



Learn English Through
Stories

H Series

H11

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The Emperor's Ring: Part 9

Nine

'Panda? Would you like a panda?'

'May I have your name, babu? Where are you from?' 'This way, babu. Which dharamshala are you booked at?'

'You will go to the temple of Baba Daksheshwar, won't you?'

I had no idea the group of pandas waiting on the platform would surround us like this, even though Feluda had warned me of the possibility. These pandas apparently kept huge ledgers that held records of one's ancestors—those who had visited Haridwar, that is—going back several hundred years. My great-great-grandfather was supposed to have left home to become a sannyasi. He had spent a long time in Haridwar. Perhaps one of those ledgers contained his name and address, or maybe even his handwriting? Who could tell?

'There is no need for a panda,' said Bonobihari Babu, 'that would only add to the confusion. Let's go to Sheetal Das's dharamshala. I know the place. We could be together, and the food's not too bad. It's just a matter of one night, anyway. Tomorrow we leave for Hrishikesh and Laxmanjhoola.'

A coolie picked up our luggage. We came out of the station and hired three tongas. Feluda and I got into one, Baba and Dr Srivastava got into another and Bonobihari Babu took the third. It was still dark.

'A holy place,' said Feluda, 'is always dirty. But once you're by the river, it feels quite pleasant.'

Our tonga rattled along the lanes of Haridwar. Not a single shop was open yet. There were men sleeping on string beds by the roadside wrapped in blankets. Kerosene lamps flickered here and there. A few old men went past, metal pots in hand. They were going to the river, Feluda explained. They would stand immersed in waist-deep water and wait for sunrise, chanting hymns to welcome a new day. The rest of the town was still asleep.

Bonobihari Babu's tonga was leading us. It stopped in front of a white single-storeyed house, with large pillars. This clearly, was Sheetal Das's dharamshala.

There was a courtyard as we went in through the gate. Corridors ran round its sides and the rooms stood in neat rows.

A man from the dharamshala came out and took our luggage in. We were about to follow him through a door when another tonga came and stopped at the front gate. The sadhu who had travelled with us up to Bareilly climbed down from it.

I tugged at Feluda's sleeve.

'Look, it's the same man! The one in the train...'

Feluda gave the man a sidelong glance and said, 'Do you mean to say even this man is a suspect?' 'Well, this is the second time...'

'Sh-h-h. Not a word. Let's go in.'

Baba, Feluda and I were given one room. There were four beds in it. The occupant of the fourth bed was fast asleep.

Bonobihari Babu and Dr Srivastava were given the room next to ours. The sadhu joined them.

By the time all of us had had a wash and tea had been ordered, it was fairly bright. A number of people were now awake and the whole place had become quite noisy. I now realized what a wide variety of people were staying at the dharamshala. There were Bengalis, Marwaris, people from Uttar Pradesh, Gujaratis, Maharashtrians—all contributing equally to the general cacophony.

'Are you thinking of going out?' asked Baba. 'Yes, I'd like to go to the river,' Feluda said.

'All right. I'm going with Bonobihari Babu to arrange two taxis for tomorrow. And if you're going anywhere near a market, get an Eveready torch. After all, this is not a place like Lucknow. A torch may come in handy.'

We left. Feluda said the place was too small for a tonga ride. It was better to walk.

I soon began to feel the difference in temperature. Haridwar was definitely cooler than Lucknow and, possibly because it was so close to a river, covered by a misty haze. 'It's more smoke than mist,' Feluda said, 'the smoke comes from angeethees.'

We stopped to ask our way a little later. 'Half a mile from here,' we were told.

A different cacophony greeted us from a distance even before we reached the river. It turned out to be groups of bathers. Besides, hawkers and beggars lined the path running to the river bank, and they were no less noisy.

We pushed through the crowd and made our way to the steps that led to the edge of the water. The scene that met my eyes was one I have never witnessed since. It was as though a carnival was being held by the riverside. Bells pealed within a temple that stood by the steps. A Vaishnav sat singing a bhajan near the temple, surrounded by a group of old men and women. Cows, goats, dogs and cats moved about freely, in happy conjunction with the humans.

Feluda found a relatively quiet spot on the steps and we sat down. 'If you want a glimpse of ancient India,' he said, 'just watch the scene below.'

The whole thing was so different from Lucknow that I nearly forgot the stolen ring. Did Feluda feel the same way, or was his mind still working on the case? I looked at Feluda, but didn't dare ask him. He was taking out his cigarettes and a matchbox from his pocket with a contented air. This was clearly good opportunity to have a smoke since he couldn't when Baba was present.

He put a cigarette between his lips and pushed open the matchbox. Something flashed brightly. Startled, I asked, 'What was that, Feluda?' By then, he had shut the box again.

'What was what?' he asked, apparently taken aback. 'That... object that's in your matchbox. I saw it flash.'

Feluda cupped his mouth with both hands to light his cigarette and inhaled. Then he blew the smoke out and said, 'Matchsticks have phosphorus in them, don't you know? That's what flashed in the sun.'

I couldn't ask anything further, but that seemed an unlikely story. Matchsticks didn't glitter in the sun!

We stayed by the river a little longer and then went to see the temple of Daksheshwar. By the time we were out of the temple, buying a torch in a stationery shop, it was nearly ten-thirty. But no matter what we did or saw, I simply could not get the matchbox out of my mind.

Somehow, I felt convinced what I had seen shining in the sun was the diamond in Aurangzeb's ring. If Feluda had said it was a coin, I might have believed him. But his tale of phosphorus in matchsticks was pure nonsense, and I knew it.

But what if it was the ring? Did the burglars know Feluda had it with him? Was that why they were threatening him and trying to hurt him? Why, they had even tried to chloroform us!

Feluda, however, appeared quite unperturbed. He was humming, quietly. 'There is a raga called Khat,' he stopped at one point to explain, 'it has to be sung in the morning. What I am humming is the same raga.'

I wanted to say, 'Keep your ragas to yourself. I am not interested and, in fact, I am very cross with you. Why did you tell me a lie?' But I couldn't utter these words for we had reached the dharamshala. I decided to tackle Feluda on the subject in the evening.

Baba, Bonobihari Babu and Dr Srivastava were sitting on the veranda, talking to another gentleman, who was wearing a dhoti and kurta and appeared to be another Bengali.

'We've arranged a couple of taxis,' Baba said upon our arrival, 'and we're leaving tomorrow morning at six. Bonobihari Babu knew those fellows, so we've been given a concession.'

The Bengali gentleman, called Bilash Babu, was from Allahabad. He turned out to be a palmist. Bonobihari Babu offered his palm and asked, 'Is there any chance of my being bitten to death by an animal?'

Bilash Babu ran a clove on the lines of Bonobihari Babu's hand and said, 'Why, no! It looks like a natural death to me!'

My eyes fell on the palmist's feet. They were distinctly odd. The big toe on each foot was longer than the others by at least half-an-inch. I could have sworn I had seen these feet—or feet like these—quite recently. But where might that have been? I simply couldn't remember.

Bonobihari Babu gave a sigh of relief. 'Thank goodness!' he said.

'Why do you say that? Are you a shikari? Do you go tiger hunting, or what?' Bilash Babu seemed puzzled.

'No, no,' Bonobihari Babu replied, 'but it's just as well to make sure. A cousin of mine once got bitten by a mad dog. You know, purely out of the blue. The poor chap died of hydrophobia. So I thought ...'

'Did you use to live in Calcutta?'

'Good heavens, is even that written in my hand?'

'Yes, so it would seem. And ... are you interested in collecting antiques?'

'Antiques? Who, me? Oh no. It was Pyarelal who did that. I am interested in animals.' 'Are you? Is that why you were talking about getting bitten? But ...'

'But what?' Bonobihari Babu asked eagerly. 'Have you recently been under stress?' 'How recently?'

'Say in the last thirty days?' Bonobihari Babu laughed.

'No, sir. I have not a care in the world, and I haven't been worried. My only anxiety is about whether I shall find that python tomorrow in Laxmanjhoola.'

Bilash Babu looked as though he would have liked to have peered at his palms a little longer, but Bonobihari Babu withdrew them abruptly and yawned.

‘The truth is,’ he said, ‘I don’t really believe in palmistry. Please don’t mind my saying this, but I don’t think what we make of ourselves has anything to do with the lines on our hands. The only thing I believe in is man’s own strength and his ability to succeed.’

So saying, he rose and went into his room.

My eyes went once more to Bilash Babu’s feet.

But no, I still could not recall where I had seen them.

2. Grammar Page

In/at/on (position) 2

We say that somebody/something is:

in a line, in a row, in a queue, in a picture, in a photograph, in a newspaper, in a magazine, in a book, in an office, in a department, in the sky, in the world in the country.

1. When I go to the cinema, I like to sit **in the front row**.
2. Amarjeet works **in the sales department**.
3. Who is the woman in that picture?
4. Do you live **in a city or in the country**?
5. It's a lovely day. There isn't a cloud **in the sky**.

We say that somebody/something is:

on the left , on the right (or on the left -hand side, on the right-hand side)

1. Do you drive **on the left** or **on the right** in your country?

on the ground floor, on the first floor, on the second floor etc.

2. Our apartment is **on the second floor** of the building.

on a map, on a menu, on a list, on a page, on a website

3. Here's the shopping list. Don't buy anything that's not **on the list**.
4. You'll find the information you need **on our website**.

We say that a place is on a river / on a road / on the coast:

1. Vienna is on the (river) Danube.
2. The town where you live – is it on the coast or is it inland?
3. We say on the way (from one place to another):
4. We stopped at a shop on the way home.

We say:

at the top (of ...), at the bottom (of ...), at the end (of ...)

1. Write your name at the top of the page.
2. Banta lives at the other end of the street.

Exercise

Complete the sentences. Use in, at or on + the following:

the west coast **the world** **the back of the class** **the sky**
the front row **the right** **the back of this card** **the way to work**

1. It's a lovely day. There isn't a cloud
2. In most countries people drive
3. What is the tallest building
4. I met a friend of minethis morning.
5. San Francisco is of the United States.
6. We went to the theatre last night. We had seats
7. I couldn't hear the teacher. She spoke quietly and I was sitting
.....
8. I don't have your address. Could you write it

Answers

1. It's a lovely day. There isn't a cloud **in the sky**.
2. In most countries people **drive on the right**.
3. What is the tallest building **in the world**?
4. I met a friend of mine **on my way to work** this morning.
5. San Francisco is **on the west coast** of the United States.
6. We went to the theatre last night. We had seats **in the front row**.
7. I couldn't hear the teacher. She spoke quietly and I was sitting **at the back of the class**.
8. I don't have your address. Could you write it **on the back of this card**.