Learn English Through Stories

H Series

H3

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The Emperor's Ring: Part 1

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I was at first quite disappointed when I heard Baba say, 'Let's have a holiday in Lucknow this year. Dhiru has been asking us for a long time to go and visit him.' It was my belief that Lucknow was dull and boring. Baba did say we'd include a trip to Haridwar and Laxmanjhoola, and the latter was in the hills — but that would be just for a few days. We generally went to either Darjeeling or Puri. I liked both the sea and the mountains. Lucknow had neither. So I said to Baba, 'Couldn't we ask Feluda to come with us?'

Feluda has a theory about himself. No matter where he goes, he says, mysterious things start happening around him. And true enough, the last time he went with us to Darjeeling, all those strange things happened to Rajen Babu. If Lucknow could offer something similar, it wouldn't matter too much if the place itself was boring.

Baba said, 'Felu would be most welcome, but can he get away?' Feluda appeared quite enthusiastic when I told him. 'Went there in 1958 to play a cricket match,' he said. 'It's not a bad place at all. If you went inside the Bhoolbhulaia in the Burra Imambara, I'm sure your eyes would pop out. What an imagination those nawabs had — my God!'

'You'll get leave, won't you?'

Feluda ignored my question and continued to speak: 'And it's not just the Bhoolbhulaia. You'll get to see the Monkey Bridge over the Gomti, and of course the battered Residency.'

'What's the Residency?'

'It was the centre of the British forces during the Mutiny. They couldn't do a thing. The sepoys tore it apart.'

Feluda had been at his job for two years. Since he hadn't taken any leave in the first year, it wasn't difficult for him now to get a couple of weeks off.

Perhaps I should explain here that Feluda is my cousin. I am fourteen and he is twenty-seven. Some people think him crazy, some say he is only eccentric, others call him just plain lazy. But I happen to know that few men of his age possess his intelligence. And, if he finds a job that interests him, he can work harder than anyone I know. Besides, he is good at cricket, knows at least a hundred indoor games, a number of card tricks, a little hypnotism and can write with both hands. When he was in school, his memory was so good that

he had memorized every word in Tagore's 'Snatched from the Gods' after just two readings.

But what is most remarkable about Feluda is his power of deduction. This is a skill he has acquired simply by reading and regular practice. The police haven't yet discovered his talents, so Feluda has remained an amateur private detective.

One look at a person is enough for him to guess — accurately — a number of things about him.

When we met Dhiru Kaka at the Lucknow railway station, Feluda whispered into my ear: 'Is your Kaka fond of gardening?'

I knew that Dhiru Kaka had a garden, but Feluda could not have known about it. After all, Dhiru Kaka was not a relative; Baba and he were childhood friends.

'How did you guess?' I asked, amazed.

'When he turns around,' said Feluda, still whispering, 'you'll see a rose leaf sticking out from under the heel of his right shoe. And the index finger of his right hand has got tincture of iodine on it. Possibly the result of messing about in a rose bush early this morning.'

I realized on the way to Dhiru Kaka's house from the station that Lucknow was really a beautiful place. There were buildings with turrets and minarets all around; the roads were broad and clean and the traffic, besides motor cars, included two different kinds of horse-drawn carriages. One, I learnt, was called a tonga and the other was an ekka. If Dhiru Kaka hadn't met us in his old Chevrolet, we might have had to get into one of those.

Dhiru Kaka said, 'Aren't you now glad you came to this nice place? It's not filthy like Calcutta, is it?'

Baba and Dhiru Kaka were sitting at the back. Feluda and I were both sitting beside the driver, Din Dayal Singh. Feluda whispered again, 'Ask him about the Bhoolbhulaia?'

I find it difficult not to do something if Feluda asks me to do it. So I said, 'What is the Bhoolbhulaia, Dhiru Kaka?'

'You'll see it for yourself!' Dhiru Kaka laughed, 'It's actually a maze inside the Imambara. The nawabs used to play hide-and-seek in it with their queens.'

This time Feluda himself spoke. 'Is it true that you cannot come out of it unless you take a trained guide with you?'

'Yes, so I believe. Once a British soldier — oh, it was many years ago—had a few glasses and had a bet with someone. Said no one should follow him into

the maze, he'd come out himself. Two days later, his body was found in a lane of the maze.'

My heart started beating faster. 'Did you go in alone or with a guide?' I asked Feluda. 'I took a guide. But it is possible to go alone.'

'Really?'

I stared. Well, nothing was too difficult for Feluda, I knew. 'How is it possible?'

Feluda's eyes drooped. He nodded twice, but remained silent. I could tell he would not speak. His eyes were now taking in every detail of the city of Lucknow.

Dhiru Kaka was a lawyer. He had come to Lucknow twenty years ago and stayed on. He was, I believe, fairly well known in legal circles. He had lost his wife three years ago, and his son was in Frankfurt. He lived alone, with his bearer, Jagmohan, a cook and a maali. His house in Secunder Bagh was a little more than three miles from the station. The main gate bore his name: D. K. SANYAL, MA, BLB, Advocate.

A cobbled driveway led to a bungalow. His garden lay on both sides of the driveway. I spotted a maali working with a lawnmower as we stopped at the front door.

Baba said after lunch, 'You must be tired after your journey. I suggest we start our sightseeing from tomorrow.' So I spent the whole afternoon learning card tricks from Feluda. 'Indians have fingers that are far more flexible than those of Europeans,' Feluda told me, 'so it's easier for us to learn tricks that require sleight of hand.'

In the evening, we went out to the garden to have our tea. As we sat under a eucalyptus tree, cups and saucers in our hands, a car drew up outside the main gate. Feluda said, 'Fiat,' without even looking. This was followed by footsteps on the driveway, and a gentleman in a grey suit appeared shortly. He was fair, wore glasses and most of his hair was grey. Yet, it was clear that he was not very much older than Baba.

Dhiru Kaka rose with a smile, his hands folded in a namaskaar. 'Jagmohan, bring another chair,' he said. Turning towards Baba, he added, 'Allow me to introduce a special friend. This is Dr Srivastava.'

Feluda and I had both risen by this time. Feluda muttered under his breath, 'The chap's nervous for some reason. He forgot to greet your father.'

Dhiru Kaka continued, ‘Srivastava is an osteopath and a genuine Lucknowwalla.’ I heard Feluda whisper again. ‘Do you know what an osteopath is?’

‘No.’

‘A doctor who specializes in problems of your bones.’

An extra chair arrived and we all sat down. Dr Srivastava picked up Baba’s teacup absentmindedly and was about to take a sip when Baba coughed politely. Dr Srivastava started, said, ‘I am so sorry,’ and put it down.

Dhiru Kaka said thoughtfully, ‘You seem a little preoccupied today. Are you thinking of a difficult case?’

Baba intervened at this point.

‘You are talking to him in Bengali, Dhiru. Does he understand it?’ Dhiru Kaka laughed, ‘Understand it? Good God—why don’t you quote a few lines from Tagore, eh, Srivastava?’

Dr Srivastava appeared a little uncomfortable. ‘I know a little Bengali,’ he confessed, ‘and I have read some of Tagore’s works.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. Great poet.’

Perhaps they would now start a great discussion on poetry, I thought. But Dr Srivastava picked up his own cup this time with an unsteady hand and said, ‘Last night a daku came to my house.’

Daku? What was that?

The next words Dhiru Kaka spoke explained it. ‘You mean a dacoit? Heavens, I thought they existed only in Madhya Pradesh. How did one get into Lucknow?’

‘Call it a dacoit or an ordinary thief. You know about my ring, don’t you, Mr Sanyal?’

‘The one Pyarelal had given you? Has it been stolen?’ asked Dhiru Kaka.

‘No, no. But I do believe the thief came to steal it.’ Baba said, ‘What’s this about a ring?’

Dr Srivastava turned to Dhiru Kaka. ‘You tell him.’

Dhiru Kaka explained, ‘Pyarelal Seth was a famous, wealthy businessman of Lucknow. A Gujarati by birth, he had lived in Calcutta for some time. So he had a smattering of Bengali. When his son, Mahabir, was about thirteen, he went down with some serious ailment affecting his bones. Dr Srivastava cured him.

Pyarelal's wife was no more, and the first of his two sons had died of typhoid a few years earlier. So you can imagine how grateful he must have felt to Dr Srivastava for saving the life of his only remaining child. Before he died himself, he gave a very expensive and valuable ring to Dr Srivastava.'

'When did he die?'

'Last July,' said Srivastava, 'three months ago. He had his first heart attack in May, which nearly killed him. That was when he gave me the ring. Then the second attack came in July. I went to visit him. It was all over in no time. Look...'

Srivastava brought out a blue velvet box from his pocket. It was slightly bigger than a matchbox. The evening sun fell on its content as he lifted the lid, and a bright, glittering rainbow dazzled our eyes.

Dr Srivastava looked around briefly before pulling the ring out of the box.

A huge white stone gleamed in the middle. It was surrounded by several smaller red, blue and green ones.

I had never seen a ring so exquisitely beautiful.

I gave Feluda a sidelong glance. He was scratching his ear with a dry leaf of eucalyptus, but his eyes were fixed on the ring.

'It must be very old,' said Baba. 'Is there a history behind it?'

Dr Srivastava replaced the ring in the box, put it back in his pocket and picked up his cup once more.

'Yes,' he said, 'there is indeed. This ring is more than three hundred years old. It once belonged to the Emperor Aurangzeb.'

Baba's eyes widened.

'You don't say! You mean the Aurangzeb? Shah Jahan's son?'

'Yes. But the story I've heard goes back to when Aurangzeb was still only a prince. Shah Jahan was the Emperor, trying to conquer Samarkand. His forces kept getting defeated. Once he sent his men under Aurangzeb's command. Aurangzeb was badly injured in the attack. He might have died, but an army officer saved him. Aurangzeb took this ring from his finger and gave it to his officer as his reward.'

'Goodness, it's incredible!'

'Yes. Pyarelal bought this ring in Agra from a descendant of that army officer. I don't know how much he paid for it. But I have had the stones examined. That big one is a diamond. So you can imagine its value.'

‘At least two hundred thousand,’ said Dhiru Kaka, ‘if it was Jahannan Khan’s instead of Aurangzeb’s, even then it would fetch about a hundred-and-fifty thousand rupees.’

Dr Srivastava said, ‘Now you know why I am so upset after yesterday’s incident. I live alone, you see, and I have to go out at all hours to see my patients. I could, of course, tell the police. But what if I did, and then someone attacked me? You never can tell, can you? I had, in fact, once thought of keeping the ring in a bank. But then I felt it would not be the same. I mean, I like showing it to my friends. So I kept it in my house.’

Dhiru Kaka said, ‘Have you shown it to many people?’

‘No. I got it only a few months ago. And those who come to my house are all my friends, people I trust. I haven’t shown it to anyone else.’

It was beginning to get dark. The top of the eucalyptus tree shone in the remaining sunlight, but that would fade away soon. I looked at Dr Srivastava. He seemed oddly restless.

‘Let’s go in,’ said Dhiru Kaka, ‘we need to think this over.’

We left the garden and went into the living-room. Feluda didn’t appear to be interested at all. He pulled out a pack of cards as soon as we had all sat down, and began to practise a new trick he had learnt.

Baba was not a great talker, but when he did speak, he chose his words carefully. ‘Why,’ he now asked, ‘are you assuming that the thief came simply to steal your ring? Wasn’t anything else stolen? After all, he—or they—might have been just petty thieves, interested in plain cash.’

Srivastava said, ‘Well, let me explain. Thieves and burglars don’t often strike in our area chiefly because of Bonobihari Babu. Besides, Mr Jhunjhunwalla is my next-door neighbour, and Mr Billimoria lives next to him. Both are very rich. You can tell that just by looking at their houses. So why should a thief come to my humble abode?’

‘If your neighbours are rich,’ said Dhiru Kaka, ‘they must have made arrangements to guard their wealth. A petty thief wouldn’t risk breaking through heavy security. After all, big money isn’t his game, is it? I suspect if he could lay his hands on five hundred rupees, it would keep him going for six months. So I’m not surprised that they broke into your house, and not your neighbour’s.’

Dr Srivastava continued to look doubtful. ‘I really don’t know, Mr Sanyal,’ he said. ‘I feel convinced they were after that ring. They opened a cupboard in the room next to mine. All its drawers were pulled out. There were other valuable

things and enough time to grab them. Yet, when I woke suddenly, they ran away without taking a single thing. I find that odd. Besides—'

Srivastava stopped abruptly, frowning. After a few moments of silence, he said, 'When Pyarelal gave me that ring, I got the impression that he was just trying to get rid of it. For some reason he didn't want to keep it in his house any longer. And—'

He stopped again and frowned once more. 'And what, Dr Srivastava?' asked Dhiru Kaka.

Srivastava sighed. 'I went to see him after his second attack. He tried to tell me something, but couldn't. But I heard one thing clearly.'

'What was that?'

'He said it twice—"a spy… a spy…"' Dhiru Kaka rose from the sofa.

'No, Doctor,' he said, 'it doesn't matter what Pyarelal said. I am convinced it was just an ordinary thief. Perhaps you haven't heard, but the barrister Bhudeb Mitra's house was recently burgled, too. They got away with a radio and some silver. But if you're feeling nervous about keeping the ring in your house, please feel free to leave it with me. I shall put it in my Godrej almirah and it'll be quite safe. You can collect it when you get over your nervousness.'

Srivastava looked visibly relieved. His lips spread in a smile. 'That is exactly what I came here to propose, but couldn't bring myself to say it. Thank you very much, Mr Sanyal. I shall feel a lot easier in my mind if you keep the ring.'

He took the ring out of his pocket and handed it to Dhiru Kaka, who went straight into his bedroom with it.

At this point, Feluda opened his mouth. 'Who is Bonobihari Babu?' he asked.

'Pardon?' Dr Srivastava was still slightly preoccupied.

'Didn't you just say that houses where you live were safe from burglars because of one Bonobihari Babu? Who is he? Someone in the police?'

Srivastava laughed, 'Oh, no, no. He has nothing to do with the police—but he gives us a special protection that's even better than what the police could give. He's quite an interesting character. His ancestors were zamindars in Bengal. When they lost their land, Bonobihari Babu went into business. He began exporting animals.'

'Animals?' Baba and Feluda spoke together.

'Yes. Animals from here are often needed in Europe, America or Australia for their zoos, circuses and television. Many Indians are in this business.

Bonobihari Babu made a lot of money, I believe. He retired about three years ago and came to Lucknow, together with some of his animals. He bought a house not far from mine and turned it into a zoo.'

'How very strange!' Baba exclaimed.

'Yes. What is special about this zoo is that all its animals are very… very… how shall I put it…' 'Vicious?'

'Yes, yes. That's it. Most vicious.'

I had heard that Lucknow already had a very good zoo. Animals were kept out in the open there, on a man-made island. But what was this about a private zoo?

Srivastava continued, 'He has a wild cat. And a hyena, an alligator and a scorpion. You can hear some of these animals even from a distance. Thieves don't dare come our way!'

Feluda now asked the question that was trembling on my lips. 'Is it possible to see this zoo?'

Dhiru Kaka returned at this moment and said, 'That's simple. We can go any time. Bonobihari Babu is a most amiable man, not vicious at all!'

Srivastava rose to take his leave. 'I must go now. There is a patient I need to see.'

We went with him up to the main gate to see him off. He said 'good-night' to everyone, thanked Dhiru Kaka again and drove off in his Fiat. Baba and Dhiru Kaka began walking back to the house. Feluda took a cigarette out of his pocket and was about to light it when a black car shot past us and disappeared in the same direction as Dr Srivastava's car.

'Standard Herald,' said Feluda, 'I missed the number.' 'What would you do with the number?'

'It looked as though that car was following Dr Srivastava. Can't you see how dark it is on the other side of the road? That's where it was waiting. The driver changed gears in front of our gate. Didn't you notice?'

Feluda turned towards the house. It was at least fifty yards from the gate. I could tell, for I have often run in hundred-yard races in school. The light in the living-room was on. I could clearly see through the window. There were Baba and Dhiru Kaka, going into the room. Then I looked at Feluda.

He was staring at the open window. The frown on his face and the way he bit his lip told me that he was worried about something.

‘You know, Topshe—’

I am not really called Topshe. My name is Tapesh, but Feluda has changed it to Topshe. ‘What?’ I asked.

‘I shouldn’t have allowed this to happen.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘That window should have been closed. You can see everything that goes on in that room from the gate. An ordinary bulb might have made a difference; but Dhiru Kaka has got a fluorescent light, which makes it worse.’

‘So what if you can see everything?’

‘Can you see your father?

‘Just his head. He’s sitting in a chair.’

‘Who was sitting in that chair ten minutes ago?’

‘Dr Srivastava.’

‘He stood up to show the ring to your father, remember?’

‘Yes. I don’t forget things so quickly.’

‘If someone was watching from the gate, he could quite easily have seen him do it.’

‘Oh no! But why do you think there might have been someone?’ Feluda stooped and picked up a tiny object from the cobbled path. Silently, he handed it to me. It was a cigarette butt. ‘Look at the tip carefully,’ said Feluda.

I peered at it closely and in the faint light from the street lamp, saw what I needed to see.

‘Well?’ said Feluda.

‘Charminar,’ I replied, ‘and whoever was smoking it was also chewing a paan. One end is smeared with its juice.’

‘Very good. Come, let’s go in.’

That night, before going to bed, Feluda asked Dhiru Kaka to show him the ring again. The two of us had a good look at it. I had no idea Feluda knew so much about stones. He turned the ring round and round under a table lamp and kept up a running commentary: ‘These blue stones that you see are called sapphires. The red ones are rubies and the green ones emeralds. The others, I think, are topaz. But the real thing to look at, of course, is this diamond in the

middle. Not many would have had the privilege of actually holding such a stone in their hand!'

Then he slipped the ring on to the third finger of his left hand and said, 'Look, my finger is the same size as Aurangzeb's!'

True, the ring fitted perfectly.

Feluda stared at the glittering stones and said, 'Who knows, this ring could have had an intriguing past. But you know what, Topshe—I am not interested in its history. Whether it had once belonged to Aurangzeb or Altamash or Akram Khan is not important. We need to know what its future is, and whether—at present—it's being chased by an admirer. If so, who is he and why is he so desperate to get hold of it?'

Then he removed the ring from his finger, gave it to me and said, 'Go now, give it back to Dhiru Kaka. And please open those windows when you return.'