



Learn English Through
Stories

H Series

H6

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The Emperor's Ring: Part 4

Four

It seemed cooler the following morning, so Baba told me to wrap a muffler round my throat. I could tell from his frown and preoccupied air that he was deeply worried. Dhiru Kaka had left the house very early in the morning without telling anyone where he was going. After yesterday's incident, he had said only one thing over and over: 'How will I now face Srivastava?'

Baba had tried to comfort him by saying: 'But it wasn't your fault! How were you to know the thief would turn up in your absence dressed as a sadhu? Why don't you go to the police? Didn't you say you knew Inspector Gargari?' So it could be that Dhiru Kaka had gone to inform the police.

Baba said over breakfast: 'I had thought of taking you to the Residency. But perhaps it's best that I stay in today. You two can go out for a while, if you like.'

I nearly smiled at this, for Feluda had already said he'd like to explore the place on foot and I had decided to join him. I knew what he had in mind was something other than just aimless walking. His eyes had taken on a steely glint since last night.

We left shortly after eight.

As soon as we were out of the house, Feluda said, 'Let me warn you, Topshe. If you talk or ask too many questions, I'll send you back. Just keep your mouth shut and walk by my side.'

'But what if Dhiru Kaka informs the police?'

'So what if he does?'

'Suppose they catch the thief before you?'

'No matter — I'll change my name, that's all.'

Dhiru Kaka lived on Frazer Road. It was a quiet street, with houses which had large gardens on either side. It led to Dupling Road. Unlike Calcutta, all roads in Lucknow were clearly marked.

There was a paan shop at the corner where Dupling Road joined Park Road. Feluda ambled towards this shop.

'Can I have a meetha (sweet) paan?' he asked.

'Yes, babu, I'll make you one with special masala,' said the paanwalla.

'Thank you.'

The paan was duly handed to him. Feluda paid for it, put it in his mouth and said, 'Look, I am new to this town. Can you tell me where can I find the Ramakrishna Mission?'

'Ramakrishna Mishir?'

'No, no. Ramakrishna Mission. I've heard that a great sadhu is visiting Lucknow and is staying at the Ramakrishna Mission.'

The paanwalla shook his head and muttered something I couldn't catch. But we got some information from another source.

A man with a huge moustache was lying on a string bed nearby, singing merrily and beating an old rusted tin. He now stopped singing and said, 'Would that be a bearded sadhubaba? Wearing dark glasses? Yesterday I spoke to such a man. He asked me where the nearest tonga stand was, and I showed him.'

'Where is it?'

'Five minutes from here. Just after that crossing, you can see a whole row of tongas.'

'Shukriya,' said Feluda.

'That was "thank you" in Urdu,' he said to me as an aside. I had never heard the word before.

The eighth tongawalla we asked admitted that a bearded, saffron-clad man had indeed hired his tonga the previous evening.

'Where did you take him?'

'Istishan,' said the tongawalla.

'You mean the railway station?'

'Yes, yes.'

'How much do you charge to get there?'

'Seventy-five paise.'

'And how long does it take?'

'Ten minutes.'

'If I pay you a whole rupee, can you get us to the station in eight minutes? Now?'

'Why, have you a train to catch?'

'Yes, the best train in the world. The Imperial Express!'

The tongawalla grinned, foolishly and said, 'All right. I'll get you there in eight minutes.'

On our way, I asked a little hesitantly, 'Do you think the sadhu is still waiting at the station clutching that ring?' At this, Feluda glared at me so furiously that I promptly shut up.

A little later, he asked our driver, 'Did the sadhubaba have any luggage?'

The driver thought for a minute and said, 'Yes, I think he had a case. But not a large one.'

'I see.'

On reaching the station, we began asking all the likely people who might remember having seen the sadhu. But those at the ticket booth or the gate couldn't help; nor could the porters. The manager of a restaurant at the railway station said, 'Are you talking about Pavitrananda Thakur? The one who lives in Dehra Dun? He arrived only three days ago. He couldn't have gone back so early. Besides, he always travels with a huge entourage.'

At last, the chowkidar of the first-class waiting-room said he had seen a man who fitted our description.

'Did he sit here in the waiting-room?'

'No, he didn't.'

'Well?'

'He went into the bathroom. He was carrying a small case.'

'What happened then?'

'I don't know, babu. I didn't see him after that.'

'Were you here throughout?'

'Yes. The Doon Express was about to arrive. There were a lot of people here. I didn't leave the room at all.'

'Perhaps you didn't notice him again.'

'Well — all right, perhaps I didn't.'

But the man looked as though what he really wanted to say was that if the sadhubaba had come out of the bathroom, he would certainly have seen him.

If that was the case, where had the sadhu disappeared?

We came out of the station. Here, too, stood a row of tongas. We got into one. I was beginning to look upon these contraptions with a new respect. The last

one had taken exactly seven minutes and fifty-seven seconds to reach the station.

I couldn't help asking another question as we set off. 'Did the sadhubaba simply vanish in the bathroom?'

'Yes, he might have done,' said Feluda. 'Sadhus and sannyasis in the olden days could disappear at will — or so I've heard.'

I knew he wasn't serious, but he spoke with such a perfectly straight face that it was impossible to tell.

A funny noise greeted us as we reached the main road. It sounded like a band, and it was coming closer. Bang, bang, twiddle-dee-dum!

Then we saw it was a tonga like ours, with the difference that this one was decorated with artificial flowers, balloons and colourful flags. The music was coming from a loudspeaker, and a man wearing a fool's cap was throwing great fistfuls of printed paper at people.

'Advertisement for a Hindi film,' Feluda said.

He was right. I could see, as the other tonga went past us, that a brightly painted poster was pasted on its side. The film was called Daku Mansoor. A couple of handbills landed in our tonga, and with them, came a white sheet of paper, screwed into a ball. It hit against Feluda's chest and fell on the floor.

'I saw the man who threw it, Feluda,' I yelled, 'he was dressed like an Afghan. But—'

Before I could finish speaking, Feluda had picked up the piece of paper, clambered down and started to run in the man's direction. I simply watched with amazement the speed at which he ran, despite jostling crowds, without colliding into anyone.

The driver, by this time, had stopped the tonga. I could do nothing but wait. The music from the loudspeaker had grown faint, although a few urchins were still busy collecting the handbills. Feluda returned a few moments later, panting. He jumped into the tonga, gestured to the driver to start, and said, 'He managed to escape only because I wasn't familiar with the little alleyways of this place!'

'Did you actually see him?' I asked.

'How could I have missed him when even you saw him?'

I said nothing more. If Feluda hadn't already seen the man, I would have said that although he was dressed like one, the man was remarkably short for an Afghan.

Feluda now took out the screwed-up piece of paper, smoothed it out and read its contents. Then he folded it three times and put it in his wallet. I did not dare ask what was written on it.

We returned home to discover that Dhiru Kaka had come back, and with him was Srivastava. The latter did not appear to be too upset by the loss of his ring. 'That ring had a jinx on it, I tell you,' he said, 'it caused trouble everywhere it went. You were lucky it was stolen in your absence. Suppose they had broken into your house at night? Suppose they had turned violent?'

Dhiru Kaka smiled at this.

'That would have made more sense,' he said. 'This man simply made a fool of me. It is this that I find so hard to accept!'

'Stop worrying, Dhiru Babu. That ring would have gone, anyway, even if I didn't part with it. And please don't go to the police. That would make matters worse. Whoever it was might try to attack you again!'

All this while, Feluda was leafing through a copy of Life magazine. He now laid it aside, leant back in the sofa and asked, 'Does Mahabir know about this ring?'

'You mean Pyarelal's son?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I don't know for sure. He used to be in Doon School. Then he joined the military academy, but left it eventually and went off to Bombay. Now he's become an actor, I believe.'

'Did Pyarelal approve of his son acting in films?'

'He never mentioned anything to me. But I know he was very fond of his son.'

'Was Mahabir in Lucknow when Pyarelal died?'

'No, he was in Bombay. He arrived as soon as he heard the news.' Dhiru Kaka said, 'Good heavens, Felu, you are asking questions like the police!'

'He's an amateur detective, you see,' Baba explained. 'He has a positive . . . er. . . knack in these matters.'

Dr Srivastava looked at Feluda with undisguised surprise. 'That's good,' he said, 'very good indeed.'

Only Dhiru Kaka remarked, a little dryly, I thought: 'And the thief took something from the very house where we have a detective staying! That is regrettable, isn't it?'

Feluda made no comment. Instead, he turned to Srivastava and asked another question.

'Is Mahabir earning enough from films?'

'I don't know about that. He went to Bombay only two years ago.' 'He does have plenty of money, doesn't he? I mean . . .'

'Yes. Pyarelal left him all his property. Acting in films is more or less just a pastime for him.'

'Hm,' said Feluda and picked up the Life again.

Srivastava suddenly looked at his watch and exclaimed, 'My God, is that the time? I forgot all about my patient! Sorry, you'll have to excuse me.'

Dhiru Kaka and Baba went out with him. Feluda dropped the magazine on a table and asked, 'Where would you like to go—the moon or Mars?'

'At this moment,' I replied, 'I'd like to do just one thing.' Feluda paid no attention to me. 'I've just seen a picture of the surface of the moon in that magazine. It didn't seem very interesting. I feel curious about Mars.'

I rose from my chair. 'Feluda,' I said, 'what I am curious about is that piece of paper in your wallet.'

'Oh that! Here, look!'

He flicked the neatly folded paper towards me as though he was playing carrom. I opened it and found just two words: Watch Out!

The writer had used a red liquid of some kind. It wasn't ink. What could it be? Feluda must have guessed what I was thinking, for he said: 'Sometimes, after a paan has been stuffed with masala, some of its juice overflows on to the stalk. Those words were written with the red juice from a paan.'

I brought the paper close to my nose. It smelt distinctly of paan. 'But who could have written it?' 'I don't know.'

'Why should anyone tell you to watch out? You didn't steal the ring!'

Feluda burst out laughing.

'The culprit doesn't get warnings and threats, silly! They are given to the culprit's enemy. And a detective is always an enemy. So whoever chases a criminal has to risk his life!'

My heart beat faster and my throat started to go dry. I swallowed hard and said, 'In that case, we should perhaps take some steps to protect ourselves.'

'And who told you I haven't taken those steps already?' said Feluda and took out a small round tin from his pocket.

'Denticare,' it said.

Why, it was only a tin of toothpowder. I had seen my grandfather use it years ago. Surprised, I asked, 'What would you do with tooth-powder, Feluda?'

'Don't be silly! It's not toothpowder.'

'What is it then?'

Feluda widened his eyes, stretched his neck and proclaimed proudly, 'It's Powdered Thunder!'

2. Grammar page

During

During = at a time between the start and end of something:

I fell asleep **during the movie**. (= at a time between the start and end of the movie)

We met some really nice people **during our holiday**.

The ground is wet. It must have rained **during the night**.

The President made the speech **during a visit to Canada**.

With 'time words' (the morning, the night, the summer etc.):

You can usually say **in** or **during**:

It rained **in the night**. Or: It rained **during the night**.

It's lovely here **during the summer**. Or: It's lovely **in the summer**.

The population of the city has actually fallen **during the last decade**.

Or: The population of the city has actually fallen **in the last decade**.

We use for (+ a period of time) to say how long something goes on:

We watched TV **for** two hours last night.

Banta is going away **for** a week in September.

How are you? I haven't seen you **for** ages.

Are you going away **for** the weekend?

I felt ill **for** a couple of days, but was fine after that.

We do not use during to say how long something goes on. We do not say 'during two hours', 'during five years' etc.:

It rained **for** three days without stopping. (not during three days)

We use during to say when something happens (not how long). Compare during and for:

‘When did you fall asleep?’

‘During the movie.’

‘How long were you asleep?’

‘For half an hour.’

During and While:

We use during + noun:

I fell asleep **during the movie**.

We met a lot of interesting people **during our holiday**.

Ramu suddenly began to feel ill **during the exam**.

We use while + subject + verb:

I fell asleep **while I was watching** TV.

We met a lot of interesting people **while we were** on holiday.

Ramu suddenly began to feel ill **while he was doing** the exam.

When we are talking about the future, we use the present after while. Do not use ‘will’:

I’m going to Moscow next week. I hope the weather will be good **while I’m** there. (not while I will be)

What are you going to do **while you’re** waiting? (not while you’ll be waiting)

Some more examples of while:

We saw Reeta **while** we were waiting for the bus.

While you were out, there was a phone call for you.

Banta read a book **while** Santa watched TV.