



# Learn English Through Stories

H Series

H28

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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# 1. The Golden Fortress

## Five

Mr Bose said 'good evening' to Dr Hajra as he passed him, and went towards his own room. Dr Hajra began walking down the corridor, holding the boy by the hand. Then he saw us and stopped, looking a little confused. Perhaps the sight of two strangers had startled him. Feluda smiled and greeted him.

'Namaskar. Dr Hajra, I presume?' he asked.

'Yes. But I don't think I. . .?'

Feluda took out one of his cards from his pocket and handed it to Dr Hajra. 'I need to talk to you. To tell you the truth, we are here at Mr Dhar's request. He has written you a letter.'

'Oh, I see. Mukul, why don't you go to your room? I'll have a chat with these people, then I'll join you. All right?'

'I'll go to the garden,' said Mukul.

His voice sounded as sweet as a flute, but his tone was flat and lifeless, almost as if the words had been spoken by a robot. Dr Hajra said, 'Very well, you may go to the garden, but be a good boy and don't go out of the gate, okay?'

Mukul jumped from the corridor straight on to the gravel path, without saying another word. Then he stepped over a row of flowers and stood quietly on the lawn. Dr Hajra turned back to us, gave a somewhat embarrassed smile and asked, 'Where should we sit?'

'Let's go to our room.'

The hair around Dr Hajra's ears had started to grey, I noticed. His eyes held a sharp, intelligent look. Now that I could see him more closely, he appeared older—probably in his late forties.

When we were seated, Feluda handed him Mr Dhar's letter and offered him a Charminar. Dr Hajra smiled, said, 'No, thanks', and began reading the letter. When he'd finished, he folded it and put it back in its envelope.

Feluda explained quickly about Neelu being kidnapped. 'Mr Dhar was afraid,' he said, 'that those men might have followed Mukul and arrived here. That is why he came to see me. In fact, I am here really because he wanted me to join you. But, even if nothing untoward happens and you do not require my protection, I can see that my visit will not go to waste as I've always wanted to see Rajasthan.'

Dr Hajra remained thoughtful for a few moments. Then he said, 'Fortunately, nothing has happened as yet that might be seen as untoward. But honestly, there was no need to talk to a press reporter and say so much. I told Mr Dhar to wait until I finished my investigation, and then he could get Mukul to speak to as many reporters as he liked, especially about the hidden treasure. I might think the story is possibly quite baseless, but there might well be people who'd be easily tempted to go and look for it!' 'What do you think of this whole business of recalling previous lives? Do you really believe in jatismars?'

'What I think amounts to shooting arrows in the dark or simply making guesses. Yet I cannot dismiss the idea as pure nonsense. After all, there have been similar cases in the past. What those people could recall turned out to be accurate, to the last detail. That is why, when I heard about Mukul, I decided to do a thorough investigation. If it turned out that everything Mukul could recall was true, then I would treat his case as a starting point and base my future research on it.'

'Have you made any progress?'

'One thing has become clear. I was right to think about Rajasthan and bring him here. Mukul's entire demeanour has changed from the moment we set foot in Rajasthan. Just think. For the first time in his life, he is away from his parents and others in his family and travelling with a virtual stranger. Yet he hasn't mentioned his own people even once in the last few days.'

'How is his relationship with you?'

'We've had no problems. He sees me as someone who's taking him to his dreamland. All he can think of is his golden fortress. So he jumps with joy each time he sees a fort.'

'Any sign of the golden fortress?'

Dr Hajra shook his head. 'No, I am afraid not. On our way here, I took him to the fort in Kisangarh. Yesterday evening, he saw the Jodhpur fort from outside. Today, we went to Barmer. Every time, he says, "No, not this one. Let's find another." One really needs patience in a case like this. I know there's no point in taking him to Chittor or Udaipur because there's no sand near those places. Mukul keeps talking of sand, and that's to be found only in these parts. So I'm thinking of going to Bikaner tomorrow.'

'Would you mind if we came along?'

'No, of course not. In fact, I'd feel quite reassured if you were with us because . . . something happened . . .'

Dr Hajra stopped. Feluda had taken out his packet of cigarettes, but did not open it. 'Yesterday evening,' Dr Hajra spoke slowly, 'there was a phone call.'

'Where?'

'Here in the Circuit House. I wasn't here; Mukul and I were out looking at the fort. In our absence, someone rang to ask if a man had arrived from Calcutta with a small boy. Naturally, the manager said yes.'

'But,' Feluda suggested, 'it could be that some of the locals know about the press report that appeared in Calcutta and simply wanted to verify it? After all, there are plenty of Bengalis in Jodhpur, aren't there? Surely a little curiosity in a matter like this is natural?'

'Yes, I can see that. But the question is, why didn't that man come here and meet me, or get in touch, even when he heard that I was here?'

'Hmm. Perhaps it's best that you and I stay together. And don't let Mukul go out on his own.'

'Are you mad? Of course I won't.' Dr Hajra rose. 'I have booked a taxi for tomorrow. As there are just two of you, we'll manage quite easily in one taxi.'

He began moving towards the door. Suddenly, Feluda asked a question rather unexpectedly: 'By the way, weren't you involved in a case in Chicago, about four years ago?'

Dr Hajra frowned. 'A case? Yes, I've been to Chicago, but. . .' 'Something to do with a spiritual healing centre?'

Dr Hajra burst out laughing. 'Ah, are you talking about Swami Bhavananda? The Americans used to call him Byavanyanda. Yes, there was a case, but what was reported in the press was grossly exaggerated. The man was certainly a cheat, but you'll find similar cheats among quacks of all kinds. It was small-time stuff, no more. In fact, his patients caught him out, and the news spread. Reporters from the press came to me for my opinion. I said very little, and tried to play things down. But those reporters blew everything out of proportion. Afterwards, I happened to meet Bhavananda. I explained the whole matter to him myself and we parted as friends.'

'Thank you. What I read in the papers told me something quite different.'

We went out of the room together with Dr Hajra. It was dark outside. Although the western sky was still glowing red, the streetlights had come on. But where was Mukul? He was last seen in the garden, but now he wasn't there. Dr Hajra had a quick look in his room, and came out, looking concerned.

'Where's that boy gone?' he said and climbed down from the corridor on to the gravel path. We followed him. Mukul was certainly not in the garden.

'Mukul!' Dr Hajra called. 'Mukul!'

'Yes, he's heard you. He's coming!' said Feluda.

In the twilight, I could see Mukul coming back from the road outside and turn into the gate. At the same time, I saw a man on the opposite pavement, walking briskly towards the new palace on the eastern side. I did not see his face, but could see—even in the dark—that the colour of his shirt was bright red. Had Feluda seen him?

Mukul came towards us. Dr Hajra went to him, his arms outstretched, a smile on his lips. Then he said gently, 'You shouldn't go out like that!'

'Why not?' asked Mukul coldly.

'You don't know this place. There are so many bad people about.' 'I know him.'

'Who?'

Mukul pointed at the road. 'That man . . . who was here.'

Dr Hajra placed a hand on his shoulder and turned to Feluda. 'That's the trouble, you see,' he said. 'It's difficult to say whether he's talking of someone he really knows in this life, or whether he's still talking about his previous life.'

I noticed a shiny piece of paper in Mukul's hand. Feluda had seen it, too. He said, 'May I see that piece of paper you're holding?'

Mukul handed it to Feluda. It was a piece of golden foil, about two inches long and half an inch wide.

'Where did you find it?'

'Over there,' Mukul pointed at the grass. 'May I keep it?' asked Feluda.

'No. I found it.' Mukul's voice hadn't changed. His tone was just as cold and as flat. Feluda was obliged to return the piece of foil to him.

Dr Hajra said, 'Come on, Mukul, let's go to our room. We'll have a wash, and then we'll both go and have dinner. Goodnight, Mr Mitter. Early breakfast at half past seven tomorrow morning, and then we'll leave.'

Feluda wrote a postcard to Mr Dhar with news of Mukul's welfare before we went to the dining hall. By the time we got there after a shower, Dr Hajra and Mukul had returned to their room.

Mandar Bose was sitting in the opposite corner, having his pudding with the Marwari gentleman he had been talking to earlier. They finished their meal and rose as we were served our soup. Mr Bose raised his hand and said, 'Good night!' as he went out through the door.

After two nights on the train, I was feeling quite tired. All I wanted to do after dinner was go to sleep, but Feluda made me stay awake for a while. He took out his blue notebook and sat on the sofa. I was lying in my bed. We had a cream to ward off mosquitoes, so there was no need to use the mosquito net.

Feluda pushed the little button on his ballpoint pen, got it ready to write and said, 'Who have we met so far? Give me the whole list.'

'Starting from . . . ?'

'Mr Dhar's arrival.'

'Okay, Sudhir Dhar. That's number one. Then Shivratan. Then Neelu. Oh, Shivratan's servant—'

'What was his name?'

Can't remember.'

'Manohar. Next?'

‘Jatayu.’

‘What’s his real name?’

‘Lalmohan.’

‘Surname?’

‘Surname . . . his surname is . . . Ganguli!’

‘Good.’

Feluda continued to write as I proceeded with my list. ‘Then we saw that man in the red shirt.’ ‘Did we actually meet him? Get to know him?’

‘No.’

‘All right. Go on.’

‘Mandar Bose, and that other gentleman.’

‘And then we met Mukul Dhar. Doctor—’

‘Feluda!’

My sudden scream made Feluda stop in mid-sentence. My eyes had fallen on Feluda’s bed. An ugly, creepy creature was trying to slip out from under his pillow. I pointed at it.

Feluda sprang to his feet, moved quickly and removed the pillow. A scorpion lay on the bed. Feluda pulled the bedsheet off in one swift motion and the scorpion fell on the ground. Then he grabbed his chappal and smacked it three times with all his might. After that, he tore off a piece from a newspaper, picked up the crushed creature with it and went into the bathroom. I saw him crumple the whole thing into a ball and throw it out of the back door.

He came back to the room and said, ‘The door which the cleaners use was left open. That’s how Mr Scorpion got into our room. Anyway, go to sleep now. We have an early start tomorrow.’

But I could not dismiss the matter so easily. Something told me . . . but I put the thought out of my mind. If I kept thinking of possible danger, and if my telepathy was strong enough, it might just drag that danger closer—who knew?

It would be far better to try to sleep.



## Six

The following morning, as soon as I emerged from our room, I heard a familiar voice say, 'Good morning!' It was Jatayu. Feluda was already seated on a chair on the corridor outside, waiting for his tea. Jatayu glanced round excitedly and said, 'Oh! This is such a thrilling place, Mr Mitter! Full of powerfully suspicious characters.'

'You are unharmed, I hope?' Feluda asked.

'Oh yes. I feel fitter than ever. This morning, you know what I did? I challenged the manager of our lodge to an arm-wrestle. But the fellow didn't accept.' Then he came a little closer and whispered, 'I have a weapon in my suitcase!'

'A catapult?'

'No, sir. A Nepali dagger, straight from Kathmandu. If I'm attacked, I'm going to stab my attacker with it—push it straight into his stomach, I tell you. Then let's see what happens. I've always wanted to build up a collection of weapons, you know.'

I wanted to laugh again, but my self-control was getting better, so I managed to stop myself. Lalmohan Babu sat down on the chair next to Feluda and asked, 'What's your plan today? Aren't you going to see the fort?'

'Yes, but not the fort in Jodhpur. We're going to Bikaner.'

'Bikaner? Why Bikaner?'

'We've got company. Somebody's arranged a car.'

Another voice said 'Good morning!' from a different part of the corridor. Mr Globetrotter was walking towards us. 'Did you sleep well?' he asked.

I caught Lalmohan Babu casting admiring glances at Mandar Bose's handsome moustache and muscular physique. Feluda introduced him to Mr Bose.

'Good heavens, a globetrotter!' Lalmohan Babu's eyes widened. 'I must cultivate you, dear sir. You must have had a lot of hair-raising experiences!'

'Plenty, I can assure you. The only thing that I have missed is being boiled in a cannibal's cooking pot. Apart from that, I have had virtually every experience a man can possibly have.'

Suddenly, I noticed Mukul. I hadn't seen him come out on the corridor. He was standing quietly in a corner, staring at the garden. Then Dr Hajra appeared, dressed and ready to go out. A flask was slung from one shoulder; from the other hung binoculars, and around his neck was the strap of his camera. He said, 'It will take us almost four and a half hours to get there. If you have a flask, take it with you. God knows if we'll get anything to drink on the way. But I've told the dining hall to give us four packed lunches.'

'Where are you off to?' asked Mandar Bose.

On being told where we were going, he became all excited. 'Why don't we all go together?' he asked.

'What a good idea!' exclaimed Lalmohan Babu.

Dr Hajra looked a little uncomfortable. 'Well then, how many are actually going?' he enquired.

'Look, there's no question of all of us going in one car,' Mr Bose reassured him. 'I will arrange another taxi. I think Mr Maheshwari would also like to go with me.'

'Are you going, too?' Dr Hajra asked Lalmohan Babu.

'If I go, I'll pay my share. I don't want anyone else to pay for me. Tell you what, why don't you four go in one taxi? I'll go with Mr Globetrotter.'

Obviously, Jatayu wanted to hear a few stories from Mr Bose and perhaps get ideas for a new plot. He had already written at least twenty-five adventure stories. To be honest, his remark made me feel quite relieved. Five in one car would have been cramped and uncomfortable.

Mr Bose spoke to the manager and booked a second taxi. Lalmohan Babu returned to New Bombay Lodge. 'Please pick me up on your way,' he said before he departed. 'I'll be ready in half an hour.'

Before I describe anything else about our visit to Bikaner, perhaps I ought to mention that Mukul rejected the fort there as soon as he saw it. But that was not the highlight of our visit. Something far more important happened in Devikund, which proved that we were truly up against a ferocious foe.

Nothing much happened on the way to Bikaner, except that we saw a group of gypsies. They were camping by the roadside. Mukul asked us to stop, got out of the car and roamed amongst the gypsies for a while. Then he returned and declared that he knew those people.

After that, Feluda and Dr Hajra spoke about Mukul for a few minutes. I cannot tell whether he heard the conversation from the front seat. If he did, his demeanour gave nothing away.

‘Dr Hajra,’ Feluda began, ‘when Mukul talks of his previous life, what exactly does he say?’

‘He mentions one thing repeatedly—a golden fortress. His house was apparently near that fortress. Gold and jewels were buried under the ground in that house. From the way he talks, it seems as if he was present when the treasure was buried. Apart from that, he talks of a battle. He says he saw a large number of elephants, horses, soldiers, guns, cannons—there was a lot of noise, and people were screaming. And he talks of camels. Says he’s ridden camels. Then he talks of peacocks. Once a peacock had attacked him, pecked his hand so hard that it began bleeding. There’s something else he mentions frequently. Sand. Haven’t you noticed how animated he becomes when he sees sand?’

We reached Bikaner at a quarter to twelve. The road began going uphill a little before we reached the city, which was surrounded by a wall, on top of the hill. The most striking building there was a huge fort, made of red sandstone.

Our car drove straight to the fort. As it got closer, the fort appeared to grow bigger. Baba was right. The appearance of the forts in Rajasthan was a good indicator of the might of the Rajputs.

As soon as our taxi drew up at the entrance, Mukul said, ‘Why have we stopped here?’

Dr Hajra asked him, ‘Does this fort seem familiar, Mukul?’ Mukul replied solemnly, ‘No. This is a stupid fort, not the golden one.’

By this time, we had all climbed out of the car. Just as Mukul finished speaking, a harsh raucous sound reached our ears. At once, Mukul ran to Dr Hajra and flung his arms around him. The sound had come from a park opposite the fort.

‘That was a peacock. Has this happened before?’ asked Feluda.

Dr Hajra stroked Mukul's head gently. 'Yes. It happened yesterday in Jodhpur. He can't stand peacocks.'

Mukul had turned quite pale. 'I don't want to stay here,' he said, in the same lifeless yet sweet voice.

Dr Hajra turned to Feluda. 'I'm going to take the car and go to the local Circuit House. Then I'll send it back here. Why don't you two see whatever you want to? You can join me at the Circuit House when the car comes back to pick you up. But please make sure we leave here by two o'clock, or it will be late by the time we get back to Jodhpur.'

There was reason to feel disappointed, particularly for Dr Hajra, but I didn't mind all that much. I was about to step into a Rajasthani fort for the first time in my life. The thought was giving me goose pimples.

We proceeded towards the main gate of the fort. Suddenly, Feluda stopped and laid a hand on my shoulder. 'Did you see?'

'What?' 'That man.'

Was he referring to the man in the red shirt? I followed his gaze, but could not spot a single red shirt anywhere. There were lots of people milling about, for there was a small market just outside the fort. 'Where is he?' I asked.

'Idiot! Are you looking for a red shirt?'

'Yes. Shouldn't I? Who are you talking about?'

'You're the biggest fool on earth. All you remember is the shirt, nothing else. It was the same man, he was wearing a shawl and most of his face was covered, all except his eyes. But today he had a blue shirt on. When we stopped to look at those gypsies, I saw a taxi going towards Bikaner. That's when I spotted that blue shirt.'

'But what is he doing here?'

'If we knew that, there would be no mystery!'

The man had vanished. I passed through the gate and entered the fort, feeling rather agitated. A large courtyard greeted me. The fort stood proudly to the right. There were pigeons everywhere, in every niche in the wall. A thousand years ago, Bikaner was a thriving city, but it had disappeared under the sand.

Feluda told me that four hundred years ago, Raja Rai Singh began building the fort. He was a famous leader in Akbar's army.

Something had been bothering me for a while. Why hadn't Lalmohan Babu and the others arrived yet? Did they get late in setting out? Or had their car broken down on the way? Then I told myself not to worry. There was no point in spoiling the joy of seeing an amazing historical sight.

What struck me as most amazing was the armoury. Not only did it contain weapons, but also a very beautiful silver throne, called Alam Ambali. It was said to be a gift from a Mughal badshah. Apart from that, there were swords, spears, daggers, shields, armour, helmets—there was no end to the weapons. The swords were so large and so strong that it seemed incredible that they were meant to be used by human beings. The sight of those weapons reminded me of Jatayu again. Funnily enough, as soon as I thought of him, he arrived, possibly dragged by the force of my telepathy. In that huge room in the massive fort, standing near a very large door, Jatayu looked smaller and more comical than ever.

When he saw us, he grinned, looked around and simply said, 'Was every Rajput a giant? Surely these things weren't made to be used by ordinary men?'

It turned out that my hunch was right. They had travelled for about seventy kilometres, when their taxi got a flat tyre. 'Where are the other two?' Feluda asked.

'They stopped to buy things in the market. I couldn't wait any longer, so I came in.'

We left the armoury and went off to see Phool Mahal, Gaj Mandir, Sheesh Mahal and Ganga Nivas. When we got to Chini Burj, we saw Mandar Bose and Mr Maheshwari. They were both clutching parcels wrapped with newspaper, so clearly they had done some shopping. Mr Bose said, 'The weapons I saw in the forts and castles in Europe—all built in medieval times—and the weapons I've seen here today, all prove one thing. The human race is becoming weaker every day, and smaller in size!'

'Like me, you mean?' Lalmohan Babu remarked with a smile. 'Right. Exactly like you,' Mr Bose replied. 'I don't think a single Rajput would have matched your dimensions in the sixteenth century. Oh, by the way,' he turned to Feluda, 'this was waiting for you at the reception desk in the Circuit House.'

He took out a sealed envelope from his pocket and passed it to Feluda. It had no stamp on it.

Someone must have delivered it by hand. 'Who gave it to you?' Feluda asked, opening the envelope. 'Bagri, the fellow who sits at the reception desk. He handed it to me just as we were leaving. Said he had no idea who had dropped it off.'

'Excuse me,' said Feluda. Then he read the note, replaced it in the envelope and put it in his pocket.

I could not tell what it said, nor could I ask.

We spent another half an hour in the fort. Then Feluda looked at his watch and said, 'Time to go to the Circuit House!' I didn't want to leave the fort, but knew I had to.

Both taxis were waiting outside. This time, we decided to leave together. As we were getting into ours, the driver told us that Dr Hajra and Mukul had not gone to the Circuit House. Apparently, Mukul had declared that he had no wish to go there. So where did they go? 'Devikund,' said the driver. Where was that? Not far from Bikaner, it turned out. Feluda said there were cenotaphs there (locally known as 'chhatris'), built as memorials to Rajput warriors.

We had to travel five miles, and it took us ten minutes. Devikund really was beautiful, as were the cenotaphs. Each cenotaph had stone columns that rose from stone platforms, supporting a small canopy, also made of stone. The whole structure, from top to bottom, was exquisitely carved. There were at least fifty such cenotaphs spread over the whole area. There were plenty of trees, all of them full of parrots. The birds were flocking together on some, or flitting from one tree to another, crying raucously. I had never seen so many parrots in one place.

But where was Dr Hajra? And Mukul?

Lalmohan Babu was getting restless. 'Very suspicious and mysterious!' he exclaimed.

'Dr Hajra!' shouted Mandar Bose. His deep, booming voice made a number of parrots take flight, but no one answered.

We began a search. There were so many cenotaphs that the place was like a maze. As we roamed amongst them, I saw Feluda pick up a matchbox from the grass and put it in his pocket.

In the end, it was Lalmohan Babu who found Dr Hajra. We heard him shout and ran to join him. Under a mango tree, in front of a mossy platform, Dr Hajra was lying crumpled on the ground. His mouth was gagged, and his hands were tied behind his back. He was groaning helplessly.

Feluda bent over him quickly, removed the gag and untied his hands. A torn piece of a turban had been used to cover his mouth.

‘How on earth did this happen?’ asked Mr Bose.

Fortunately, Dr Hajra was not injured. He sat up on the grass and panted for a while. Then he told us what had happened. ‘Mukul said he didn’t want to go to the Circuit House,’ he said, ‘so we just drove on. Then we happened to come here. Mukul liked the place. “Those things are chhatris,” he said. He had seen them before, and he wanted a closer look. So we got out of the car. Mukul began exploring, and I stood in the shade, under a tree. Suddenly someone attacked me from behind. He placed a hand over my mouth and knocked me down. I fell flat on my face. Then he pressed me down firmly—I think he kept his knee on the back of my head—and tied my hands, and then gagged my mouth.’

‘Where’s Mukul?’ Feluda asked anxiously.

‘I don’t know. I did hear a car start soon after I was tied up.’ ‘You didn’t see this man’s face?’

Dr Hajra shook his head. ‘No, but when we struggled, I got an idea of his clothes. He was wearing Rajasthani clothes, not a shirt and trousers.’

‘There he is!’ shouted Mandar Bose.

To my surprise, Mukul emerged from behind a chhatri, chewing a stalk of grass. Dr Hajra let out an audible sigh of relief. ‘Thank God!’ he cried.

‘Where did you go, Mukul?’ No answer.

‘Where were you all this while?’

‘Behind that,’ Mukul replied this time, pointing at a chhatri. ‘I have seen such things before.’ Feluda spoke next. ‘Did you see the man who was here?’

‘Which man?’

Dr Hajra intervened, ‘Mukul could not have seen him. He ran off to explore the area the minute he got out of the car. I never imagined such a thing would happen in Bikaner, so I wasn’t unduly worried about him.’

Even so, Feluda tried again, ‘Didn’t you see the man who tied the doctor’s hands?’

‘I want to see the golden fortress,’ said Mukul. It was clearly pointless to ask him anything else. ‘Let’s not waste our time any more,’ Feluda spoke abruptly. ‘In a way, I am glad that Mukul was nowhere near you. Or that man might have made off with Mukul. If he has returned to Jodhpur, we might be able to catch up with him, if we drive fast enough.’

In two minutes, we were all back in our cars and speeding back to Jodhpur. This time, Lalmohan Babu decided to join us. ‘Those men drink a lot. I can’t stand the smell of alcohol!’ he confided.

Our Punjabi driver, Harmeet Singh, managed to drive at sixty mph. At one point, a small bird flew into our windscreen and died. Mukul and I were sitting in the front with the driver. I turned around once to look at the three men in the back seat. Lalmohan Babu was sitting crushed between Feluda and Dr Hajra. His face looked pale and his eyes were closed; nevertheless, a smile hovered on his lips, which told me that he could smell an adventure. Perhaps he had even thought of a plot for his next novel.

We drove at that speed for a hundred miles, but by that time it had become clear that the criminal had got away, and we wouldn’t be able to catch up with him. After all, there was no reason to think that he wasn’t travelling in a fast new car.

When we reached Jodhpur, it was dark and all the lights in the city had been switched on. Feluda said to Lalmohan Babu, ‘You’d like to be dropped at the New Bombay Lodge, wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Lalmohan Babu squeaked, ‘I mean, all my things are there, so naturally . . . but I was wondering if . . . after dinner, I might go over to your place . . .?’

‘Very well,’ Feluda said reassuringly, ‘I will ask at the Circuit House if they have a vacant room. You can ring me at around nine. I should be able to tell you then.’



I was still mulling over all that had happened during the day. We were up against someone extremely clever and crafty—of that there was no doubt. Was it the man in the red shirt, who went to Bikaner today wearing a blue one? I didn't know. Nothing was making any sense to me. Perhaps Feluda was just as puzzled. If he had worked things out, his whole demeanour would have changed. Having spent so many years with him and watched his reactions, that was something I had learnt to read quite well.

Upon reaching the Circuit House, we dispersed and went to our individual rooms. Before going to our room, Feluda said to Dr Hajra, 'If you don't mind, may I keep this with me?' In his hand was the torn piece of cloth with which Dr Hajra had been tied.

'Certainly,' Dr Hajra replied. Then he moved a little closer and lowered his voice. 'As you can see, Mr Mitter, the situation is now quite serious. This is exactly what you were afraid of, isn't it? I must say I hadn't anticipated such trouble.'

'Don't worry,' Feluda told him. 'You carry on with your work I am going to be with you. If you had gone straight to the Circuit House in Bikaner today, I don't think there would have been any problem. Fortunately, whoever attacked you could not kidnap Mukul. That's the main thing. From now on, stay close to us. That should minimize the chances of something similar happening again.'

Dr Hajra continued to look troubled. He said, 'I am not worried about myself, you see. If a scientist has to do research, he has to take certain risks just to complete his work. I am worried about you two. You are outsiders, not involved in this case at all.'

Feluda smiled. 'You must assume that I, too, am a scientist involved in some research, and so I'm taking risks as well!'

Mukul was pacing up and down the corridor. Dr Hajra called him, said 'Good night' to us and went to his room with Mukul. He was still looking preoccupied.

We went to ours. Feluda called a bearer and ordered two Coca-Colas. Then he took out his cigarettes and lighter from his pocket and placed them on the table. He was looking worried. From a different pocket, he took out the matchbox he had found in Devikund. It had an ace printed on one side, and it was empty. Feluda stared at it for a few moments, before saying, 'We stopped at so many stations on the way to Jodhpur, and you saw so many paan stalls selling matches and cigarettes. Did you notice any of them selling this particular brand of matches?'

I had to admit the truth. 'No, Feluda, I didn't notice anything.'

'In western India, this brand with the ace on it is not sold anywhere—certainly not in Rajasthan.

This matchbox has come from a different state.'

'Does that mean it doesn't belong to the man in the red shirt?'

'That is a foolish question. To start with, if a man is dressed as a Rajasthani, that doesn't automatically mean that he is one. Anyone can wear Rajasthani clothes. Secondly, plenty of other people could have gone to Devikund and attacked Dr Hajra.'

'Yes, of course. But we don't know who they are, do we? So what's the use of wondering about that?'

'See, you are speaking without thinking again. Lalmohan, Mandar Bose and Maheshwari—all three men reached the Bikaner fort quite late. Just think about that. Besides . . .'

'Oh. Yes, yes, now I can see what you mean!'

It just hadn't occurred to me before. Lalmohan Babu told us that their car had a flat tyre, which delayed them by forty-five minutes. What if he had lied? Even if he had told the truth and was quite innocent, Mandar Bose and Maheshwari could well have gone to Devikund instead of going to the local market.

Feluda let out a deep sigh and took out another object from his pocket. My heart gave a sudden lurch. I had totally forgotten about it. It was the letter Mandar Bose had handed him that morning.

‘Who wrote that letter, Feluda?’ I asked, my voice trembling. ‘No idea,’ Feluda replied, passing it to me. Only one line was written in large letters with a ballpoint pen:

*If you value your life, go back to Calcutta immediately.*

The note shook in my hand. I put it quickly on the table and placed my hands on my lap, trying to steady them.

‘What are you going to do, Feluda?’

Feluda was staring at the ceiling fan. His eyes remained fixed on it as he muttered, almost to himself, ‘A spider’s web . . . geometry. It is dark now . . . so you can’t see it . . . but when the sun rises, the web will catch its light . . . it will glitter . . . and then you can see its pattern. Now, all we have to do is wait for sunrise. . .!’

## 2. Grammar Page

Unit  
135

### Verb + preposition 4 of/for/from/on

#### A verb + of

**accuse / suspect** somebody **OF** ...

- Tina **accused** me **of** being selfish.
- Some students were **suspected of** cheating in the exam.

**approve / disapprove OF** ...

- His parents don't **approve of** what he does, but they can't stop him.

**die OF** or **die FROM** an illness etc.

- 'What did he **die of**?' 'A heart attack.'

**consist OF** ...

- We had an enormous meal. It **consisted of** seven courses.

#### B verb + for

**pay** (somebody) **FOR** ...

- We didn't have enough money to **pay for** the meal. (*not pay the meal*)
- But we say '**pay** a bill / a fine / a fee / tax / rent / a sum of money' etc. (no preposition)
- We didn't have enough money to **pay the rent**.

**thank / forgive** somebody **FOR** ...

- I'll never **forgive** them **for** what they did.

**apologise (TO somebody) FOR** ...

- When I realised I was wrong, I **apologised (to them) for** my mistake.

**blame** somebody/something **FOR** ..., somebody is **to blame FOR** ...

- Everybody **blamed** me **for** the accident.
- Everybody said that I was **to blame for** the accident.

**blame** (a problem etc.) **ON** ...

- It wasn't my fault. Don't **blame it on** me.

#### C verb + from

**suffer FROM** an illness etc.

- There's been an increase in the number of people **suffering from** heart disease.

**protect** somebody/something **FROM** ...

- Sun cream **protects** the skin **from** the sun.

#### D verb + on

**depend ON** ..., **rely ON** ...

- I don't know what time we'll arrive. It **depends on** the traffic.
  - You can **rely on** Anna. She always keeps her promises.
- You can use **depend + when/where/how** etc. with or without **on**:
- 'Are you going to buy it?' 'It **depends how much** it is.' (or 'It **depends on** how much ...')

**live ON** money/food

- Michael's salary is very low. It isn't enough to **live on**.

**congratulate / compliment** somebody **ON** ...

- I **congratulated** her **on** doing so well in her exams.
- The meal was really good. I **complimented** Mark **on** his cooking skills.