



# Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F27

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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# 1. The Snake - Song

By R k Narayan

We were coming out of the music hall quite pleased with the concert. We thought it a very fine performance. We thought so till we noticed the Talkative Man in our midst. He looked as though he had been in a torture chamber. We looked at him sourly and remarked, 'We suppose you are one of those great men who believe that South Indian music died one hundred years ago. Or were you at any time hobnobbing with all our ancient musicians and composers, the only reason many persons like you have for thinking that all modern singing is childish and inane? Or are you one of those restless theorists who can never hear a song without splitting it into atoms?'

'None of these,' answered the Talkative Man. 'I am just a simple creature who knows what he is talking about. I know something of music, perhaps just a little more than anyone else here, and that is why I am horrified to see the level to which taste has sunk . . .'

We tried to snub him by receiving his remarks in cold silence and talking among ourselves. But he followed us all the way, chatting, and we had to listen to him.

Seeing me now (said the Talkative Man), perhaps you think I am capable of doing nothing more artistic than selling chemical fertilizers to peasants. But I tell you I was at one time ambitious of becoming a musician. I came near being one. It was years and years ago. I was living at the time in Kumbum, a small village eighty miles from Malgudi. A master musician lived there. When he played on the flute, it was said, the cattle of the village followed him about. He was perhaps the greatest artist of the century, but quite content to live in obscurity, hardly known to anyone outside the village, giving concerts only in the village temple and absolutely satisfied with the small income he derived from his ancestral lands. I washed his clothes, swept his house, ran errands for him, wrote his accounts, and when he felt like it, he taught me music. His personality and presence had a value all their own, so that even if he taught only for an hour it was worth a year's tuition under anyone else. The very atmosphere around him educated one.

After three years of chipping and planning, my master felt that my music was after all taking some shape. He said, 'In another year, perhaps, you may go to the town and play before a public, that is, if you care for such things.' You may be sure I cared. Not for me the greatness of obscurity. I wanted wealth and renown. I dreamt of going to Madras and attending the music festival next year, and then all the districts would ring with my name. I looked on my bamboo flute as a sort of magic wand which was going to open out a new world to me.

I lived in a small cottage at the end of the street. It was my habit to sit up and practise far into the night. One night as I was just losing myself in *bhairavi raga*,

there came a knock on the door. I felt irritated at the interruption.

‘Who is there?’ I asked.

‘A *sadhu*; he wants a mouthful of food.’

‘At this hour! Go, go. Don’t come and pester people at all hours.’

‘But hunger knows no time.’

‘Go away. I have nothing here. I myself live on my master’s charity.’

‘But can’t you give a small coin or at least a kind word to a *sadhu*? He has seen Kasi, Rameswaram . . .’

‘Shut up,’ I cried, glared at the door and resumed my *bhairavi*.

Fifteen minutes later the knocks were repeated. I lost my temper. ‘Have you no sense? Why do you disturb me?’

‘You play divinely. Won’t you let me in? You may not give me food for my stomach, but don’t deny me your music.’

I didn’t like anyone to be present when I practised, and this constant interruption was exasperating. ‘Don’t stand there and argue. If you don’t go at once, I will open the door and push you out.’

‘Ah, bad words. You needn’t push me out. I am going. But remember, this is your last day of music. Tomorrow you may exchange your flute for a handful of dried dates.’

I heard his wooden clogs going down the house steps. I felt relieved and played for about ten minutes. But my mind was troubled. His parting words . . . what did he mean by them? I got up, took the lantern from its nail on the wall and went out. I stood on the last step of my cottage and looked up and down the dark street, holding up the lantern. I turned in. Vaguely hoping that he might call again, I left the door half-open. I hung up the lantern and sat down. I looked at the pictures of gods on the wall and prayed to be protected from the threat of the unseen mendicant. And then I was lost in music once again.

Song after song flowed from that tiny bamboo and transformed my lonely cottage. I was no longer a petty mortal blowing through a piece of bamboo. I was among the gods. The lantern on the wall became a brilliant star illuminating a celestial hall . . . And I came to the snake-song in *punnaga varali*. I saw the serpent in all its majesty: the very venom in its pouch had a touch of glory: now I saw its divinity as it crowned Shiva’s head: Parvathi wore it as a wristlet: Subramanya played with it: and it was Vishnu’s couch . . . The whole composition imparted to the serpent a quality which inspired awe and reverence.

And now what should I see between the door and me but a black cobra! It had opened its immense hood and was swaying ecstatically. I stopped my song and rubbed my eyes to see if I was fully awake. But the moment the song ceased, the cobra turned and threw a glance at me, and moved forward. I have never seen such a black cobra and such a long one in my life. Some saving instinct told me: ‘Play on!’

Play on! Don't stop.' I hurriedly took the flute to my lips and continued the song. The snake, which was now less than three yards from me, lifted a quarter of its body, with a gentle flourish reared its head, fixed its round eyes on me and listened to the music without making the slightest movement. It might have been a carven snake in black stone, so still it was.

And as I played with my eyes fixed on the snake I was so much impressed with its dignity and authority that I said to myself, 'Which God would forgo the privilege of wearing this in His hair?

After playing the song thrice over, I commenced a new song. The cobra sharply turned its head and looked at me as if to say, 'Now what is all this?' and let out a terrible hiss, and made a slight movement. I quickly resumed the snake-song, and it assumed once again its carven posture.

So I played the song again and again. But however great a composition might be, a dozen repetitions of it was bound to prove tiresome. I attempted to change the song once or twice, but I saw the snake stir menacingly. I vainly tried to get up and dash out, but the snake nearly stood up on its tail and promised to finish me. And so I played the same song all night. My distinguished audience showed no sign of leaving. By and by I felt exhausted. My head swam, my cheeks ached from continuous blowing and my chest seemed to be emptied of the last wisp of breath. I knew I was going to drop dead in a few seconds. It didn't seem to matter very much if the snake was going to crush me in its coils and fill me with all the venom in its sac. I flung down the flute, got up and prostrated before it, crying, 'Oh, Naga Raja, you are a god; you can kill me if you like, but I can play no more . . .'

When I opened my eyes again the snake was gone. The lantern on the wall had turned pale in the morning light. My flute lay near the doorway.

Next day I narrated my experiences to my master. He said, 'Don't you know you ought not to play *punnaga varali* at night? That apart, now you can never be sure you will not get the snake in again if you play. And when he comes he won't spare you unless you sing his song over again. Are you prepared to do it?'

'No, no, a thousand times no,' I cried. The memory of the song was galling. I had repeated it enough to last me a lifetime.

'If it is so, throw away your flute and forget your music . . . You can't play with a serpent. It is a plaything of gods. Throw away your bamboo. It is of no use to you anymore. ' I wept at the thought of this renunciation. My master pitied me and said, 'Perhaps all will be well again if you seek your visitor of that night and beg his forgiveness. Can you find him?'

I put away my flute. I have ever since been searching for an unknown, unseen mendicant, in this world. Even today, if by God's grace I meet him, I will fall at his feet, beg his forgiveness

## 2. Grammar Page - Tenses

### Uses of Present Simple:

#### Newspaper headlines

1. Ten die in bus accident.
2. Mr Sunak visits India.

#### In the sentence beginning with 'here' and 'there'.

1. Here comes the bus.
2. There he goes.

#### With simple future tense, in the clauses of cause and effect.

1. If you work hard, you'll pass the test.
2. If he comes to the party, she'll be happy.

#### To tell about someone's job or profession.

1. He works in a bank.
2. Rana is an engineer.
2. His father works in a school.
4. He teaches English.

#### Adverbs used:

always, seldom, daily, usually, occasionally, hardly, now-a-days, rarely, sometimes, never, generally, frequently, often, every day, every week, every month, every year, once a week, twice a day, trice a month, whenever, after, every time, etc.

1. Sonya always gets up at 7 o'clock.
2. He often comes here.
3. He sometimes visits new places.
4. She goes to temple every day.
5. Mika brushes her teeth twice a day.
6. Barking dogs seldom bite.
7. She changes her job every two years.
8. I usually work till 8.
9. Does it rain often in your hometown?
10. He plays tennis on Saturdays.