



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F16

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>

Contents

- 1. The School Among the Pines Part 1.**
- 2. The Taj Mahal.**
- 3. Grammar Page – Nouns Agreement.**

The School Among the Pines

Part 1

1

A leopard, lithe and sinewy, drank at the mountain stream, and then lay down on the grass to bask in the late February sunshine. Its tail twitched occasionally and the animal appeared to be sleeping. At the sound of distant voices it raised its head to listen, then stood up and leapt lightly over the boulders in the stream, disappearing among the trees on the opposite bank.

A minute or two later, three children came walking down the forest path. They were a girl and two boys, and they were singing in their local dialect an old song they had learnt from their grandparents.

Five more miles to go!

*We climb through rain
and snow. A river to
cross...*

A mountain to pass...

Now we've four more miles to go!

Their school satchels looked new, their clothes had been washed and pressed. Their loud and cheerful singing startled a spotted fork-tail. The bird left its favourite rock in the stream and flew down the dark ravine.



A fork-tail bird

“Well, we have only three more miles to go,” said the bigger boy, Prakash, who had been this way hundreds of times. “But first we have to cross the stream.”

He was a sturdy twelve-year-old with eyes like raspberries and a mop of bushy hair that refused to settle down on his head. The girl and her small brother were taking this path for the first time.

“I’m feeling tired, Bina,” said the little boy.

Bina smiled at him, and Prakash said, “Don’t worry, Sonu, you’ll get used to the walk. There’s plenty of time.” He glanced at the old watch he’d been given by his grandfather. It needed constant winding. “We can rest here for five or six minutes.”

They sat down on a smooth boulder and watched the clear water of the shallow stream tumbling downhill. Bina examined the old watch on Prakash’s wrist. The glass was badly scratched and she could barely make out the figures on the dial. ‘Are you sure it still gives the right time?’ she asked.

‘Well, it loses five minutes every day, so I put it ten minutes forward at night. That means by morning it’s quite accurate! Even our teacher, Mr Mani, asks me for the time. If he doesn’t ask, I tell him! The clock in our classroom keeps stopping.’

They removed their shoes and let the cold mountain water run over their feet. Bina was the same age as Prakash. She had pink cheeks, soft brown eyes, and hair that was just beginning to lose its natural curls. Hers was a gentle face, but a determined little chin showed that she could be a strong person. Sonu, her younger brother, was ten. He was a thin boy who had been sickly as a child but was now beginning to fill out. Although he did not look very athletic, he could run like the wind.

Bina had been going to school in her own village of Koli, on the other side of the mountain. But it had been a Primary School, finishing at Class Five. Now, in order to study in the Sixth, she would have to walk several miles every day to Nauti, where there was a High School going up to the Eighth. It had been decided that Sonu would also shift to the new school, to give Bina company. Prakash, their neighbour in Koli, was already a pupil at the Nauti School. His mischievous nature, which sometimes got him into trouble, had resulted in his having to repeat a year.

But this didn’t seem to bother him. “What’s the hurry?” he had told his indignant parents. “You’re not sending me to a foreign land when I finish school. And our cows aren’t running away, are they?”

“You would prefer to look after the cows, wouldn’t you?” asked Bina, as they got up to continue their walk.

“Oh, school’s all right. Wait till you see old Mr Mani. He always gets our names mixed up, as well as the subjects he’s supposed to be teaching. At our last lesson, instead of maths, he gave us a geography lesson!”

“More fun than maths,” said Bina.

“Yes, but there’s a new teacher this year. She’s very young, they say, just out of college. I wonder what she’ll be like.”

Bina walked faster and Sonu had some trouble keeping up with them. She was excited about the new school and the prospect of different surroundings. She had seldom been outside her own village, with its small school and single ration shop. The day’s routine never varied - helping her mother in the fields or with household tasks like fetching water from the spring or cutting grass and fodder for the cattle. Her father, who was a soldier, was away for nine months in the year and Sonu was still too small for the heavier tasks.

As they neared Nauti village, they were joined by other children coming from different directions. Even where there were no major roads, the mountains were full of little lanes and short cuts. Like a game of snakes and ladders, these narrow paths zigzagged around the hills and villages, cutting through fields and crossing narrow ravines until they came together to form a fairly busy road along which mules, cattle and goats joined the throng.

Nauti was a fairly large village, and from here a broader but dustier road started for Tehri. There was a small bus, several trucks and (for part of the way) a road-roller. The road hadn’t been completed because the heavy diesel roller couldn’t take the steep climb to Nauti. It stood on the roadside half way up the road from Tehri.

Prakash knew almost everyone in the area, and exchanged greetings and gossip with other children as well as with muleteers, bus-drivers, milkmen and labourers working on the road. He loved telling everyone the time, even if they weren’t interested.

“It’s nine o’clock,” he would announce, glancing at his wrist. “Isn’t your bus leaving today?”

“Off with you!” the bus-driver would respond, “I’ll leave when I’m ready.”

As the children approached Nauti, the small flat school buildings came into view on the outskirts of the village, fringed with a line of long-leaved pines. A small crowd had assembled on the playing field. Something unusual seemed to have happened. Prakash ran forward to see what it was all about. Bina and Sonu stood aside, waiting in a patch of sunlight near the boundary wall.

Prakash soon came running back to them. He was bubbling over with excitement.

“It’s Mr Mani!” he gasped. “He’s disappeared! People are saying a leopard must have carried him off!”

2

Mr Mani wasn’t really old. He was about fifty-five and was expected to retire soon. But for the children, adults over forty seemed ancient! And Mr Mani had always been a bit absent-minded, even as a young man.

He had gone out for his early morning walk, saying he’d be back by eight o’clock, in time to have his breakfast and be ready for class. He wasn’t married, but his sister and her husband stayed with him. When it was past nine o’clock his sister presumed he’d stopped at a neighbour’s house for breakfast (he loved tucking into other people’s breakfast) and that he had gone on to school from there. But when the school bell rang at ten o’clock, and everyone but Mr Mani was present, questions were asked and guesses were made.

No one had seen him return from his walk and enquiries made in the village showed that he had not stopped at anyone’s house. For Mr Mani to disappear was puzzling; for him to disappear without his breakfast was extraordinary.

Then a milkman returning from the next village said he had seen a leopard sitting on a rock on the outskirts of the pine forest. There had been talk of a cattle-killer in the valley, of leopards and other animals being displaced by the construction of a dam. But as yet no one had heard of a leopard attacking a man. Could Mr Mani have been its first victim? Someone found a strip of red cloth entangled in a blackberry bush and went running through the village showing it to everyone. Mr Mani had been known to wear red pyjamas. Surely, he had been seized and eaten! But where were his remains? And why had he been in his pyjamas?

Meanwhile, Bina and Sonu and the rest of the children had followed their teachers into the school playground. Feeling a little lost, Bina looked around for Prakash. She found herself facing a dark slender young woman wearing spectacles, who must have been in her early twenties – just a little too old to be another student. She had a kind expressive face and she seemed a little concerned by all that had been happening.

Bina noticed that she had lovely hands; it was obvious that the new teacher hadn’t milked cows or worked in the fields!

“You must be new here,” said the teacher, smiling at Bina. “And is this your little brother?”

“Yes, we’ve come from Koli village. We were at school there.”

“It’s a long walk from Koli. You didn’t see any leopards, did you? Well, I’m new too. Are you in the Sixth class?”

“Sonu is in the Third. I’m in the Sixth.”

“Then I’m your new teacher. My name is Tania Ramola. Come along, let’s see if we can settle down in our classroom.”

Mr Mani turned up at twelve o’clock, wondering what all the fuss was about. No, he snapped, he had not been attacked by a leopard; and yes, he had lost his pyjamas and would someone kindly return them to him?

“How did you lose your pyjamas, Sir?” asked Prakash.

“They were blown off the washing line!” snapped Mr Mani.

After much questioning, Mr Mani admitted that he had gone further than he had intended, and that he had lost his way coming back. He had been a bit upset because the new teacher, a slip of a girl, had been given charge of the Sixth, while he was still with the Fifth, along with that troublesome boy Prakash, who kept on reminding him of the time! The headmaster had explained that as Mr Mani was due to retire at the end of the year, the school did not wish to burden him with a senior class. But Mr Mani looked upon the whole thing as a plot to get rid of him. He glowered at Miss Ramola whenever he passed her. And when she smiled back at him, he looked the other way!

Mr Mani had been getting even more absent-minded of late – putting on his shoes without his socks, wearing his homespun waistcoat inside out, mixing up people’s names, and of course, eating other people’s lunches and dinners. His sister had made a special mutton broth (*pai*) for the postmaster, who was down with ‘flu’ and had asked Mr Mani to take it over in a thermos. When the postmaster opened the thermos, he found only a few drops of broth at the bottom – Mr Mani had drunk the rest somewhere along the way.

When sometimes Mr Mani spoke of his coming retirement, it was to describe his plans for the small field he owned just behind the house. Right now, it was full of potatoes, which did not require much looking after; but he had plans for growing dahlias, roses, French beans, and other fruits and flowers.

The next time he visited Tehri, he promised himself, he would buy some dahlia bulbs and rose cuttings. The monsoon season would be a good time to put them down. And meanwhile, his potatoes were still flourishing.

3

Bina enjoyed her first day at the new school. She felt at ease with Miss Ramola, as did most of the boys and girls in her class. Tania Ramola had been to distant towns such as Delhi and Lucknow – places they had only read about – and it was said that she had a brother who was a pilot and flew planes all over the world. Perhaps he'd fly over Nauti some day!

Most of the children had, of course, seen planes flying overhead, but none of them had seen a ship, and only a few had been in a train. Tehri Mountain was far from the railway and hundreds of miles from the sea. But they all knew about the big dam that was being built at Tehri, just forty miles away.

Bina, Sonu and Prakash had company for part of the way home, but gradually the other children went off in different directions. Once they had crossed the stream, they were on their own again.

It was a steep climb all the way back to their village. Prakash had a supply of peanuts which he shared with Bina and Sonu, and at a small spring they quenched their thirst.

When they were less than a mile from home, they met a postman who had finished his round of the villages in the area and was now returning to Nauti.

“Don't waste time along the way,” he told them. “Try to get home before dark.”

“What's the hurry?” asked Prakash, glancing at his watch. “It's only five o'clock.”

“There's a leopard around. I saw it this morning, not far from the stream. No one is sure how it got here. So don't take any chances. Get home early.”

“So there really is a leopard,” said Sonu.

They took his advice and walked faster, and Sonu forgot to complain about his aching feet.

They were home well before sunset.

There was a smell of cooking in the air and they were hungry.

“Cabbage and roti,” said Prakash gloomily. “But I could eat anything today.” He stopped outside his small slate-roofed house, and Bina and Sonu waved him goodbye, then carried on across a couple of ploughed fields until they reached their small stone house.

“Stuffed tomatoes,” said Sonu, sniffing just outside the front door.

“And lemon pickle,” said Bina, who had helped cut, sun and salt the lemons a month previously.

Their mother was lighting the kitchen stove. They greeted her with great hugs and demands for an immediate dinner. She was a good cook who could make even the simplest of dishes taste delicious. Her favourite saying was, “Home-made *pai* is better than chicken soup in Delhi,” and Bina and Sonu had to agree.

Electricity had yet to reach their village, and they took their meal by the light of a kerosene lamp. After the meal, Sonu settled down to do a little homework, while Bina stepped outside to look at the stars.

Across the fields, someone was playing a flute. “It must be Prakash,” thought Bina. “He always breaks off on the high notes.” But the flute music was simple and appealing, and she began singing softly to herself in the dark.

4

Mr Mani was having trouble with the porcupines. They had been getting into his garden at night and digging up and eating his potatoes. From his bedroom window – left open, now that the mild-April weather had arrived – he could listen to them enjoying the vegetables he had worked hard to grow. Scunch, scunch! *Katar, katar*, as their sharp teeth sliced through the largest and juiciest of potatoes. For Mr Mani it was as though they were biting through his own flesh. And the sound of them digging industriously as they rooted up those healthy, leafy plants, made him tremble with rage and indignation. The unfairness of it all!

Yes, Mr Mani hated porcupines. He prayed for their destruction, their removal from the face of the earth. But, as his friends were quick to point out, “Bhagwan protected porcupines too,” and in any case you could never see the creatures or catch them, they were completely nocturnal.

Mr Mani got out of bed every night, torch in one hand, a stout stick in the other, but as soon as he stepped into the garden the crunching and digging stopped and he was greeted by the most infuriating of silences. He would grope around in the dark, swinging wildly with the stick, but not a single porcupine was to be seen or heard. As soon as he was back in bed – the sounds would start all over again. Scrunch, scrunch, *katar, katar...*

Mr Mani came to his class tired and dishevelled, with rings beneath his eyes and a permanent frown on his face. It took some time for his pupils to discover the reason for his misery, but when they did, they felt sorry for their teacher and took to discussing ways and means of saving his potatoes from the porcupines.

It was Prakash who came up with the idea of a moat or water ditch. "Porcupines don't like water," he said knowledgeably.

"How do you know?" asked one of his friends.

"Throw water on one and see how it runs! They don't like getting their quills wet." There was no one who could disprove Prakash's theory, and the class fell in with the idea of building a moat, especially as it meant getting most of the day off.

"Anything to make Mr Mani happy," said the headmaster, and the rest of the school watched with envy as the pupils of Class Five, armed with spades and shovels collected from all parts of the village, took up their positions around Mr Mani's potato field and began digging a ditch.

By evening the moat was ready, but it was still dry and the porcupines got in again that night and had a great feast.

"At this rate," said Mr Mani gloomily "there won't be any potatoes left to save."

But next day Prakash and the other boys and girls managed to divert the water from a stream that flowed past the village. They had the satisfaction of watching it flow gently into the ditch. Everyone went home in a good mood. By nightfall, the ditch had overflowed, the potato field was flooded, and Mr Mani found himself trapped inside his house. But Prakash and his friends had won the day. The porcupines stayed away that night!

A month had passed, and wild violets, daisies and buttercups now sprinkled the hill slopes, and on her way to school Bina gathered enough to make a little posy. The bunch of flowers fitted easily into an old ink-well. Miss Ramola was delighted to find this little display in the middle of her desk.

“Who put these here?” she asked in surprise.

Bina kept quiet, and the rest of the class smiled secretively. After that, they took turns bringing flowers for the classroom.

On her long walks to school and home again, Bina became aware that April was the month of new leaves. The oak leaves were bright green above and silver beneath, and when they rippled in the breeze they were like clouds of silvery green. The path was strewn with old leaves, dry and crackly. Sonu loved kicking them around.

Clouds of white butterflies floated across the stream. Sonu was chasing a butterfly when he stumbled over something dark and repulsive. He went sprawling on the grass. When he got to his feet, he looked down at the remains of a small animal.

“Bina! Prakash! Come quickly!” he shouted.

It was part of a sheep, killed some days earlier by a much larger animal. “Only a leopard could have done this,” said Prakash.

“Let’s get away, then,” said Sonu. “It might still be around!”

“No, there’s nothing left to eat. The leopard will be hunting elsewhere by now. Perhaps it’s moved on to the next valley.”

“Still, I’m frightened,” said Sonu. “There may be more leopards!”

Bina took him by the hand. “Leopards don’t attack humans!” she said.

“They will, if they get a taste for people!” insisted Prakash.

“Well, this one hasn’t attacked any people as yet,” said Bina, although she couldn’t be sure.

Hadn’t there been rumours of a leopard attacking some workers near the dam?

But she did not want Sonu to feel afraid, so she did not mention the story. All she said was, “It has probably come here because of all the activity near the dam.”

All the same, they hurried home. And for a few days, whenever they reached the stream, they crossed over very quickly, unwilling to linger too long at that lovely spot.

2. The Taj Mahal

The Taj Mahal is a famous mausoleum next to the river Yamuna in the Indian city of Agra. A mausoleum is a building where people bury the dead. The name Taj Mahal means 'the crown of palaces'.

The most famous part of the Taj Mahal is the large white dome in the centre. It is 35 metres high and is surrounded by four smaller domes. The rooms inside the building are decorated with beautiful archways and precious stones in the walls. The buildings are surrounded by gardens with pathways, pools, fountains and green gardens.

The construction of the Taj Mahal began in 1632 and finished in 1653. It was built with materials from all over India and Asia, but the main material is white marble. Historians believe that the materials were transported by over 1,000 elephants for the construction.

The emperor Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal as a burial place for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. According to legend, he wanted to build another Taj Mahal in black on the other side of the river, but this never happened. During the Indian Rebellion of 1857, many parts of the Taj Mahal were damaged by British soldiers, who took some of the precious stones from its walls. Over the years, the Taj Mahal has suffered from environmental damage, and there have been many government attempts to conserve its beauty.

The Taj Mahal is one of India's most famous landmarks. There are millions of visitors to the mausoleum every year. The Taj Mahal is almost always included in lists of famous buildings to visit and is considered one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

3. Grammar Page

8. Proper nouns ending in -s

→ The names and titles of books, countries, hotels, shows, etc normally agree with singular verbs.

Great Expectations was written by Charles Dickens.

Gulliver's Travels is a famous book by Jonathan Swift.

Tom and Jerry is a famous cartoon.

The United States has a big army.

The United Nations is an international organization of sovereign countries.

Athens is one of the oldest cities in Europe.

9. Plural expressions of distance, money, time, etc considered as a single unit

→ Plural expressions of distance, money, time, etc normally agree with singular verbs.

Ten dollars *is* a high price to pay.

Ten thousand rupees *is* enough for this work.

Five years *is* the maximum sentence for that offense.

Six months *is* not enough time to complete this project.

Two kilos of rice *costs* about two hundred rupees.

Hundred miles *is* a long distance.

Two lakh rupees *was* set aside for emergencies.

Twenty thousand rupees *is* the admission fee for this course.

10. Expressions of quantity

→ Words that indicate percent, fraction, part, majority, some, all, none, etc agree with singular or plural verbs depending on what types of nouns follow them.



All of **the food** *is* gone off.

All **the children** *are* physically strong.

A lot of **water** *was* put in the hay.

A lot of **students** *were* taught this course.

Most of **the bread** *is* gone off.

Most of **the students** *are* out of discipline.

Some of **the beads** *are* missing.

Some of **the water** *is* gone.

Two-thirds of **the book** *is* torn.

Two-thirds of **the books** *were* interesting.

A quarter of **it** *was* nice.

A quarter of **them** *were* not good.

Lots of **money** *was* spent.

A good deal of **time** *was* given.

A good deal of **efforts** *are* needed.

Two-thirds of **the workers** *are* satisfied with the wages.

Sixty percent of **the students** *have* scored more than eighty marks in English.