



Learn English Through  
Stories

H Series

H5

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## The Emperor's Ring: Part 3

### Three

It was nearly 4 p.m. by the time we reached Bonobihari Babu's house. It was impossible to tell from outside that the house contained a mini zoo. The animals were all kept in the back garden.

'This house was built about thirty years before the Mutiny by a wealthy Muslim merchant,' Bonobihari Babu told us. 'I bought it from an Englishman.'

The house was obviously quite old. The carvings on the wall were typically Mughal.

'I hope you don't mind having coffee. There's no tea in my house, I am afraid,' said Bonobihari Babu.

I felt quite pleased at this for I wasn't allowed to have too much coffee at home. But we had to see the animals first.

The living-room led to a veranda, behind which sprawled a huge garden. Individual cages for the animals were strewn all over this garden. There was a pond in the middle surrounded by tall iron spikes. An alligator lay in it, sunning itself lazily. Bonobihari Babu said, 'Ten years ago, when I found it in Munger, it was only a baby. I kept it in a water tank in my house in Calcutta. Then one day I discovered it had slipped out and swallowed a kitten!'

Little pavements ran from the pond to other cages. A strange hissing noise came from one of them.

We left the alligator and made our way to it.

A large cat, nearly as big as a medium-sized dog, stared at us through bright green eyes. It had a striped body and was really more like a tiger than a cat.

'This comes from Africa. An Anglo-Indian dealer in animals in Calcutta sold it to me. Even the Alipore zoo doesn't have a creature like this.'

We moved on from the wild cat to look at a hyena, then a wolf and then an American rattle-snake. I knew it was extremely poisonous. An object like a long, narrow sea-shell was attached to its tail, not different from the kind of shell I had often collected on the beaches of Puri. The snake shook its tail slightly as it moved, dragging the shell on the ground, making a noise like a rattle. In the western states of America, it was this noise that warned people of the movements of a rattle-snake.

We saw two other creatures that made my flesh creep. In a glass case was the large and awful blue scorpion of America. In another was a spider, sticking out

its black, hairy legs. It was probably as big as my palm, with all my fingers spread out. This, I learnt, was the famous Black Widow spider from Africa.

‘The poisons of the scorpion and this spider are neuro toxins,’ Bonobihari Babu said. ‘What it means is that one sting from either can kill a human being.’

We returned to the living-room and sat down on sofas. Bonobihari Babu himself took a chair and said, ‘Often, in the silence of the night, I can hear the hyena laugh, the cat hiss, the wolf cry and the snake rattle. It makes a rather strange chorus, but it helps me sleep in peace. Where would I find a better battery of bodyguards, tell me? But then, if an outsider did break in, none of these captive animals could really do anything. I have a different arrangement to take care of that Badshah!’

A massive black hound bounded out of the next room. This was Bonobihari Babu’s real bodyguard. Not only did Badshah protect his master, but he also made sure that no harm came to the animals in the zoo.

Feluda was sitting next to me. ‘Labrador hound,’ he said softly, ‘the same breed as the Hound of the Baskervilles!’

Baba had been silent throughout. Now he said, ‘Tell me, do you really enjoy living with these wild animals in your house?’

Bonobihari Babu took out a pipe and began filling it. ‘Why not?’ he replied. ‘What’s there to be afraid of? There was a time when I used to go hunting regularly, and my aim was perfect. But I never killed anything except wild animals. Once—only once—did I kill a deer. I was simply showing off to an American friend, trying to prove how good my aim was, and the deer was about a hundred-and- fifty yards away. I felt such bitter remorse afterwards that I had to give up hunting altogether. But animals had become a part of my life. So I went into the business of exporting some of them. Then, when I retired, having a zoo in my house seemed only natural. The good thing about living with these animals is that they don’t pretend to be anything other than what they are—vicious and venomous. But look at man! One who appears to be totally good and honest may turn out to be a first-rate criminal. You can’t really trust even a close friend these days, can you? So I’ve decided to spend the rest of my life in the company of animals. I don’t meddle in other people’s affairs, you see. I keep to myself. So what others think or say about my lifestyle doesn’t matter to me at all. But I’ve been told that my little zoo has been responsible for keeping burglars at bay. If that is true, I must say I’ve unwittingly done some good to the whole community.’

This last remark made me first look at Dhiru Kaka, and then at Feluda. Could it be that Bonobihari Babu didn't know about the attempted theft at Dr Srivastava's house?

I didn't have to wait long to get an answer. Dr Srivastava himself arrived almost as soon as Bonobihari Babu's bearer appeared with the coffee and some sweets.

After greeting everyone, Dr Srivastava said to Dhiru Kaka, 'A boy fell from a tree and broke his arm, not very far from where you live. I went to your house after seeing him. Your bearer told me you hadn't returned. So I came straight here.'

Dhiru Kaka gave Dr Srivastava a reassuring look, to indicate that his ring was safe.

Srivastava appeared to know Bonobihari Babu quite well. Perhaps friendliness among neighbours ran more easily in small towns.

'Bonobihari Babu,' he said jokingly, 'your watchmen are getting slack.' Bonobihari Babu seemed taken aback.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'A thief broke into my house the day before yesterday, and none of your animals made a noise.' 'What? A thief? In your house? When?'

'At about 3 a.m. No, he didn't actually take anything. I woke suddenly, so he ran away.'

'Even so, I must say he must have been an expert to have escaped Badshah's attention. Why, your house can't be more than a couple of hundred yards from mine! Whoever it was must have walked past my compound. There is no other way!'

'Never mind,' said Srivastava, 'I just wanted you to know what had happened.'

The sweets were still lying on our plates. 'Have some of these,' Bonobihari Babu invited, 'these are called Sandile ka laddoo and gulabi reori. These and bhoona pera—all three are a speciality of Lucknow.'

I wasn't too fond of sweets, so I paid little attention to these words and began watching Bonobihari Babu closely. He seemed a little thoughtful. Feluda, however, was busy stuffing himself. Having eaten two laddoos already, he stretched out a hand and pretended to wave a fly away from my coffee-cup. Before I knew it, he had picked up a laddoo from my plate with supreme nonchalance.

Rather unexpectedly, at this point Bonobihari Babu turned to Srivastava and asked, 'Hope you still have the Emperor's ring?'

Dr Srivastava choked. Then, pulling himself together with an effort, he covered the sudden fit of coughing with a small laugh and said, 'Good God—you haven't forgotten!'

Bonobihari Babu blew out smoke from his pipe.

'How could I forget? Mind you, I'm not really interested in such things. But you don't often get to see something so remarkable, do you?'

'Oh, the ring's quite safe,' said Dr Srivastava, 'I am aware of its value.'

Bonobihari Babu stood up. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'it's time to feed my cat.'

We took our cue and rose with him to take our leave.

On our way out we saw a man carry a bag into the house. A powerful man, no doubt. His muscles were bulging under his shirt. His name was Ganesh Guha, we learnt. He had apparently been with Bonobihari Babu for a long time, right from the days of animal exporting. He now looked after the zoo.

'I couldn't have managed without Ganesh,' Bonobihari Babu told us. 'That man knows no fear.'

Once the wild cat clawed him. He stayed on, despite that.'

'It was really a pleasure to have you,' he continued, as we got into our car, 'do come again. You're going to be in Lucknow for some time, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Baba, 'but we might go to Haridwar for a few days.'

'I see. Someone told me of a twelve-foot python that's just been found near Laxmanjhoola. As a matter of fact, I was toying with the idea of going there myself.'

We dropped Dr Srivastava at his house. Just as he got out of the car, a sudden strange, eerie howl coming from Bonobihari Babu's garden startled us all. Only Feluda yawned and said, 'Hyena.' Heavens—so this was the famous laugh of a hyena? It chilled my blood.

'Yes, that noise often gave me the creeps,' Dr Srivastava said through the window, 'but now I've got used to it.'

'You didn't have any further problems last night, did you?' Dhiru Kaka asked.

'No, no. Nothing,' Dr Srivastava laughed.

It was nearly dark by the time we got home. From somewhere in the distance came the sound of drumbeats. 'Preparations for Ram Lila,' Dhiru Kaka explained.

'What is Ram Lila?'

'Oh, it's a north Indian performance held during Dussehra. The whole story of the Ramayana is staged as a play. It ends with Ram and Lakshman galloping across in a chariot and shooting arrows at a colossal effigy of Ravan. The effigy is filled with gunpowder. So, when the arrows hit it, it bursts into flames. Crackers burst and rockets fly . . . and, eventually, the mighty Ravan is reduced to ashes. Oh . . . it's a spectacle worth watching!'

'Dr Srivastava came while you were out,' Dhiru Kaka's bearer told us as we got home, 'and a sadhubaba. He waited for about half-an-hour and then left.'

'Sadhubaba?'

It was obvious that Dhiru Kaka had not been expecting a visit from a holy man.

'Where did he wait?'

'In the living-room.'

'And he wanted to see me?'

'Yes.'

'Did he actually mention my name?'

'Yes.'

'That's strange!'

Dhiru Kaka thought for a minute, then suddenly rushed into his bedroom. We heard him open his Godrej almirah, which was followed by an agonized cry: 'Oh no! Disaster!' Baba, Feluda and I ran after him.

Dhiru Kaka was standing with the small blue velvet box open in his hand, his eyes bulging. The box was empty.

He stared foolishly into space for a few seconds. Then he flopped down on his bed with a thud.