him with a stick, and had a covering over his eyes and nose; and he was bent, as if with age or weakness. He wore a huge ragged sea coat. I never saw in my life a more dreadful looking figure. He stopped a little distance from the Inn, and raising his voice in an odd way, half singing, half speaking, addressed the air in front of him:

"Will any kind friend tell a poor blind man, who has lost the precious sight of his eyes in defending his native country, in what part of this country he may now be?"

(Adapted from *Treasure Island*, by R. L. Stevenson.)

- (a) Why was the writer feeling sad as he stood at the door?
- (b) How did he know that the man was blind?
- (c) What suggested that the man was either ill or old?
- (d) What words, apart from "drawing slowly near," suggest that the man was moving slowly?
- (e) In what way did the man say he had lost his sight?
- (f) Does anything in these lines suggest to you that possibly he had not lost his sight in any such way?
- (g) Put the direct speech in this passage into reported speech.
- (h) What is the passage all about?

(5) *The Barrel*

Thinking I should like an apple I went to get one. In I got, right into the apple barrel, and found there was scarcely an apple left; but, sitting down there in the dark, what with the sound of the waters and the movement of the ship, I had either fallen asleep or was on the point of doing so, when a heavy man sat down close by. The barrel shook as he leaned his shoulders against it, and I was just about to jump up when the man began to speak. It was Silver's voice, and, before I had heard a dozen words, I would not have shown myself for all the world, but lay there shaking with fear and listening with all my power, for from these dozen words I understood that the lives of all the honest men on board depended on me alone.

(Adapted from *Treasure Island*, by R. L. Stevenson.)

- (a) Why did the writer get into the barrel?
- (b) Were there any apples left there?
- (c) Did he take one?
- (d) Did he fall asleep?
- (e) What made him feel sleepy?
- (f) Why do you think he was unwilling to show himself after he had heard what Silver was talking about?
- (g) Why do you think the lives of the honest men now depended "on me alone"?
- (h) Express in a different way "I was on the point of falling asleep."
- (i) What is the passage all about?

(6) *The Log House*

I had not gone a hundred yards when I came on the stockade. This was how it was: a spring of clear water rose almost at the top of a little hill. On the hill, and encircling the spring, they had put a strong log-house, fit to hold forty people at the most, with holes for guns on every side. All round this they had cleared a wide space, and then the thing was completed by a fence six feet high, without door or opening, too strong to pull down without time and labour, and too open to shelter the attackers. The people in the log-house were very well placed; they might stand in shelter and shoot the others like rabbits. All they wanted was a good watch and food; for, unless they were completely surprised, they might hold the place against an army.

(Adapted from *Treasure Island*, by R. L. Stevenson.)

- (a) Why did the fence protect the defenders but not the attackers?
- (b) How did the defenders in the log-house fire their guns?
- (c) What would be the only way for anyone to reach the log-house?
- (d) What is meant by "a good watch"?
- (e) What were the two reasons that made the builders of the log-house choose this particular spot?
- (f) What is the passage all about?

(7) The house of Shaws stood some five full storeys high. As I advanced it seemed to me the stair grew airier and a little lighter: and I was wondering what might be the cause of this change, when a second flash of summer lightning came and went. If I did not cry out, it was because fear had me by the throat; and if I did not fall, it was more by Heaven's mercy than my own strength. For the flash shone in on every side through holes in the wall, so that I seemed to be