



Learn English Through
Stories

H Series

H8

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The Emperor's Ring: Part 6

Six

Feluda got into the tonga and said to the driver: 'Hazratganj.'

'Where is that?' I asked.

'It is the Chowringhee of Lucknow. There's lots to see in this town, beside royal palaces. I want to look at the shops today.'

Yesterday, from the Residency, we had gone to Bonobihari Babu's house for coffee, and taken a look at all the animals once more—the hyena, the rattle-snake, the spider, the wild cat and the scorpion.

While having coffee in the living-room, Feluda had looked at a locked door and said to Bonobihari Babu, 'I had noticed it was locked the last time we were here. Where does it lead to?'

'Oh yes—it's just a spare room. I've kept it locked ever since I moved in. Didn't want to take the trouble of having it cleaned, you see.'

'In that case, the padlock on it must have been recently changed—for it isn't rusted at all.' Bonobihari Babu's smile did not falter, but he gave Feluda a very sharp look.

'Yes,' he said, 'the old one got so rusty that I was obliged to change it.'

Baba changed the subject. 'We were thinking of going to Haridwar and Laxmanjhoola,' he said. Bonobihari Babu lit his pipe and blew out a pungent-smelling smoke.

'When would you like to go?' he asked. 'If you leave the day after tomorrow, I can come with you. I told you about that twelve-foot python, didn't I? I really must take a look at it. Besides, our sleuth has turned so active that it might be a good idea for all of us to go out of town for a while.'

Dhiru Kaka said, 'I cannot do that quite so easily. But there's no reason why the three of you can't go. Felu and Tapesheh mustn't go back without having seen Laxmanjhoola.'

'If you come with me,' said Bonobihari Babu, 'I can arrange for you to stay at a dharamshala I know; and get a car to take you to Laxmanjhoola from Haridwar. I know a lot of people there. Now you must decide what you want to do.'

We decided to go with Bonobihari Babu on Friday, which was the day after tomorrow. Even a couple of days ago, I would have been quite pleased to have Bonobihari Babu accompany us. But the incident at the Residency had made

me feel doubtful about the man. But Feluda didn't seem to mind, so I told myself not to worry.

This morning, Feluda said, 'I've run out of razor blades. Let's go and get some.' And so we were out in a tonga, going to Hazratganj. Apparently, you could get anything you wanted in Hazratganj.

Feluda had been totally silent since yesterday regarding the matter of the ring. When he had gone for his bath this morning, I had tried to read his scribbles once more, but they still didn't make any sense. One or two letters appeared to be English, but the rest were all totally strange.

Sitting beside him in the tonga, I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer, and told him what I'd done. He was furious at first. 'What you've done is despicable!' he said sternly. 'Why, one could call you a criminal!'

Then he relented a little.

'You could never read those words,' he said more amiably, 'because you don't know the script.' 'What script is it?'

'Greek.'

'And the language? Is that Greek, too?' 'No, it's English.'

'Where did you learn to write in Greek?'

'A long time ago, when I had just joined college. Some of those letters, of course, I had learnt in my maths class. You know, things like alpha, beta, gamma, delta, mu, pi, epsilon. I learnt the others from the Encyclopaedia Britannica. If you write something in English using Greek letters, it sounds like a code. No one could possibly make any sense of it!'

'How would you spell Lucknow in Greek?'

'Lambda epsilon kappa nu omicron epsilon. The letters "c" and "w" do not exist in Greek, so the spelling would be LUKNOU.'

'And how would you spell Calcutta?'

'Kappa alpha lambda kappa epsilon tau tau alpha.'

'Good heavens—it would take an hour to spell just three words!'

Hazratganj wasn't exactly Chowringhee, but it had some nice shops. We paid the tonga off and began walking.

'Look, Feluda, there's a stationery shop. They'll have blades.' 'Wait. There's something else I need to do.'

Feluda suddenly stopped before a shop. 'Malkani & Co., Antique & Curio Dealers', its signboard proclaimed in large letters.

One look at the showcase outside told me it was a shop that sold old things. Inside, it was packed with ancient jewellery, carpets, clocks, furniture, chandeliers, framed photographs and heaven knows what else.

A silver-haired gentleman in gold-framed glasses came forward to greet us. 'Do you have any jewellery dating back to the Mughal times?'

'No, I'm afraid not. But I could show you shields and armours of that period. Will that do?'

Feluda picked up an attardaan (perfume container) and turned it in his hand. 'I had seen some old jewellery in Pyarela's house,' he remarked casually. 'He was a regular customer here, wasn't he?'

The man seemed taken aback.

'Who? Which Pyarelal are you talking about?' 'Pyarelal Seth. The one who died a few months ago?'

Mr Malkani shook his head and said, 'No, he never bought anything from us, although ours is the biggest shop of this kind in Lucknow.'

'I see. In that case he must have bought those things in Calcutta.'

'Probably.'

'Who are your biggest buyers here?'

It was obvious from Mr Malkani's expression that he didn't have too many big buyers.

'Well,' he said, 'tourists from abroad sometimes buy things from us at a good price. Among the locals is Mr Mehta who buys a few things occasionally; and there's Mr Pestonji, who's one of my oldest customers. He bought a real Persian carpet only the other day for three thousand rupees.'

Feluda suddenly pointed at a barge and asked, 'Isn't that from Bengal?'

'Yes, Murshidabad.'

'Just look at it, Topshe. Isn't it beautiful?'

It was. Made of ivory, it was perfect in every detail. A nawab sat on its roof under a canopy, smoking from a hubble-bubble, courtiers sat by his side and, before him, stood a group of musicians and dancers. Sixteen oarsmen were rowing and one man sat at the rudder. Besides these, there were guards and messengers and every other personage necessary in a royal entourage. I couldn't take my eyes away.

‘Where did you get that?’ Feluda asked. ‘Mr Sarkar sold it to me.’

‘Which Mr Sarkar?’

‘Mr B. Sarkar who lives in Badshah Nagar. He, too, has occasionally bought a few things from me.

He’s got a good collection.’

‘I see. Well, all right then. You’ve got a nice little shop here. I’m glad to have seen it. Thank you.’ ‘Good day, sir.’

We came out of the shop.

‘That means Bonobihari Sarkar frequents these shops,’ said Feluda. ‘I had had my suspicions all along.’

‘But he said he wasn’t interested in such things!’

‘If he wasn’t, how could he tell at one glance whether a stone was real or fake?’

A shop called The Empire Book Stall was next door to Malkani & Co. Feluda wanted to buy a book on Haridwar and Laxmanjhoola. So we went in, and found Pyarelal’s son, Mahabir.

Feluda whispered softly, ‘I can see he’s buying a book on cricket. Very good.’

Mahabir was standing with his back to us. Feluda went up to the man behind the counter and said, ‘Do you have anything by Neville Cardus?’

Mahabir spun round immediately. I knew Cardus had written some very good books on cricket. ‘Are you looking for a particular book?’ asked the bookseller.

‘Yes, the one called Centuries.’

‘No, I’m afraid we don’t have that one. Shall I show you some other book?’

Mahabir came forward with a smile. ‘Are you a cricket enthusiast?’ he asked.

‘Yes. So, apparently, are you!’ Feluda replied.

Mahabir looked at the book he was holding.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I had ordered this one. It’s Bradman’s autobiography.’

‘Oh, I see. I’ve read that one. A brilliant book!’

‘Who do you think was a greater cricketer—Ranji or Bradman?’ Soon, both were involved in an animated discussion. After a few minutes, Mahabir said, ‘The Kwality restaurant isn’t far from here. Why don’t we sit down and have a cup of tea?’

Feluda agreed. The three of us trooped into the restaurant. I ordered a Coca-Cola and the others asked for tea.

‘Do you play yourself?’ Mahabir asked.

‘I used to,’ Feluda said. ‘I have played here in Lucknow. How about you?’

‘I was in the first eleven at the Doon School. My father, too, was a good player in school.’

A shadow passed over his face. Feluda began pouring the tea. ‘You must have heard about the ring,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Mahabir replied. ‘I went to visit Dr Srivastava. He told me.’

‘Did you know your father had that ring and that he wanted to give it to Dr Srivastava?’

‘My father had told me a long time ago that he wanted to give something of value to Srivastava for making me well. I did not come to know what it was until after his death. Dr Srivastava himself told me.’

Then he looked straight at Feluda. ‘Why are you taking such an interest?’

Feluda smiled. ‘It’s . . . just a sort of hobby.’

Mahabir sipped his tea and said nothing.

‘Who else is there in your house?’ Feluda asked quietly.

‘An old aunt and some servants.’

‘Have they been with you for some time?’

‘All from even before I was born. Pritam Singh, our bearer, was with my father in Calcutta, thirty- five years ago.’

‘Did your father have any other articles like that ring?’

‘I don’t know. In fact, I had quite forgotten about this interest my father had. He began collecting antiques when I was very small. I opened an old chest only the other day. There were some other things of that period, but none as valuable as the ring.’

I sipped my Coca-Cola through a straw. Mahabir paused, then lowered his voice. ‘Pritam Singh told me something rather strange.’

Feluda waited for him to continue. Mahabir looked around carefully and leant forward, still speaking softly.

‘He said he had heard my father scream that morning before he had his second attack.’

‘Oh?’

‘Pritam Singh didn’t, at first, pay much attention since my father used to suffer from backache, and often cried out in pain while rising from a chair or his bed. Yet, he would never allow anyone to help him up. Pritam Singh thought it was his backache that was bothering him again that morning. But now he says he might have been mistaken because apparently my father had screamed very loudly.’

‘Do you happen to know if anyone had visited your father that day? Can Pritam Singh remember anything?’

‘That’s something I’ve already asked him, but he cannot say anything definitely. Father did occasionally have visitors in the morning, but Pritam can’t now recall whether anyone in particular had visited him that day. When he eventually went into my father’s room, he found him in pretty bad shape; but he was alone. Pritam then rang Dr Srivastava as the doctor who normally treated Father— Dr Graham—was away in Allahabad, attending a conference.’

‘And what about the spy?’

‘Spy? What spy?’ Mahabir sounded profoundly startled.

‘Oh, clearly you haven’t heard this one. Your father had started to tell Dr Srivastava about a spy, but died before he could finish speaking.’

Mahabir shook his head, ‘I had no idea. And I cannot imagine what my father could possibly have had to do with a spy!’

I had just finished my drink and twisted the straw when I noticed a tall and hefty man having tea at the next table, staring at us. He rose and came forward as he caught my eye.

‘Namaskaar,’ he said to Feluda, ‘hope you remember me?’

‘Yes, of course.’

I hadn’t recognized him at first, but now I could. We had seen this man in Bonobihari Babu’s house. He was supposed to be in charge of the zoo. Today, he had a piece of cotton stuck on his chin, held in place by two strips of sticking plaster. Perhaps he had cut himself while shaving.

‘Do sit down,’ Feluda invited. ‘Meet Mahabir Seth. This is Ganesh Guha.’

Now I noticed a scratch on his neck, although it was clearly an old one. ‘What happened to your chin?’ asked Feluda.

Ganesh Babu picked up his cup from the next table and joined us. 'Don't remind me!' he winced. 'I'm surprised my whole body hasn't been torn apart. You know about my job, don't you?'

'Yes. But I thought it was a job you'd taken on willingly.'

'You're joking! I do it because I have to—simply for the money. I was once the keeper of a tiger in a circus. But that tiger was drugged most of the time. I tell you, compared to the animals I handle in Bonobihari Babu's zoo, that tiger was little more than a baby! The wild cat clawed me the other day, and now the hyena slaps me on the chin! I couldn't take it anymore. So I told Mr Sarkar this morning I had made up my mind. I want to go back to that circus. He agreed to let me go.'

'What!' Feluda sounded surprised. 'You've given up your job? Why, we were at your zoo only yesterday!'

'Yes, I know. And no doubt many other people would like to go and visit my zoo. But I am clearing out! I'll go straight to the station from here and buy myself a ticket to Howrah. Then I'll soon be home, away from it all. The thing is—' he stooped and spoke into Feluda's ear, 'That man is not... as straightforward as he might seem.'

'You mean Bonobihari Babu?'

'He was all right, I guess, until he laid his hands on something. Then he lost his head.'

'What thing?'

'No, I've already said too much!'

Ganesh Guha dropped a few coins on the next table and disappeared.

Feluda turned to Mahabir and said, 'Have you ever seen Bonobihari Babu's zoo?'

'No. I'd have liked to have seen it, but my father was dead against the idea. He hated the kind of animals that zoo is reported to be filled with. In fact, the sight of a cockroach would have given him palpitations! But now... yes, I think I'll go and see it.'

Mahabir snapped his fingers at a waiter. Feluda had already offered to pay, but Mahabir would not let him. Well, I thought to myself, a film actor was supposed to make a lot of money. So paying for a cup of tea and a cold drink couldn't hurt him much.

After paying the bill, he took out a packet of cigarettes and offered it to Feluda. I noticed they were Charminars.

'How long are you here for?' he asked.

'Tomorrow we're going to Haridwar for a couple of days, but after that we're here until next month.'

'Are you all going to Haridwar?'

'No, Dhiru Kaka cannot get away. So we three are going, and possibly Bonobihari Babu. He's going to look for a python in Laxmanjhoola.'

We went out of the restaurant.

'I have a car,' Mahabir offered, 'I could give you a lift.'

'No, thanks,' said Feluda. 'We can ride in a motor car any time in Calcutta. A tonga is a new experience, and an enjoyable one!'

Mahabir took Feluda's hand and clasped it warmly. 'It really was a pleasure to meet you,' he said. 'Let me tell you just one thing—if I get evidence that my father did not die a natural death and that someone was responsible for it, I will not rest until I have tracked down the criminal and settled scores with him. I may be young, but I did spend four years in the Military Academy. I have a licensed revolver, and I am a crack shot... good-bye!'

He crossed the road, got into his black Standard and drove off. Feluda simply said, 'Bravo!'

Yes, the plot had certainly thickened. There appeared to be a puzzle within a puzzle, a maze within a maze.

We began walking in search of a tonga. Feluda didn't really need blades, I realized.

2. Grammar Page

Time: At – On — In

A. Compare at, on and in:

1. They arrived at 5 o'clock.
2. They arrived on Friday.
3. They arrived in June.
4. They arrived in 2012.

We use **at** for the time of day:

— at six o'clock — at 10.45 — at midnight — at lunchtime — at sunset etc.

We use **on** for days and dates:

— on Friday or on Fridays — on 16 May 2012 — on New Year's Day — on my birthday etc.

We use **in** for longer periods (months/years/seasons etc.)

— in September — in 2010 — in the 1990s — in the 20th century — in the past — in winter — in summer etc.

B. We say

— at the moment — at the minute — at present — at this time (= now):

1. Can we talk later? I'm busy **at the moment**.
2. He's in great form **at the minute**.
3. Nothing about my life excites me **at present**.
4. There's usually a lot of traffic **at this time** of day.

at the same time — Banta and I arrived at the same time.

at the weekends or at weekends – British English

on the weekend or on weekends – American English)

1. Will you be here at the weekend? (or... on the weekend).
2. Do you give each other presents **at Christmas**? Not on Christmas.

at night (= during nights in general), in the night (= during a particular night):

1. I don't like working **at night**.
2. I was woken up by a noise **in the night**.

C. We say:

- in the morning(s) — but on Friday morning(s)
- in the afternoon(s) — on Sunday afternoon(s)
- in the evening(s) — on Monday evening(s) etc.

1. I'll see you **in the morning**.
2. I'll see you **on Friday morning**.
3. Do you work **in the evenings**?
4. Do you work **on Saturday evenings**?

D. We do not use at/on/in before last/next/this/every:

1. I'll see you next Friday.
2. They got married last June.
3. They got divorced this morning.
4. He drinks alcohol every day.

E. We say that something will happen in a few minutes / in six months etc. :

1. The train will be leaving in a few minutes. (= a few minutes from now)
2. Banta has gone away. He'll be back in a week. (= a week from now)
3. They'll be here in a moment. (= a moment from now, very **soon**)