



Learn English Through Stories

H Series

H24

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Trouble in Gangtok

By Satyajit

Three

Although the mist had lifted, the sky was still overcast, and it was raining. I didn't mind the rain. It was only a faint drizzle, the tiny raindrops breaking up into a thin, powdery haze. One didn't need an umbrella in rain like this; it was very refreshing.

We found a branch of Bata near our hotel. Luckily, they did have the kind of boots we were looking for. When we came out clutching our parcels, Feluda said, 'Since we don't yet know our way about this town, we'd better take a taxi.'

'Where to?'

'The Tibetan Institute. I've heard they have a most impressive collection of tankhas, ancient manuscripts and pieces of Tantrik art.'

'Are you beginning to get suspicious?' I asked, though I wasn't at all sure that Feluda would give me a straight answer.

'Why? What should I be getting suspicious about?'

'That Mr Shelvankar's death wasn't really caused by an accident?' 'I haven't found a reason yet to jump to that conclusion.'

'But that statue is missing, isn't it?'

'So what? It slipped out of his pocket, and was stolen by someone. That's all there is to it. Killing is not so simple. Besides, I cannot believe that anyone would commit murder simply for a statue that had been bought for a thousand rupees.'

I said nothing more, but I couldn't help thinking that if a mystery did grow out of all this, it would be rather fun.

A row of jeeps stood by the roadside. Feluda approached one of the Nepali drivers and said, 'The Tibetan Institute. Do you know the way?'

'Yes sir, I do.'

We got into the jeep, both choosing to sit in the front with the driver. He took out a woollen scarf from his pocket, wrapped it round his neck and turned the jeep around. Then we set off on the same road which had brought us into town. Only this time, we were going in the opposite direction.

Feluda began talking to the driver.

‘Have you heard about the accident that happened recently?’ ‘Yes, everyone in Gangtok has.’

‘The driver of that jeep survived, didn’t he?’

‘Yes, he’s very lucky. Last year there had been a similar accident: The driver got killed, not the passenger.’

‘Do you happen to know this driver?’

‘Of course. Everyone knows everyone in Gangtok.’

‘What is he doing now?’

‘Driving another taxi. SKM 463. It’s a new taxi.’ ‘Have you seen the accident spot?’

‘Yes, it’s on the North Sikkim Highway. Three kilometres from here.’ ‘Could you take us there tomorrow.’

‘Yes, sure. Why not?’

‘Well then, come to the Snow View Hotel at 8 a.m. We’ll be waiting for you.’

‘Very well, sir.’

A road rose straight through a forest to stop before the Tibetan Institute. The driver told us that orchids grew in this forest, but we didn’t have the time to stop and look for them. Our jeep stopped outside the front door of the Institute. It was a large two-storey building with strange Tibetan patterns on its walls. It was so quiet that I thought perhaps the place was closed, but then we discovered that the front door was open. We stepped into a big hall. Tankhas hung on the walls. The floor was lined with huge glass cases filled with objects of art.

As we stood debating where to go next, a Tibetan gentleman, clad in a loose Sikkimese dress, came forward to meet us.

‘Could we see the curator, please?’ Feluda asked politely.

‘No, I’m afraid he is away on sick leave today. I am his assistant. How may I help you?’

‘Well, actually, I need some information on a certain Tibetan statue. I do not know what it’s called, but it has nine heads and thirty-four arms. Could it be a Tibetan god?’

The gentleman smiled. ‘Yes, yes, you mean Yamantak. Tibet is full of strange gods. We have a statue of Yamantak here. Come with me, I’ll show it to you. Someone brought a beautiful specimen a few days ago—it’s the best I’ve ever seen—but unfortunately, that gentleman died.’

‘Oh, did he?’ Feluda feigned total surprise.

We followed the assistant curator and stopped before a tall showcase. He brought out a small statue from it. I gasped in horror. Good heavens, was this a god or a monster? Each of its nine faces wore a most vicious expression. The assistant curator then turned it in his hand and showed us a small hole at the base of the statue. It was customary, he said, to roll a piece of paper with a prayer written on it and insert it through that little hole. It was called the ‘sacred intestine’!

He put the statue back in the case and turned to us once more. ‘That other statue of Yamantak I was talking about was only three inches long. But its workmanship was absolutely exquisite. It was made of gold, and the eyes were two tiny rubies. None of us had ever seen anything like it before, not even our curator. And he’s been all over Tibet, met the Dalai Lama—why, he’s even drunk tea with the Dalai Lama, out of a human skull!’

‘Would a statue like that be valuable? I mean, if it was made of gold—?’

The assistant curator smiled again. ‘I know what you mean. This man bought it for a thousand rupees. Its real value may well be in excess of ten thousand.’

We were then taken on a little tour down the hall, and the assistant curator told us in great detail about some of the other exhibits. Feluda listened politely, but all I could think of was Mr Shelvankar’s death. Surely ten thousand rupees was enough to tempt someone to kill? But then, I told myself firmly,

Mr Shelvankar had not been stabbed or strangled or poisoned. He had died simply because a falling rock had hit his jeep. It had to be an accident.

As we were leaving, our guide suddenly laughed and said, 'I wonder why Yamantak has created such a stir. Someone else was asking me about this statue.'

'Who? The man who died?'

'No, no, someone else. I'm afraid I cannot recall his name, or his face. All I remember are the questions he asked. You see, I was very busy that day with a group of American visitors. They were our Chogyal's guests, so . . .'

When we got back into the jeep, it was only five to five by my watch; but it was already dark. This surprised me since I knew daylight could not fade so quickly. The reason became clear as we passed the forest and came out into the open again. Thick black clouds had gathered in the western sky. 'It generally rains at night,' informed our driver. 'The days here are usually dry.' We decided to go back to the hotel as there was no point now in trying to see other places.

Feluda did not utter a single word on our way back. He simply stared out of the jeep, taking in everything he saw. If we went up this road again on a different day, I was sure he'd be able to remember the names of all the shops we saw. Would I ever be able to acquire such tremendous powers of observation, and an equally remarkable memory? I didn't think so.

We saw Mr Bose again as we got out of our jeep in front of our hotel. He appeared to be returning from the market, still looking thoughtful. He gave a little start when he heard Feluda call out to him. Then he looked up, saw us and came forward with a smile. 'Everything's arranged. I am leaving by the morning flight tomorrow.'

'Could you please make a few enquiries for me when you get to Bombay?' asked Feluda. 'You see, Mr Shelvankar had bought a valuable Tibetan statue. We must find out if it was sent to Bombay with his other personal effects.'

'All right, I can do that for you. But where did you learn this?' Feluda told him briefly about his conversation with Mr Sarkar and the German photographer. 'Yes, it would have been perfectly natural for him to have kept the statue with him. He had a passion for art objects,' Mr Bose said. Then he suddenly seemed to remember something, and the expression on his face changed. He looked at Feluda again with a mixture of wonder and amusement.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘you didn’t tell me you were a detective.’

Feluda and I both gave a start. How had he guessed? Mr Bose began laughing. Then he pulled out his wallet and, from it, took out a small visiting card. To my surprise, I saw that it was one of Feluda’s. It said: Pradosh C. Mitter, Private Investigator.

‘It fell out of your pocket this morning when you were paying the driver of your jeep,’ Mr Bose told us. ‘He picked it up and gave it to me, thinking it was mine. I didn’t even glance at it then, but saw it much later. Anyway, I’m going to keep it, if I may. And here’s my own card. If there is any development here . . . I mean, if you think I ought to be here, please send me a telegram in Bombay. I’ll take the first available flight . . . Well, I don’t suppose I’ll meet you tomorrow. Goodbye, Mr Mitter. Have a good time.’ Mr Bose raised his hand in farewell and began walking briskly in the direction of the dak bungalow. It had started to rain.

Feluda took his shoes off the minute we got back into our room and threw himself down on his bed. ‘Aaaah!’ he said. I was feeling tired, too. Who knew we’d see and hear so many different things on our very first day?

‘Just imagine,’ Feluda said, staring at the ceiling, ‘what do you suppose we’d have done if a criminal had nine heads? No one could possibly sneak up to him and catch him from behind!’

‘And thirty-four arms? What about those?’

‘Yes, we’d have had to use seventeen pairs of handcuffs to arrest him!’

It was raining quite hard outside. I got up and switched on the lights. Feluda stretched out an arm and slipped his hand into his handbag. A second later, he had his famous blue notebook open in front of him and a pen in his hand. Feluda had clearly made up his mind that there was indeed a mystery somewhere, and had started his investigation.

‘Can you tell me quickly the name of each new person we have met today?’

I wasn’t prepared for such a question at all, so all I could do for a few seconds was stare dumbly at Feluda. Then I swallowed and said, ‘Today? Every new person? Do I have to start from Bagdogra?’

'No, you idiot. Just give me a list of people we met here in Gangtok.' 'Well . . . Sasadhar Datta.'

'Wrong. Try again.'

'Sorry, sorry. I mean Sasadhar Bose. We met him at the airport in Bagdogra.'

'Right. Why is he in Gangtok?'

'Something to do with aromatic plants, didn't he say?'

'No, a vague answer like that won't do. Try to be more specific.'

'Wait. He came here to meet his partner, Shivkumar Shelvankar. They have a chemical firm.

Among other things, they . . .' 'OK, OK, that'll do. Next?' 'The hippie.'

'His name?' 'Helmet—'

'No, not Helmet. It's Helmut. And his surname?' 'Ungar.'

'What brought him here?'

'He's a professional photographer, working on a book on Sikkim. He had his visa extended.' 'Next?'

'Nishikanto Sarkar. Lives in Darjeeling. No idea what he does for a living. He had a Tibetan statue which he—'

I was interrupted by a knock on the door. 'Come in!' Feluda shouted.

The man I was just talking about walked into the room. 'I hope I'm not disturbing you?' asked Nishikanto Sarkar. 'I just thought I'd tell you about the Lama dance.'

'Lama dance? Where?' Feluda offered him a chair. Mr Sarkar took it, that same strange smile still hovering on his lips.

'In Rumtek,' he said, 'just ten miles from here. It's going to be a grand affair. People are coming from Bhutan and Kalimpong. The chief Lama of Rumtek—he is number three after the Dalai Lama—'

was in Tibet all this while. He has just returned to Rumtek. And the monastery is supposed to be new and worth seeing. Would you like to go tomorrow?'

'Not in the morning. Maybe after lunch?'

'OK. Or if you wish to have a darshan of His Holiness, we could go the day after tomorrow. I could get hold of three white scarves.'

'Why scarves?' I asked.

Mr Sarkar's smile broadened. 'That is a local custom. If you wish to meet a high class Tibetan, you have to present him with a scarf. He'll take it from you, and return it immediately. That's all, that takes care of all the formalities.'

'No, I don't think we need bother about a darshan,' said Feluda. 'Let's just go and see the dance.' 'Yes, I would actually prefer that myself. The sooner we can go the better. You never know what might happen to the roads.'

'Oh, by the way, did you tell anyone else apart from Shelvankar about that statue?' Mr Sarkar's reply came instantly, 'No. Not a soul. Why do you ask?'

'I was curious, that's all.'

'I did think of taking it somewhere to have it properly valued, but I met Mr Shelvankar before I could do that, and he bought it. Mind you, he didn't pay me at once. I had to wait until the next day.'

'Did he pay you in cash?'

'No, he didn't have that much cash on him. He gave me a cheque. Look!' Mr Sarkar took out a folded cheque from his wallet and showed it to Feluda. I leant over and saw it, too. It was a National and Grindlays Bank cheque. Feluda returned it to Mr Sarkar.

'Did you notice anything sus-suspicious?' Mr Sarkar asked, still smiling. I realized later that he had a tendency to stammer if he was upset or excited. 'No, no.' Feluda yawned. Mr Sarkar rose to go. At this precise moment, there was a bright flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by the ear-splitting noise of thunder. Mr Sarkar went white. 'I can't stand thunder and lightning, heh heh. Good night!' He went out quickly.

It continued to rain throughout the evening. Even when I went to bed after dinner, I could hear the steady rhythm of the rain, broken occasionally by distant thunder. Despite that, it didn't take me long to fall asleep.

I woke briefly in the middle of the night and saw a figure walk past our window. But who would be mad enough to go out on a night like this? Perhaps

I wasn't really awake. Perhaps the figure wearing a red garment that I saw only for a few seconds in the flash of lightning was no more than a dream . . . a figment of my imagination.

2. Grammar Page

Verb + Prepositions 1: Verb + TO

Who were you **talking to**? I was talking to my friend Banta.

Who would you like to speak? I want to **speak to** Santa.

When I'm driving, I like to **listen to** the radio.

They **apologised to** me for their mistake.

Can you **explain** this word **to** me? I **explained to** them why I was worried.

Let me **describe to** you what I saw.

Phone, text, email and call etc. (without **TO**)

I called the airline to cancel my flight.

I phoned my friend Jeet.

I wrote a letter to my sister.

Exercise

Which is correct?

1. A: Can you explain this word to me? B: Can you explain me this word?
2. A: I got angry with Mark. Afterwards, I apologised to him.
B: I got angry with Mark. Afterwards, I apologised him.
3. A: Amy won't be able to help you. There's no point in asking to her.
B: Amy won't be able to help you. There's no point in asking her.
4. A: I need somebody to explain me what I have to do.
B: I need somebody to explain to me what I have to do.
5. A: They didn't understand the system, so I explained it to them.
B: They didn't understand the system, so I explained it them.
6. A: I like to sit on the beach and listen to the sound of the sea.
B: I like to sit on the beach and listen the sound of the sea.
7. A: I asked them to describe me exactly what happened.
B: I asked them to describe to me exactly what happened.
8. A: We'd better phone the restaurant to reserve a table.
B: We'd better phone to the restaurant to reserve a table.
9. A: It was a difficult question. I couldn't answer to it.
B: It was a difficult question. I couldn't answer it.
10. A: I explained everybody the reasons for my decision.
B: I explained to everybody the reasons for my decision.

Answers:

1. A 2. A 3. B 4. B 5. A 6. A 7. B 8. A 9. B 10. B