



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F35

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1. The Travels of a Dervish

By Premchand

Part 1

1

I am an inhabitant of Berlin. My father, who is no more, was a reputed researcher of physics. I have inherited from him my interest in geographical explorations. After his death, I was possessed by the idea of traversing different parts of the globe on foot. I had deposited all my money in a bank with the instruction that the required amount should be sent to me on demand. Once this arrangement was made, I started preparations for my travels. I took the necessary paraphernalia for such a journey and set out with the name of God on my lips. At that time, I was quite amused by the thought that I was the first person in the world to have thought of the idea of traversing the earth on foot. Other travellers had journeyed the earth by trains, ships and cars, but I saw myself as the first man who took the daring step to traverse the planet on foot. If my audacious courage helped me complete the task, then people of the world would place me on a high pedestal and sing my eulogies till doomsday. At that time, my head was filled with such ideas. I thank God that my courage didn't leave me even in the face of a thousand hurdles and my enthusiasm remained unabated right through the course.

For years I lived in places where I had only loneliness for company. For years I lived in a place that remained covered with snow. I have slept in the company of beasts and passed my nights in a shelter for birds. My strong courage helped me overcome all these hardships. Now, that time was close at hand, the world of knowledge and culture had to pay obeisance to me.

In the course of my travels, I saw many strange things, many wonderful sights, and observed closely the cultures and traditions of different peoples. My travelogue is a treasure house of my thoughts and experiences. I witnessed events that are no less amazing than the exotic tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. But I doubt if I will ever find a parallel to what I saw on the shores of the Gyan Sagar. I can't forget that event as long as I live. If I had just this experience during the course of my entire journey, it would have been an ample reward. I think it's proper to mention here that I am no admirer of false conduct nor do I believe in the supernatural. I believe in the sciences and try to explain things in terms of cause and effect. If someone else recounted these incidents, I would have found it difficult to believe. Yet what I am going to recount is nothing but the absolute truth. Even after such assurance from me if people disbelieve what I narrate, it would reflect their own inherent scepticism and narrow-mindedness.

It was the month of May in the seventh year of my travels. I lay on the green grass on the banks of the Gyan Sagar in the mountain ranges of the Himalayas. The weather was pleasant; a salubrious breeze was blowing. The crystal clear water of the Gyan Sagar reflected the blue sky; mountain ranges covered with lush green vegetation extended far beyond its banks, and water birds swam in the lake. This sight was so alluring that I felt as though I was in a trance. I have seen the scenic beauty of Switzerland and America, but they hardly possess this magical calm and serenity.

I was totally absorbed in the exquisite beauty that surrounded me when, all of a sudden, I saw a lion slowly approaching towards me with a royal gait. My wits deserted me. Never had I seen such a huge and hefty lion. There was no way of escape for me, except jumping into the Gyan Sagar. But extreme terror had transfixed me and I couldn't move from there. I had no control over my limbs. I was sure that the lion was going to make short work of me and that my end had arrived.

Suddenly, I remembered that there was a pistol, fully loaded, in my pocket. I quickly pulled out the pistol and was about to shoot the lion when I heard a voice exhorting me, 'Traveller, for God's sake don't shoot. You'll regret it if you do. This lion will do you no harm.'

Surprised, I turned to look back and saw a lady walking towards me. She held a golden jug and a tray in her hands. Never before had I set my eyes on such a fine human figure. I have seen the houris of Armenia and the fairies of *koh-e Qaf*, the cave of fairies, but this was the first time that I was looking at a celestial beauty from the Himalayas. Her image remains etched in my memory to this day. I have no idea if Raphael or Caravaggio had ever drawn such a figure with their pencils. Such a figure also cannot be found in the paintings by van Dyck or even Rembrandt. I was so struck by this spectacle that the fear of the lion and the idea of firing a shot at it vanished from my mind. Nothing but the magic of beauty could have made me forget the fear of imminent death. I realized the great power of beauty for the first time in my life. No wonder such beautiful faces have ruined lands and erased the symbols of great empires.

As I watched, this beauty walked slowly towards the lion. As the beast saw her, it stood in its tracks, cast an envious look at me and growled with a thundering noise. The lady took out a scarf and wiped its mouth. Then she poured out milk on a platter and placed it before the beast. The lion began drinking the milk. I was amazed. 'Was this for real or was it magic?' I thought. Was it happening in the real world or was I simply imagining things? I've often seen tame lions in a circus and have also seen what elaborate manoeuvres are needed to keep those lions in control. In contrast, this bloodthirsty and terrifying creature was lying in front of the lady as if it were a little deer in the guise of a lion. What secret powers did the lady possess that had won over the lion? Are animals also influenced by beauty? It is said that a snake charmer's music can make a black cobra go wild. If music can have such an impact, one can imagine the power of beauty! Beauty is the most precious jewel in this world and a manifestation of nature's miraculous power.

As the lion finished drinking milk, the lady again wiped its mouth with the scarf, took it in her arms and started patting it. The lion shook its tail and licked her pink palms. Then both of them entered a cave. I was consumed with curiosity to get to the root of this strange relationship. When the two disappeared from my sight, I regained my wits and walked soundlessly towards the mouth of the cave. Though every pore in my body quivered with fear, the desire to uncover this secret was stronger than my fear. I peeped into the cave and witnessed a strange scene. There was a carpet, woven with thread of gold, on the floor, and embroidered bolsters were placed on it. The lion sat on a throne like a royal personage. There were gold and silver vessels,

fine chandeliers and beautiful paintings placed at appropriate spots. That cave looked like an aristocratic palace.

Seeing my shadow at the entrance, the lady came out of the cave and asked, 'Traveller, who're you and how have you landed up here?'

She had a melodious voice that sounded like music! When I saw her up close, her face looked melancholic. There was longing in her eyes. Her voice and tone were tinged with an ache in her heart.

'I replied, 'O paragon of beauty, I live in Europe and am now travelling around the world. I consider it my good fortune to have the opportunity of a conversation with you.'

'A faint smile appeared on the rosy lips of the beautiful lady. Perhaps this was due to the formal way I addressed her. 'You're a foreigner. We have a tradition of extending hospitality to our guests and I extend you an invitation. Please accept my invitation today.'

'Seeing the opportunity, I replied, 'I'm highly honoured by your favour, but I'm totally baffled by the miracle I've witnessed. May I hope that you will throw some light on this?'

'The lady took a deep breath. 'My story is a tragic one. You may be sorry to hear it.' As I insisted, she gestured that I sit on the floor. Then she began narrating the story of her life.

'I'm a Rajput princess from Kashmir. I was married to a valiant Rajput warrior, Narsingh Dev. We led a life of comfort and bliss. The greatest bounty for human beings on earth is beauty, the second is health and the third is wealth. God had blessed us with these three bounties. It's a pity you can't meet my husband. There was no one as brave, handsome and learned as he in all of Kashmir. I worshipped him and he loved me deeply. For several years, our life was like a perpetual spring untouched by autumnal winds. It was a stream of pleasure that flowed continually through shady trees and lush green meadows.

'There was a temple in our neighbourhood. The priest who worked there was known as Pandit Sridhar. Both of us used to go to the temple for worship in the mornings and in the evenings to offer prayers. The temple stood on

the banks of a salubrious lake with a pure and refreshing breeze blowing over it. Pandit Sridhar was a learned Sanskrit scholar whose fame had spread far and wide. The people of Kashmir revered him for his deep learning. He was a principled man; his eyes were a reflection of his deep spirituality and his heart was a treasure house of virtues. He never hurt anyone with his words and was moved if he saw anyone in distress.

‘Sridhar was about ten years older than my husband but his wife, Vidyadhari, was my age. We were friends. Vidyadhari was a sober and contented woman.

‘She looked like a queen and had a refined way of talking to people that made her attractive. Such women suit the palace more than the temple. But Vidyadhari had no complaints. She regarded her husband as her god.

‘It was the rainy month of Savaan. Dark clouds floated in the skies looking like mountains of kohl. Water falling from cascades looked like streams of milk. The mountains were covered with a coat of green. Tiny drops of water fell from the skies like nectar from a heavenly spring. These drops gathered on flowers and leaves looking like their garlands. The spectacle filled one’s heart with longing and ecstasy. This was the season when women pined for their lovers who were staying far away, when their hearts yearned to hug them, when a sigh rose from their hearts looking at their empty beds. In this season women, separated from their lovers, pretended sickness so that their men would return to see them. It was the season when the gardener’s daughters, wearing green saris, walked coquettishly by flowerbeds in the garden picking *champa* and *beli* to meet the increasing demand for flower garlands of all kinds.

‘Vidyadhari and I were sitting on the terrace, watching the beauty of the rainy season and reading Kalidas’s *Ritusamhar* when my husband came in and said, “We have fantastic weather today. Why don’t we go and sit on the swing?” Could anyone reject an invitation to sit on the swing on such a pleasant day?

‘Vidyadhari also agreed to the proposal. Strings of silk were tied to the branches of the *kadam* tree and a plank of sandalwood was attached to the strings. The swing was ready and Vidyadhari and I started swinging on it. Our hearts brimmed over with pure joy, just as the Gyan Sagar was filled to the brim with crystal clear water. But alas, the happiness I experienced that day was the last gleam of my blessed season of happiness! The moon shows

its maximum brightness on a full-moon night and then begins to wane. That was the night of the full moon in our lives. I walked to the swing and sat on the plank but Vidyadhari could not heave herself to the level of the plank. She tried a couple of times but was unable to sit on the plank. Seeing this, my dear husband, my lord and master, held her arm in order to support her. His eyes were drooping and he softly sang the raga Malhar. As Vidyadhari sat on the plank, her face looked red as the setting sun and her eyes were bloodshot. She chided my husband in a furious voice, “You’ve touched my body with a polluted mind. I curse you, on the virtue of my *pativrat*, that you be turned into a beast.” Saying this, Vidyadhari pulled out the string of *rudraksh* beads from her neck and flung it at him.

In a moment, there was a huge lion standing close to the plank, in place of my husband.’

2

‘O traveller! Seeing the fate of my husband, my blood froze and I felt as though I was struck by lightning. I fell at Vidyadhari’s feet and cried copiously. I saw all this right before my eyes and realized the terrible power of a *pativrati*. I had read about such incidents in the Puranas, but I could not imagine that such a thing could happen in contemporary times when the relationship between men and women is based on self-interest. I can’t say how far Vidyadhari was justified in what she did. My husband always addressed her as “sister”. He was extremely handsome, but the life of a handsome man’s wife is not enviable. I had never found any occasion to doubt his faithfulness. He was as attached to me as a dedicated wife could be to her husband. His gaze was pure and his thoughts were clean. One proof of this was that he did not care much for even Kalidas’s romantic poetry. But who can escape the fatal arrows of Kama? The Kama that broke the meditation of sages like Shiva and Brahma and brought disgrace to saints like Narad and Vishvamitra is capable of wrecking any ruin. Perhaps the combined effect of wine and the romantic weather had something to do with it. I feel that it was merely a figment of Vidyadhari’s imagination. Well, the fact was — she had cursed him. At that moment, I, too, felt the urge to test whether I,

too, didn't possess the power that Vidyadhari had, the power which had made her so vain. Am I not a *pativrata*? But no matter how hard I tried to curse, it seemed someone had made me tongue-tied. I did not possess the kind of confidence that Vidyadhari had about being a *pativrata*. My helplessness took the edge out of my desire for revenge. I said with utter humility, "Sister, what is this that you've done?"

"I've done nothing. It's the result of his karma."

"Who else can I ask for remedy but you? Won't you have pity on me?"

"There's nothing I can do now."

"Devi, you are a *pativrata*; your words have great power. If your anger can turn a man to a beast, can't your kindness turn a beast to a man?"

"Pay penance! Except for penance, you have no other options to remedy the situation."

'Traveller! I'm the daughter of a Rajput. I could not lower myself to Vidyadhari beyond a point. Her heart was an ocean of love. Had I fallen at her feet, she would've certainly taken pity on me. But a Rajput woman can bear humiliation, hatred, anger, but she will not ask for pity. She cannot bear the burden of obligation. I'm still sorry for all my entreaties. Eventually, I got down from the swing, kissed the feet of my husband and brought him back home. I was determined to do penance.'

3

'Several months passed by. I kept myself busy looking after my husband with utmost devotion. Although his tongue was devoid of speech, it was clear from his demeanour that he was ashamed of his act. Despite his change of form, he hated meat. I had reared hundreds of cows and buffaloes, but Sher Singh never harmed any of them. I offered him milk twice a day and in the evenings I took him out for a walk in the field.

'In the meantime, the devouts gathered at Haridwar for a holy dip in the Ganga. A caravan of pilgrims from my village also set off for Haridwar. I joined them and took several sacks filled with gold and silver coins to

distribute among the poor and the destitute. I travelled all the way on foot and took about a month to reach Haridwar. Crowds of people had come there from various parts of India, resembling a vast expanse of pebbles from a distance. The concourse of humanity expanded for miles together.

‘Several days had passed after our arrival. It was morning. I was bathing in the Ganga. Suddenly, I looked up to see a man peeping down from the railings of the bridge. The next moment the man tripped and fell hundreds of metres down into the river. Thousands of people were witnessing this scene but no one showed the courage to save the life of that unfortunate man. Only in India people could be so indifferent to the loss of a human life. They were happy watching the spectacle. The river current was strong and the water was colder than ice. Chilly winds seemed to pierce one’s bones. I saw that wretched man being swept away by the current. I could not bear to see this heart-rending scene. I took the name of God, mustered the courage and started swimming along with the tide. As I advanced, the man moved further away from me. Soon my whole body seemed to freeze in the ice-cold water. I grabbed at the rocks several times to catch my breath. I hit rocks many a time. I could barely move my hands. My whole body felt like a frozen skeleton. I was sure that I was going to die in the waters of the Ganga.

‘Suddenly, I saw that the man’s body had stopped by a rock. I gathered courage and my body felt energized. I pushed myself with all my strength and reached that rock. I grabbed his hand and pulled him up the rock. I was stunned to see who the man was. He was Pandit Sridhar.

‘Traveller, I put my life at risk to accomplish this feat. When I brought Pandit Sridhar’s half-dead body to the shore, thousands of people broke into applause which rent the skies. Many of them fell at my feet. As people were trying to revive Sridhar, Vidyadhari arrived and stood before me. Her face looked pale, her lips parched and tears trickled down her eyes. She was panting for breath as she clung to my feet. Our eyes met but they reflected a sense of reserve—if one’s eyes were filled with pride, the others were filled with regret. Vidyadhari could barely utter a word. She only said, “Sister, may God grant you reward for this noble deed.”’

2. Grammar Page

The Simple Past Tense

Structures:

Affirmative: *sub + v² + obj*

Negative: *sub + did not + v¹ + obj*

Questions: *Did + sub + v¹ + obj + ?*
WH + did + sub + v¹ + obj + ?

Active: *sub + v² + obj*

Passive: *obj + was/were + v³ + by + sub*

He wrote a letter.

He did not write a letter.

Did he write a letter?

Why did he write a letter?

He wrote a letter.

A letter was written by him.

Uses:

We use the simple past tense to show:

⇒ *finished events or situations with a past time reference.*

Last year I went to Nagarkot.

Anita met me an hour ago.

Last year, we travelled to Singapore.

Who invented the telescope?

She visited Kathmandu in 2001.

I didn't see a play yesterday.

Did you watch that movie last night?

Long ago there lived a king.

⇒ *past facts or generalizations or situations which are no longer true.*

He didn't like meat and fish before.

I studied Urdu when I was a child.

Deepa worked at the restaurant after school.

They never wore shorts; they wore pants.

When he was a child, he lived a very ascetic life.

Did you play a musical instrument when you were a kid?

⇒ *a series of completed actions in the past.*

He wrote a letter, put it in an envelope, put stamp on it and posted it.

She got off at the bus stop, called her friend and went with her to the hotel.

Yesterday he cleaned his room, made dinner, watched TV for 2 hours, and walked in the park.

She typed a couple of letters, made a couple of phone calls, had a cup of coffee and went to the bank.

⇒ *duration of any completed action which starts and stops in the past.*

We talked on the phone for thirty minutes.

I waited for Anjali for two hours.

They lived in Kathmandu for six years and then moved to Pokhara.

Shilpa studied French for three years.

Adverbs of time:

We often use the simple past tense with 'yesterday, last week, last year, an hour ago, a year ago, a long time ago, in 2001, etc'.

It happened many years ago.

Columbus discovered America in 1492.

Atul came back last week.

I bought a new vacuum cleaner yesterday.

Dorje left two hours ago.

They were in England in 1998.

Pemba visited her twice last year.

When did you see him? - I saw him yesterday.

She waited for his call all evening yesterday, but he didn't call.