



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F20

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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1. The Tiger's Claw

BY R K Naryan

The man-eater's dark career was ended. The men who had laid it low were the heroes of the day. They were garlanded with chrysanthemum flowers and seated on the arch of the highest bullock cart and were paraded in the streets, immediately followed by another bullock-drawn open cart, on which their trophy lay with glazed eyes—overflowing the cart on every side, his tail trailing the dust. The village suspended all the normal activity for the day; men, women and children thronged the highways, pressing on with the procession, excitedly talking about the tiger. The tiger had held a reign of terror for nearly five years, in the villages that encircled Mempi Forest.

We watched this scene, fascinated, drifting along with the crowd—till the Talkative Man patted us from behind and cried, 'Lost in wonder! If you've had your eyeful of that carcass, come aside and listen to me . . .' After the crowd surged past us, he sat us on a rock mount, under a margosa (Neem) tree, and began his tale: I was once camping in Koppal, the most obscure of all the villages that lie scattered about the Mempi region. You might wonder what I was doing in that desolate corner of the earth. I'll tell you. You remember I've often spoken to you about my work as agent of a soil fertilizer company. It was the most miserable period of my life. Twenty-five days in the month, I had to be on the road, visiting nooks and corners of the country and popularizing the stuff . . . One such journey brought me to the village Koppal. It was not really a village but just a clearing with about forty houses and two streets, hemmed in by the jungle on all sides. The place was dingy and depressing. Why our company should have sought to reach a place like this for their stuff, I can't understand. They would not have known of its existence but for the fact that it was on the railway. Yes, actually on the railway, some obscure branch-line passed through this village, though most trains did not stop there. Its centre of civilization was its railway station—presided over by a porter in blue and an old station-master, a wizened man wearing a green turban, and with red and green flags always tucked under his arms. Let me tell you about the station. It was not a building but an old railway carriage, which, having served its term of life, was deprived of its wheels and planted beside the railway lines. It had one or two windows through which the station-master issued tickets, and spoke to those occasional passengers who turned up in this wilderness. A convolvulus creeper was trained over its entrance: no better use could be found for an ex-carriage.

One November morning a mixed train put me down at this station and puffed away into the forest. The station-master, with the flags under his arm, became

excited on seeing me. He had seen so few travellers arriving that it gave him no end of pleasure to see a new face. He appointed himself my host immediately, and took me into the ex-compartment and seated me on a stool. He said, 'Excuse me. I'll get off these papers in a minute . . .' He scrawled over some brown sheets, put them away and rose. He locked up the station and took me to his home—a very tiny stone building consisting of just one room, a kitchen and a back yard. The station-master lived here with his wife and seven children. He fed me. I changed. He sent the porter along with me to the village, which was nearly a mile off in the interior. I gathered about me the peasants of those forty houses and lectured to them from the *pyol* of the headman's house. They listened to me patiently, received the samples and my elaborate directions for their use, and went away to their respective occupations, with cynical comments among themselves regarding my ideas of manuring. I packed up and started back for the station-master's house at dusk, my throat hurting and my own words ringing in my ears. Though a couple of trains were now passing, the only stopping train would be at 5:30 on the following morning. After dinner at the station-master's house, I felt the time had come for me to leave: it would be indelicate to stay on when the entire family was waiting to spread their beds in the hall. I said I would sleep on the platform till my train arrived . . . 'No, no, these are very bad parts. Not like your town. Full of tigers . . .' the station-master said. He let me, as a special concession, sleep in the station. A heavy table, a chair and a stool occupied most of the space in the compartment. I pushed them aside and made a little space for myself in a corner. I'd at least eight hours before me. I laid myself down: all kinds of humming and rustling sounds came through the still night, and telegraph poles and night insects hummed, and bamboo bushes creaked. I got up, bolted the little station door and lay down, feeling forlorn. It became very warm, and I couldn't sleep. I got up again, opened the door slightly to let in a little air, placed the chair across the door and went back to my bed.

I fell asleep and dreamt. I was standing on the crest of a hill and watching the valley below, under a pale moonlight. Far off a line of catlike creatures was moving across the slope, half-shadows, and I stood looking at them admiringly, for they marched on with great elegance. I was so much lost in this vision that I hadn't noticed that they had moved up and come by a winding path right behind me. I turned and saw that they were not catlike in size but full-grown tigers. I made a dash to the only available shelter—the station room.

At this point the dream ended as the chair barricading the door came hurtling through and fell on me. I opened my eyes and saw at the door a tiger pushing himself in. It was a muddled moment for me: not being sure whether the

dream was continuing or whether I was awake. I at first thought it was my friend the station-master who was coming in, but my dream had fully prepared my mind—I saw the thing clearly against the starlit sky, tail wagging, growling, and, above all, his terrible eyes gleaming through the dark. I understood that the fertilizer company would have to manage without my lectures from the following day. The tiger himself was rather startled by the noise of the chair and stood hesitating. He saw me quite clearly in my corner, and he seemed to be telling himself, 'My dinner is there ready, but let me first know what this clattering noise is about.' Somehow wild animals are less afraid of human beings than they are of pieces of furniture like chairs and tables. I have seen circus men managing a whole menagerie with nothing more than a chair. God gives us such recollections in order to save us at critical moments; and as the tiger stood observing me and watching the chair, I put out my hands and with desperate strength drew the table towards me, and also the stool. I sat with my back to the corner, the table wedged in nicely with the corner. I sat under it, and the stool walled up another side. While I dragged the table down, a lot of things fell off it, a table lamp, a long knife and pins. From my shelter I peeped at the tiger, who was also watching me with interest. Evidently he didn't like his meal to be so completely shut out of sight. So he cautiously advanced a step or two, making a sort of rumbling noise in his throat which seemed to shake up the little station house. My end was nearing. I really pitied the woman whose lot it was to have become my wife.

I held up the chair like a shield and flourished it, and the tiger hesitated and fell back a step or two. Now once again we spent some time watching for each other's movements. I held my breath and waited. The tiger stood there fiercely waving its tail, which sometimes struck the side walls and sent forth a thud. He suddenly crouched down without taking his eyes off me, and scratched the floor with his claws. 'He is sharpening them for me,' I told myself. The little shack had already acquired the smell of a zoo. It made me sick. The tiger kept scratching the floor with his forepaws. It was the most hideous sound you could think of.

All of a sudden he sprang up and flung his entire weight on this lot of furniture. I thought it'd be reduced to matchwood, but fortunately our railways have a lot of foresight and choose the heaviest timber for their furniture. That saved me. The tiger could do nothing more than perch himself on the roof of the table and hang down his paws: he tried to strike me down, but I parried with the chair and stool. The table rocked under him. I felt smothered: I could feel his breath on me. He sat completely covering the top, and went on shooting his paws in my direction. He would have scooped portions of me out for his use, but fortunately I sat right in the centre, a hair's-breadth out of his reach

on any side. He made vicious sounds and wriggled over my head. He could have knocked the chair to one side and dragged me out if he had come down, but somehow the sight of the chair seemed to worry him for a time. He preferred to be out of its reach. This battle went on for a while, I cannot say how long: time had come to a dead stop in my world. He jumped down and walked about the table, looking for a gap; I rattled the chair a couple of times, but very soon it lost all its terror for him; he patted the chair and found that it was inoffensive. At this discovery he tried to hurl it aside. But I was too quick for him. I swiftly drew it towards me and wedged it tight into the arch of the table, and the stool protected me on another side. I was more or less in a stockade made of the legs of furniture. He sat up on his haunches in front of me, wondering how best to get at me. Now the chair, table and stool had formed a solid block, with me at their heart, and they could withstand all his tricks. He scrutinized my arrangement with great interest, espied a gap and thrust his paw in. It dangled in my eyes with the curved claws opening out towards me. I felt very angry at the sight of it. Why should I allow the offensive to be developed all in his own way? I felt very indignant. The long knife from the station-master's table was lying nearby. I picked it up and drove it in. He withdrew his paw, maddened by pain. He jumped up and nearly brought down the room, and then tried to crack to bits the entire stockade. He did not succeed. He once again thrust his paw in. I employed the long knife to good purpose and cut off a digit with the claw on it. It was a fight to the finish between him and me. He returned again and again to the charge. And I cut out, let me confess, three claws, before I had done with him. I had become as bloodthirsty as he. (Those claws, mounted on gold, are hanging around the necks of my three daughters. You can come and see them if you like sometime.)

At about five in the morning the station-master and the porter arrived, and innocently walked in. The moment they stepped in the tiger left me and turned on them. They both ran at top speed. The station-master flew back to his house and shut the door. The porter on fleet foot went up a tree, with the tiger halfway up behind him. Thus they stopped, staring at each other till the goods train lumbered in after 5:30. It hissed and whistled and belched fire, till the tiger took himself down and bolted across the tracks into the jungle.

He did not visit these parts again, though one was constantly hearing of his ravages. I did not meet him again—till a few moments ago when I saw him riding in that bullock cart. I instantly recognized him by his right forepaw, where three toes and claws are missing. You seemed to be so much lost in admiration for those people who met the tiger at their own convenience, with gun and company, that I thought you might give a little credit to a fellow who

has faced the same animal, alone, barehanded. Hence this narration.

When the Talkative Man left us, we moved on to the square, where they were keeping the trophy in view and hero-worshipping and fêting the hunters, who were awaiting a lorry from the town. We pushed through the crowd, and begged to be shown the right forepaw of the tiger. Somebody lowered a gas lamp. Yes, three toes were missing, and a deep black scar marked the spot. The man who cut it off must have driven his knife with the power of a hammer. To a question, the hunters replied, 'Can't say how it happens. We've met a few instances like this. It's said that some forest tribes, if they catch a tiger cub, cut off its claws for some talisman and let it go. They do not usually kill cubs.'

2. Grammar Page

17. Agreement in these structures

There + singular verb + singular noun +	There <i>is</i> a boy in the room. <i>Was</i> there a dog in the kennel?
There + plural verb + plural noun +	There <i>isn't</i> much milk left. There <i>are</i> six boys in the room. <i>Were</i> there any dogs in the kennel? There <i>aren't</i> many books left.
Here + singular verb + singular noun +	Here <i>is</i> the money I owe you.
Here + plural verb + plural noun +	Here <i>comes</i> the boy. Here <i>are</i> some posters. Here <i>are</i> some English books.
The following + singular verb + singular noun +	The following <i>is</i> the winner of the competition.
The following + plural verb + plural noun +	The following <i>is</i> the news report. The following <i>are</i> the winners of the competition. The following <i>are</i> the news reports.
The number of + plural noun + singular verb +	The number of girls for this course <i>is</i> eighty.
A number of + plural noun + plural verb +	The number of villages in this district <i>is</i> fifteen. A number of students <i>have</i> joined this course. A number of villages <i>were</i> affected by the flood.
Many a + singular noun + singular verb	Many a worker <i>has</i> rejected the proposal.
Many + plural noun + plural verb	Many a boy <i>is</i> interested in basketball. Many workers <i>have</i> rejected the proposal. Many boys <i>are</i> interested in basketball.
More than one + singular noun + singular verb	More than one boy <i>has</i> submitted the application.
More than two + plural noun + plural verb	More than one worker <i>is</i> right. More than two boys <i>have</i> submitted the paper. More than ten workers <i>are</i> right.
Pair + singular noun + singular verb	The pair of glasses <i>is</i> missing.
Couple + plural noun + plural verb	A pair of shoes belongs to me. The couple <i>are</i> going out for dinner. A couple of dresses need to be washed.
No + singular noun/uncountable + singular verb	No book <i>is</i> needed for it.
No + plural noun + plural verb	No student of that name <i>has</i> come. No books <i>are</i> needed for it. No students of such names <i>have</i> come.
WH + singular verb + singular noun/ho noun	What <i>has</i> happened to these old boots? Who <i>makes</i> that noise? Who <i>was</i> responsible for it?
WH + plural verb + plural noun	What <i>are</i> these books about? Where <i>are</i> they going? Who <i>were</i> the boys?