



# Learn English Through Stories

**G Series**

**G22**

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## 1. Sheikh Makhmoor — Part 2

By Premchand

Musicians picked up their instruments and began to play tunes of welcome to the victorious guest.

While on the one hand gatherings were held to celebrate the newly won victory, on the other a conspiracy born out of envy was raging. It was reported to Chief Namak-khwar that Masood was conspiring with the enemy and had gone with a troop of men to battle so as to get them all killed and, thus, deprive the chief's forces of its most valorous soldiers. To corroborate this charge, forged letters were produced and glib talk was used with such consummate skill that Chief Namak-khwar was made to believe it. At daybreak Masood left Princess Sher Afghan's durbar wearing the victory garland and went to the chief to congratulate him on their victory. But instead of being appreciated and honoured for his feat, he was made to bear insults and insinuations. He was also ordered to unsheathe his sword and lay it down.

Masood was thunderstruck. He thought, "I've received this weapon from my father as an heirloom. It's a relic of my majestic past. It's been my strength and my comrade. I've so many memories attached to it! How can I part with it as long as I live? If anyone can accuse me of running away from the battlefield, if anyone can manoeuvre this sword better than I do, if I didn't have the strength to handle this sword, I swear by God that I would lay it down on my own! But, thank God, no one can level any of the above allegations against me. Then, why should I allow anyone to take it away from me? Should I do this simply because some mean and jealous fellows have instigated Chief Namak-khwar against me? No, this can't happen!"

But then, Masood realized that the chief would be infuriated if he defied him and that his sword could be wrested away from him by force. Should that happen, his soldiers, who were ready to die for him, would not be able to restrain themselves for long. Rivers of blood would flow in a fratricidal battle. God forbid that he should be the reason for such a terrifying situation. Thinking of all this, he quietly laid down his sword before Chief Namak-khwar. Exercising great self-control, he restrained himself from any angry outburst, bowed and walked out of the tent.

The soldiers in the army were proud of Masood. They were ready to lay down their lives for him. As he was laying down his sword, two thousand soldiers looked on, their eyes blazing and their hands on the hilts of their swords. One gesture from Masood and heaps of dead bodies would have piled up that day.

But Masood was as exemplary in his courage as in his restraint and patience. He chose to bear this dishonour and disgrace. Thus disarming himself, he didn't take

the path of rebellion. He surrendered to self-abnegation before his peers because he did not wish to be the cause of disaffection and revolt in the army. He chose to remain silent and steadfast at this critical moment when many others would have lost control and gone for each other's throats. But Masood looked unperturbed, no one could perceive any change in his demeanour. He bade a tearful farewell to his friends and took refuge in a cave. By the time he came out of the cave after sunset, he had vowed to wipe out the taint of disgrace attached to him and shame his jealous enemies.

Masood began to wear the robe of a mendicant. He grew long, matted hair in place of a crown, his body armour was replaced by a saffron robe and his hand held a begging bowl in place of a sword. Instead of a battle cry he began to mutter the name of God. He adopted the name Sheikh Makhmoor. However, unlike other fakirs, he did not burn incense or preach rituals.

He would often visit the enemy camp and listen carefully to the conversations among the soldiers. Sometimes he would observe their fortifications and occasionally he would inspect their artillery or their forts. On three different occasions, Chief Namak-khwar somehow managed to escape from the clutches of the enemy when he himself had lost all hope of saving his life. This was all Sheikh Makhmoor's doing. It was not easy to overpower the fort at Minkaad.

Five thousand brave soldiers were ready to lay down their lives to protect it, thirty cannons were ready to discharge fireballs, and two thousand expert archers waited for the signal to let loose their arrows. But when Chief Namak-khwar attacked with just two thousand of his soldiers, the five thousand inside the fort were turned to wooden puppets. The cannons became mute and the archers' flying arrows failed to hit their targets. All this, too, was Sheikh Makhmoor's doing. He was present there. At the time, Chief Namak-khwar had fallen prostrate before him and touched his forehead with the dust beneath the Sheikh's feet.

Kishwarkusha the Second's durbar was seated and wine was being served. The ministers and nobles were seated according to rank. Suddenly, informers brought the news that Mir Shuja had been defeated and killed. On hearing this, Kishwarkusha's face changed colour.

He addressed the gathering. "Who among you have the courage to decapitate this evil chieftain and present me his severed head? His audacity has crossed all limits. Your forefathers had wrested this kingdom from the Muraadiya dynasty. Are you really their worthy descendants?"

The chiefs fell to a hushed silence. Faces changed colour and no one showed the courage to take up the king's challenge.

Eventually, Kishwarkusha's old uncle, Amir Purtadbir, stood up and said, "O fortunate one! I accept the challenge. Though I'm old and do not have the strength to hold a sword, I still have the zest and passion with which we wrested this kingdom from Shah Baamurad. I shall either kill that dirty dog or die in this endeavour so that I do not have to see the destruction of this land."

Amir Purtadbir stood up and began preparing for war. He knew that it would be his final encounter and should he fail, there would be no option except death. All this while, Chief Namak-khwar was slowly advancing towards the royal throne at Jannat-Nishan. He received the news that Amir Purtadbir was advancing with twenty thousand foot soldiers to challenge him.

Chief Namak-khwar lost his nerve when he heard this. Despite his advancing years, Amir Purtadbir was an unparalleled commander in his day whose name evoked awe and admiration among warriors. Chief Namak-khwar had been under the impression that the Amir, an old man now, must be remembering God in some solitary place. When he saw him as his adversary on the battlefield, the chief almost lost his mind. He was afraid that this defeat would retard all the advantages that they had gained through other victories and advances of the past years. Everyone suggested retreat as the best option.

At that moment Sheikh Makhmoor exhorted, 'O Chief Namak-khwar! You have undertaken the responsibility of liberating this land. Can you fulfil it by undertaking this step? Your valiant officers and soldiers have never run away from the battlefield, they have never shown their backs to the enemy. You've treated a fusillade of arrows like a pleasant rain shower and gunshots as spring flowers! Have you grown tired of all this? You didn't begin this war with the evil intention of expanding your kingdom. You're fighting a just war to protect the truth. Is your passion spent already? Has the thirst of your sword of justice been quenched so quickly? You know well that truth and justice will ultimately prevail, and that you will be rewarded by God for your valour. Then why do you give up hope so soon? There's nothing to worry. Amir Purtadbir might be a man of courage and valour. If he's brave as a lion, so are you. If he has an iron sword, you have a sword made of steel. If his soldiers can lay down their lives, your soldiers will fight them till their last breath. Pray to God for victory, hold the sword firmly in your hand and pounce upon the enemy. Your determination will bring you victory!'

This stirring speech roused the officers. Their eyes sparkled, they arranged their swords and their feet automatically moved towards the battlefield. Sheikh Makhmoor threw away the mendicant's robe, discarded his begging bowl and picked up the same sword and shield that had once been snatched away from him. Staying close to Chief Namak-khwar he egged on the officers and soldiers to the battlefield. It was midnight. Amir's soldiers had just retired after a long

journey. They didn't have the time to even breathe when they received the news that Namak-khwar's army was standing ready to attack them. Courage left them and they felt completely unnerved. However, Amir emerged from his tent roaring like a lion and, in an instant, organized his forces in battle formation just as a gardener gathers flowers from his surroundings and makes a bouquet out of them.

Like two black mountains, the forces stood face to face. The burst of cannon fire began, resembling an erupting volcano. A thunderous sound swept over the battlefield as the black mountains moved forward. Then suddenly they clashed and the very earth seemed to reverberate with the awesome sounds of war.

Masood's sword was like a demon that night: wherever it was swung, it sliced through countless soldiers and decapitated hundreds of heads.

Through the night swords clashed with swords and rivers of blood flowed. When the sun rose in the morning, the battlefield resembled a bazaar of death.

Severed heads and mutilated, blood-stained limbs covered the entire stretch of land. Then suddenly, an arrow flew like lightning from Sheikh Makhmoor's bow and pierced Amir Purtadbir's heart. As he fell, his soldiers began to run away.

Holding aloft the banner of victory, Chief Namak-khwar's army began its triumphant march towards the capital city.

The victorious soldiers began to enter the city in droves. The inhabitants of the city, who had been bearing the brunt of exploitation and slavery for years, poured out in the streets to welcome them. They hugged the soldiers and showered them with flowers. Their exultation resembled the joy of birds who, having escaped the clutches of a hunter, were kissing flowers in the garden.

People lay prostrate before Sheikh Makhmoor and shed tears of joy at Chief Namak-khwar's feet.

The time had come for Masood to claim the throne and crown for his own.

But when he heard everyone voicing the name of Princess Sher Afghan, he kept quiet. He knew fully well that if he insisted on validating his claim to the throne providing evidence, her claim would stand forfeited. He also knew that it was impossible to settle the claims without more bloodshed. It was unusual for a passionate and ambitious individual to exercise restraint. Since the day he had come to consciousness, he had known he was the rightful heir to this kingdom. Not for a moment did he forget Shah Baamurad's bequest. If he devised plans for restoring the kingdom during the day, at night he would dream about them. His firm belief that he was the king had all along made him behave like one.

Alas, all his plans now seemed to be a daydream.

Masood was the picture of self-restraint. He didn't utter a single word of

complaint nor let anyone have a whiff of his disappointment. In fact, he was the first person to kiss the Princess's hand and pay obeisance to her. Yes, at the very moment he was kissing her hand, a teardrop fell on her hennaed hand that seemed to encapsulate all his desires. It was as though he was shedding his desires in the form of that teardrop. The princess drew back her hand and threw an affectionate look at Masood. When all the members of the court paid their obeisance, gun salutes began to be fired from cannons. The entire city was animated by a spirit of joy and scenes of celebrations could be seen everywhere.

Three days after the coronation Princess Sher Afghan paid a visit to Masood in his solitary abode. She said, 'I've brought a small gift for you. It is my heart. Will you accept it from me?'

Masood looked at her in astonishment. When he saw the ecstasy of love in her eyes, he eagerly stood up and hugged her. Then, he spoke. "Long ago, it was your love that had wounded me. How fortunate I am that today you've come to apply balm on it."

The kingdom of Jannat-Nishan had now truly become the abode of freedom and plenty. It had been not even a year since the Princess Sher Afghan had ascended the throne, but the affairs of the state were now fully organized and expertly managed. In the running of the state her principal adviser was her beloved husband, Masood, who was still known as Sheikh Makhmoor, the mendicant.

It was night and the court was in session. The wazirs had taken their seats according to their ranks. Liveried servants were in attendance. Suddenly, an attendant came and said, "Your highness, an old woman is waiting outside who wants to make an appeal to you."

The curiosity of the courtiers was aroused and the princess spoke with alacrity, 'Let her be brought in.'

The attendant went out to bring her in. A few moments later, an old woman walked in leaning on her stick.

She took out a jewel-encrusted crown from her basket and said, "You can have this, it's of no use to me anymore. My husband had given it to my son Masood at the time of his death and said that it belonged to him. But where can I go now looking for my beloved Masood? I've lost my eyes weeping bitter tears for him. I've searched for him everywhere but in vain. I'm tired of life, there's no purpose in life for me. This was entrusted to me, but any one of you can keep it now."

A hushed silence descended on the court. People stood like statues with astonishment. It was as if a magician had cast his spell on them. Suddenly,

Masood stood up from his seat and threw himself at Rinda's feet, tears trickling down his eyes. She could recognize her beloved son instantly. Rinda held him close to her heart and then placed the crown on his head.

"Dear Sirs," she said, "this is my dear Masood, the son of Shah Baamurad. You are his subjects. To him belongs this crown and this kingdom. From this day, he is the ruler of this land and the protector of his people."

A commotion ensued in the court. Some courtiers stood up and carried Masood in their arms and placed him beside Princess Sher Afghan on the throne. He was given offerings and salutes. The minstrels sang of good omens and trumpets sounded a triumphal note. When the commotion subsided a little and people turned to look at Rinda, they found her dead. She had breathed her last as soon as she saw her last wish come true. It seemed as though it was only her unfulfilled desire that had kept her alive so long.



