



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F18

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1. Love Conquers All

Long, long ago, there was a king who ruled over a large part of India. He was a great horseman. When he rode, he was like a strong wind rushing by. Horses knew and loved him, and because of his power over them he was known as the Lord-of-Horses.

In spite of his fame and popularity, the king was unhappy, for no children had been born to him, and in India this was always considered a great misfortune. He went from temple to temple, praying and offering sacrifices, but to no avail – it seemed as though the gods were displeased with him.

Finally he consulted the great sage Narada.

“How can I please the gods?” he asked. “I have been married five years, but still there is no heir to the throne.”

“Build a new temple,” said Narada. “Build a temple to Brahma the Creator.”

“I shall build the most beautiful temple in the land,” said the king, and he immediately summoned his best workmen and told them to build a temple taller than any other.

“Let it be taller than three palm trees,” he said. “Paint it gold inside and outside. A hundred steps of pure white marble must lead up to it.”

Within a few months a beautiful golden temple was built, surrounded by flowering trees and shrubs. And every day the king visited the temple, making special offerings to Brahma, God of Creation, and his wife, Savitri, that they might send him a son.

His queen and his nobles, and even the sage Narada, had almost given up hope, when one day, as the king laid his offerings before the shrine, he thought he saw a figure growing out of the flames that had sprung up from his sacrifice. And then he heard a voice – the voice, he thought, of a goddess. Although it was soft it filled the temple with its sweet sound.

“You have pleased me with your devotion,” were the words he heard. “I am Savitri, wife of Brahma. What is it you seek?”

His voice trembling, the king said, “Goddess, I desire a son, so that my name may not perish from the land.”

“I will give you a daughter,” replied the clear sweet voice.

The fire died down and the figure faded.

And not long afterwards there was great rejoicing in the king's palace. A daughter was born to the queen – a girl so radiantly beautiful that her parents were convinced that she was heaven-born, and sent out a proclamation saying that the child was to be called "Savitri" after the wife of Brahma.

As Savitri grew up, her father began to think about her marriage, and he decided that she should choose a husband for herself from among the princes of the neighbouring states. He had no intention of imposing his will upon her.

"Daughter," he said one day, "do you wish to marry? You may, if you wish, visit the palaces of our neighbouring kings and choose a husband for yourself from among the princes. I know that you are as wise as you are lovely, and that your choice will be pleasing to me."

Savitri decided that she would seek her husband, not among her wealthy and royal neighbours, but among the remote dwellings of the hermits in the forest. She had her chariot prepared for a long journey, and ordered her drivers to take the path that led into the wilderness.

After driving through the forest for several hours, the chariot-drivers told Savitri that a hermitage lay ahead. Savitri and her handmaidens got down from the chariot and approached a small temple, beside which stood a hut made of leaves and branches. Inside the hut they found an old man who, though blind and white-haired, had an upright bearing. He was, in fact, not a priest, but a king: many years ago he had gone blind and had been driven from his kingdom by a rival who took over his throne and threatened death to any of the king's family who tried to return.

As Savitri stood watching the blind old man, a youth on a black horse came riding through the forest and up to the door of the hut.

"He dresses like a peasant," said Savitri to herself, "but he sits his horse like a prince." And when she saw his face, her own lit up, for she knew that she had seen the man she would marry.

The youth dismounted, tethered his horse, greeted the old man with tender affection, and went into the hut.

"We need search no further," said Savitri to her handmaidens. "Let us ask the hospitality of these good people, and then in a few days we will return home."

The old king made them welcome. He told them of his misfortunes and of how he, and his wife, and their little son Satyavan, had been driven from the kingdom of Shalwa twenty years ago, and had lived ever since among the

hermits of the forest. Satyavan stood aside, watching Savitri, and falling further in love with her every moment. Not many days had passed before they had vowed to marry each other, but Savitri said that first she must return to her father's kingdom and obtain his consent to the marriage, after which she would come back to the forest and follow Satyavan for the rest of her life.

"But do not tell your parents as yet," she said. "Let me first speak to my father."

Savitri returned to her father's palace and found him holding counsel with Narada.

The sage had suggested that it was time that a husband was found for Savitri.

"Well, here she is," said the king, as Savitri approached. "She will tell you whether or not she has found a husband."

"Yes, father, I have," she cried, as she knelt at his feet for blessing. "In his dress and his possessions he is a poor man's son, but by birth he is a prince."

"And
his
name?
"

"Satya
van."

Before she could say another word, Narada, looking horrified, stood up and with raised hand, said: "No, Princess, not Satyavan!"

"There can be no other," said Savitri with a smile.

The king turned to Narada and asked: "Is there something wrong with the youth? Is he not all that my daughter takes him for?"

"He is all that she says... "

"Then is he already betrothed? Is there a curse upon him?"

Narada bowed his head and in a low voice said: "He is destined for an early death. Yama, the God of Death, has set his noose for him. Within a year the prince must die."

Savitri went pale, and almost fainted. But she summoned up all her courage and said, "Narada, you have prophesied his doom. I can but pray and hope. But even the knowledge of this terrible tale cannot shake my purpose. Satyavan shall be my husband for a year, even if for fifty I must be a widow!"

The sage stood silent, his head sunk upon his breast. Then finally he raised his hands towards Savitri in blessing.

“Peace be with you, daughter of the Lord-of-Horses,” he said, and turned and walked away.

The next day it was announced that the Princess Savitri would soon marry a prince in a distant region, and that, since the journey would be long and tedious, only her father would accompany her. Preparations were soon made, and the Lord- of-Horses and his beautiful daughter set out for the forest. They took with them many costly gifts for the parents of the bridegroom. But when the old King of the Shalwas heard what had brought them to his home, he was taken aback.

“But how can this be?” he asked. “How will your heaven-sent daughter fare in this rough country? There are no maids to tend on her. And what shall we feed her? We eat the fruits of the forest. We sleep on an earthen floor.”

Savitri took the blind old man by the hand, and spoke to him so sweetly and gently that she removed all his fears.

That same evening, when Satyavan returned from hunting, Savitri was given to him in marriage. The only guests were the hermits who lived nearby. All they brought as gifts were their blessings; and Savitri pleased them by removing her jewels and replacing her rich garments with humble clothes.

The Lord-of-Horses bade his daughter farewell, and rode alone back to his kingdom.

The days and weeks and months slipped by, and it seemed to Satyavan that his wife grew lovelier and gentler by the hour. No man was as happy as he. Savitri, too, was happy; but as the day of doom approached, she became quiet and pensive. She decided she would not leave his side by day or night. So she watched and waited, and seldom slept.

One morning the blind old king asked Satyavan to go to a part of the forest where there was a bamboo grove. He asked him to cut and bring home several stout pieces of bamboo.

When Satyavan set out, Savitri decided to follow him.



Satyavan, whistling cheerfully, soon reached the place where the bamboos grew, and raised his axe; but he had scarcely lifted it above his head for the first stroke, when it fell from his hands. He sank to the ground.

Savitri, following close behind, knew that the fatal moment was at hand. She ran forward and took his head in her arms. A shadow fell over them, and she became aware of a terrible form bending over her. He was tall and gaunt, greenish in hue, but with eyes of a fiery red. He carried a noose in one of his hands.

This was Yama, the God of Death.

Savitri rose slowly from the ground and, bending low before Yama, said: "What do you want, oh mighty one?"

"I have come for Satyavan, whose term of life is ended." And Yama leant forward and drew the prince's soul right out of his body.

Then, turning to the south, he fled at lightning speed.

But Savitri, too, was fleet of foot. Love lent her wings, and she followed close at Yama's heels. They came at last to the edge of the world, beyond which no mortal may pass alive, and here the God of Death stopped and spoke.

"Return, Savitri! You have followed far enough. Return and bury your husband's body with due rites."

"No, great Yama," answered Savitri. "When I wed my lord, I vowed to follow

him, wherever he went or was taken. I have done no wrong since I made that vow, and so the gods have no power over me to make me break it.”

“That is true,” said Yama, “and your answer pleases me. Ask a boon of me – but not the gift of your husband’s life!”

Savitri thought for a moment, and then asked that the old King of the Shalwas should regain his sight.

“It is granted,” said Yama. “Now return. No mortal may pass this spot alive.”

But Savitri stood her ground. She knew that no one loved Yama, that he was friendless even among the gods, so she decided to flatter him.

“Is it true, oh Yama, that a mortal is pleasing to the gods if she mingles with those who are virtuous?”

“It is true,” said Yama.

“Then you cannot force me to go, for you are virtuous, and I become more pleasing to the gods every moment I stay beside you.”

Yama was delighted, and told Savitri that, for her good sense, she might obtain another boon from him.

“Then grant that my father-in-law may regain his former kingdom,” she said. Yama assented and told her for the third time to go back and find her husband’s body before it was devoured by jackals.

“It does not matter,” said Savitri, “if the jackals devour the corpse. Of what use is the body without the soul? Another body can be found for the soul, if it is released from your noose, but never another soul for the body.”

“You speak with more wisdom than most mortals,” said the god. “Yet one more boon I will grant you.”

“Grant me a hundred sons, oh mighty Yama,” cried Savitri. And when the god bowed his head in assent, she laughed and clapped her hands. “If you are indeed a god who keeps his word with men, then release the soul of Satyavan. There is no other man that I can marry, and only by bringing him back to life can you grant me the sons you have promised!”

Yama realised that Savitri had been allowed, by a greater power than he, to triumph over him; so he loosened the coil of rope, and Satyavan’s soul flew up into the air and back to the forest where his body lay. Sometime later, Savitri reached the same place and found her husband lying just as she had left him. She lifted his head, and he opened his eyes and stretched himself and yawned.

“I must have fallen asleep,” he said. “Why did you not wake me before? It is almost sunset.”

Hand in hand they walked home, and on the way she told him all that had happened. And when they came home they found their father and mother rejoicing with the other hermits because the old man’s sight had suddenly been restored. And even as they rejoiced a messenger arrived to say that the king’s enemy had been slain and that the people wished their former ruler to return to them.

The next day Savitri and Satyavan, with their parents, returned to Shalwa, and there they all lived happily for the rest of their lives. We are told that Savitri and Satyavan lived together for four hundred years, and that they had a hundred sons, as Yama had promised.

Today, when anyone in India wishes to pay a wife the highest compliment, it is said that she is like Savitri, who brought back her husband’s soul from the edge of the world.

2. Grammar Page

13. Subjects with 'either...or, neither...nor, or'

→ When nouns or pronouns are joined by 'or, nor, either...or, neither...nor' the verb often agrees with the number of the noun or pronoun nearest to the verb.

- ◆ *singular noun + singular noun*
Either the boy or the girl has done it.
Either Amit or Mona likes to play badminton.
Neither the dog nor the cat was in the hall.
Neither Suman nor his sister is aggressive.
Tony or Seema has gone out.
- ◆ *plural noun + plural noun*
Either the boys or the girls have done it.
Neither the dogs nor the cats were in the hall.
The teachers or the students are in the canteen.
Either the men or the women are right.
- ◆ *singular noun + plural noun*
Either the boy or the girls have done it.
Neither the dog nor the cats were in the hall.
The teacher or the students are in the park.
Either the workers or the boss is happy.
- ◆ *pronoun + pronoun*
Either you or I am selected for the contest.
Neither you nor he is interested in acting.
Neither he nor she has passed the test.
Either he or they were dancing in the room.
- ◆ *noun + pronoun*
Either Anu or I am decorating the room.
Neither Kunal nor they have won the match.
My father or I was watching TV.
Neither my father nor I eat meat.

Grammar Review

- ➞ When a singular and a plural subject are connected by 'or, either...or, neither...nor', put the plural subject last and use a plural verb.
Neither the dog nor the puppies are in the kennel.
You or he was there.
Were you or he there?
Anu or her brothers have gone away.
Has Anu or her brothers gone away?
- ➞ When pronouns are connected by 'or, either...or, neither...nor', put the pronouns in the order of 'third-second-first'.
Either you or I was busy.
Neither he nor we have done it.
You, she or I am right.