



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F40

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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A Hunt

By Premchand

1.

Muniya, dressed in tatters, gazed at Rani Vasudha's bright face. She picked Rani's young son, the Rajkumar, in her arms and said, 'Even someone as poor as I won't put up with such a relationship. Maharani, I won't take it from my husband even for a single day. I won't allow him to set foot in the house. I'll give him such a tongue-lashing that he'll never forget.'

Rani Vasudha smiled indulgently and said, 'Won't he turn round and ask, "Who are you to meddle in my affairs? I'll do as I please. You're provided with food and clothing. Why do you need to concern yourself with my other activities? I'm not your slave."'

Muniya had been employed three days earlier to look after the children of the household. Earlier, she had worked as a domestic help for a couple of families. She had not yet acquired the etiquette observed in a royal household. Her shrunken face was suffused with anger. She declared, 'My lady, the day he utters such words, I'll pull out his moustache. If he's not my slave, I'm also not his keep. I make sure that he's given food even if I starve, because he's a man and works hard every day. I see to it that he wears clean clothes even if I wear rags. When I do so much for him, how can he dare harass me?

'One keeps one's house shipshape so that he is protected during the rainy season. Who would like to live in a house with the constant fear that it might cave in? Even the shade of a tree is better. Yesterday he went somewhere and spent the entire day singing. When he returned at ten in the evening, I didn't speak to him the whole night. He coaxed and cajoled me, and finally fell at my feet. Only then I relented. My only weakness is that I can't bear to see his sad face, and that is why he sometimes turns wayward. But now I've hardened myself. Now if he does this another day, that'll be the end of it. Only one of us shall remain in the house. Why should I take things lying down? Those who don't work might put up with such behaviour. I earn as much as him.'

Vasudha asked in the same vein, 'Had you not worked, would you have put up with his arrogance?'

Muniya replied in a belligerent tone, 'Why shouldn't I work? My lady, if men work outside, we work inside the home. Doesn't housework require hard labour? Those working outside at least get to rest at night. Domestic chores don't spare us even this. I can't take it that my man should enjoy himself outside, while I slog at home.'

Saying this, Muniya left the room with the Rajkumar in tow. Vasudha looked out the window with weary eyes. The lush green garden spread outside with colourful flowers in full bloom. On the other side was a grand temple, its golden spire rising into the skies. Women in colourful clothes could be seen going for puja. On the right side of the temple was a pond with lotus flowers in full bloom. Even this captivating scene didn't have the power to lift Vasudha's spirits.

Beside the pond stood a boatman's dilapidated hut. Vasudha's eyes filled with tears. This solitary hut in the midst of nature's bounty seemed to heighten her loneliness amidst luxury and grandeur. She felt like hugging that hut and crying her heart out.

It had been five years since Vasudha had started living here. In the beginning she had revelled in her good luck. She had come here to live in this palatial building surrounded by wealth, leaving behind the small, mud-built house of her parents. At that time wealth meant everything to her; her husband's love was secondary. With the passage of time, her craving for wealth disappeared and she began to long for her husband's love. For a while she felt she had come to acquire that asset too. But soon she came to realize that it was an illusion.

Kunwar Gajraj Singh was handsome and educated. He was witty and knew the art of love. But his life had other distractions than love. Vasudha's captivating youth and beauty, which could have bewitched even the gods, was simply a source of pleasure for him. Exhilarating pastimes like horseracing, hunting and gambling left little scope for love. Deprived of love, Vasudha cried over her misfortune. Even her two handsome sons couldn't compensate for her lack of happiness.

It was more than a month now that Kunwar Sahib had gone hunting and had not returned yet. This was not the first occasion of its kind. The

duration of his frequent absence continued to increase. First, he'd stay away for a week, then two weeks, and now it had stretched for a month. About three to four months in a year he began to spend hunting. When he returned from hunting, it was for horse racing that he travelled to Meerut or Poona or Calcutta. And when he was at home, he spent his time chatting with the scions of the aristocracy. Vasudha detested the ways of her husband but couldn't do anything. Lately, she had been running a low fever.

Vasudha watched the scene outside for a long while. Then she went over to the telephone and asked the estate manager, 'Any letter from Kunwar Sahib?'

'Yes, madam, a letter has just arrived. Kunwar Sahib has killed a huge tiger.'

Annoyed, Vasudha shot back, 'I'm not interested in all that. When is he coming back?'

'He hasn't written anything about that.'

'How far is his camp from here?'

'From here? Not less than two hundred miles. He's hunting in the jungles of Pilibhit.'

'Please arrange two cars for me. I want to go there today.'

The phone went dead for a few moments, and then came the reply, 'He has taken one car with him. One has been sent to the bungalow of the district magistrate. The third one is being used by the bank manager, and the fourth has gone for repairs.'

Queen Vasudha was furious. Her face was red hot with anger. 'Who ordered the cars to be sent to the bank manager and the district magistrate? Recall both the cars. I must go today.'

'I'll recall them right away.'

Vasudha started making preparations for the trip. She was determined to resolve the issue once and for all. She couldn't live a pitiable life.

She would go and tell Kunwar Sahib, 'I can't live as a slave to your wealth. You are welcome to enjoy your wealth and luxury. I have rights over you,

not your wealth. If you want to keep me at arm's length, I shall stay a mile away!

Innumerable such thoughts created a tumult in her heart.

The doctor arrived at that moment and called from the entrance, 'May I come in?'

Vasudha replied listlessly, 'I'd like to be excused today. I'm making a trip to Pilibhit.'

The doctor was surprised, 'You're going to Pilibhit? Your temperature will shoot up. I can't advise you to travel in this condition.'

Vasudha said nonchalantly, 'Let it shoot up. I don't care!'

The old doctor lifted the curtain and stepped in. Looking at her face he said, 'Let me take your temperature. If it is high, I won't permit you to travel.'

'There's no need to take my temperature. I've decided to go.'

'Your first duty is to take care of your health.'

Vasudha answered with a smile, 'You can rest assured, I'm not dying any time soon! But if death is the only cure for a disease, what can one do?'

The doctor stuck to his view but finally left, shaking his head in astonishment.

2.

If one travelled by train and got off at the last station, one still had to trudge through twenty miles of jungle. It is for this reason that Kunwar Sahib always travelled by car. Vasudha also decided to travel in the same way. Both the cars arrived by ten o'clock.

Vasudha vented her anger on the drivers. 'In future, if the cars are ever sent away without my permission, I'll grab you by your ears and turn you out.'

Everyone's acting according his sweet will—keeping intact his own possessions and using another's. We keep these cars for our own use, not for strangers'.

Those who fancy cars should be ready to shell out money for it. They can't indulge in luxury at someone else's expense.'

When she was leaving home, both her children began to cry. But when they were told that Amma was going to kill a monster, they quietened down. Vasudha had not cuddled them that morning.

She had thought angrily, 'Is it only my duty to give them love? He's enjoying himself there, leaving me alone to look after them.'

But at the moment of departure she couldn't hold herself anymore and hugged and kissed them by turn. She told them that she was going to return in an hour and sat in the car. As the car sped past, she was reminded of them again and again. Several times she thought of going back.

If he doesn't care for me, why should I make my life miserable worrying about him? It occurred to her that, whether he came home or not, she must give him a piece of her mind. That would bring her some relief. She felt entirely exhausted. She began to run a fever and had a terrible headache. But her resolve dismissed these hurdles and she moved on. By the time she reached the dak bungalow at ten in the night, she was delirious with fever and hardly conscious. Hearing the chauffeur, Kunwar Sahib stepped out and asked, 'What brings you here? Is everything all right?'

The chauffeur went to him and said, 'Rani Sahiba has arrived, sir. She began to run a fever on the way and now lies unconscious.'

Kunwar Sahib asked him sternly, 'Then why didn't you take her back? Don't you know that there is no doctor around here?'

'Sir, she wouldn't listen to me. What could I do?' the chauffeur replied hesitantly.

Kunwar Sahib was furious. 'Shut up. Don't make excuses! You must have thought of having fun hunting here and some days of relaxation. You probably never said a word to her about going back. I know you fellows inside out. You must drive the car back right away. Who else is with you?'

The chauffeur replied in an undertone, 'One car is stuffed with bedding and clothes. Rani Sahiba is in the other car.'

'So there's no one else with her?'

'Sir, I only carry out orders.'

'Enough! Just shut up.'

In this vexatious mood, Kunwar Sahib went over to Vasudha but called out her name softly. When no reply came, he gently placed his hands on her forehead. It was as hot as a burning griddle. His anger vanished with the touch. He rushed back to the bungalow and woke his men from their sleep and ordered them to make a bed for her. He picked Vasudha in his arms, carried her into the room, and laid her on the bed. He sat near the bed and kept gazing at her with tearful eyes. Her dust-laden body and dishevelled hair seemed to speak of her selfless love. Till then, he had considered Vasudha as a narcissistic woman, obsessed with decking herself up, not too concerned about his love. Today, he had a glimpse of her femininity shining beneath the powder and pomade. There was so much longing, so much yearning in her. She was like a bird, lost in the pleasure of flight and now beating her wings against the door of a cage.

Wouldn't the door of this cage open to her and she be given a welcome?

The cook inquired, 'Has madam come all alone?'

Kunwar Sahib said softly, 'Yes. There were so many servants, but she didn't bring anyone with her. She could have come by train comfortably, and then we could have sent a car for her from here. The fever is very high, you can't touch her.' Then he turned to the cook and said, 'Fetch some hot water and then prepare some food for her.'

The cook added, 'Two hundred miles is a long track, sir! She's spent the entire day sitting in the car.'

Straightening the pillow under Vasudha's head, Kunwar Sahib remarked, 'This journey completely drains people like us out. Her exhaustion does not come as a surprise at all. There's no worse road than this anywhere in the world.'

3.

There was no remission in Vasudha's fever for twelve days. The family doctor arrived. Both her sons and Muniya arrived with a retinue of servants. It was like a carnival in the forest. Lying in her bed, Vasudha watched Kunwar Sahib tending to her needs which brought her great satisfaction. He who didn't wake up before ten in the morning was now up and about before dawn and took care of her medicine and diet. He left her side only for a short while to take a bath and then returned to the spot. It was as though he was performing some kind of prayer. His health declined and his face became pale. He looked exhausted.

One day, Vasudha asked, 'Why aren't you going hunting these days? I had also come here to hunt, but I began my journey at such an inauspicious hour that you had to face such difficulties. Just take a look at yourself in the mirror!'

In the last few days, the thought of going hunting hadn't occurred to Kunwar Sahib even once. No one even talked about it. One day a fellow hunter happened to mention a tiger when Kunwar Sahib glared at him, which silenced him, and he never dared bring the matter up again. He now wanted to spend all his time chatting with Vasudha. He didn't want to stay away from her even for a moment. But he felt embarrassed when Vasudha spoke about hunting.

'Yes of course, what better occasion can we ever have to go hunting?'

'I'm quite all right now, but just look at your face. One falls ill if he's with a sick person all the time.'

Vasudha's was a commonplace remark, but it hurt Kunwar Sahib's heart deeply. He had already regretted his passion for hunting several times. He thought, Vasudha would not have fallen ill if I weren't so obsessed with hunting. It's all my fault.

Vasudha continued, 'What trophies have you acquired lately? Please fetch them, let me take a look. I'll keep the best one for myself. And listen, when you go hunting next time, I'll go with you. I hope you'll take me with you. I won't listen if you begin to make excuses.'

Kunwar Sahib liked nothing better than to show off his hunting trophies. He had an extensive collection of animal skins. In his rooms, the carpets, mattresses, couches, chairs, stools were all made of these pelts. Even his bed and covers were embellished with them. He had had several suits made of pelts which he wore when he went hunting. On this hunting trip too, he had collected a large number of horns, heads, claws and skins.

Surely, these will amuse her, he thought. He didn't realize that Vasudha, having denied entry through the main door, was trying to gain entry into his heart through the backdoor. He fetched his trophies and began to show them to her one by one.

Kunwar Sahib had not seen such a glow on Vasudha's face for weeks. She looked like a child witnessing a spectacle. After an illness we begin to behave like children—obstinate, restless and guileless. Vasudha watched each skin with such eagerness as though she were watching the moving scenes in a bioscope.

The most beautiful among the trophies was a lion skin which she selected for herself. This was Kunwar Sahib's most prized trophy with which he wanted to adorn his own room.

He said, 'Take one of the leopard skins. This one is no good.'

Pulling the skin towards her, Vasudha replied, 'Thank you for your advice. I like this inferior one.'

Kunwar Sahib replied tonelessly, 'Sure. If you like it, do keep it. I said it only for your sake. As for me, I can shoot another leopard like this one.'

'Then why were you trying to befool me?'

'Who was doing that?'

'All right, take an oath saying this is not the best skin.'

Kunwar Sahib said shamefacedly, 'Take an oath? For a mere skin? If I had a hundred pelts of such quality, I would sacrifice all of them for your sake.'

When the servant took all the skins away, Kunwar Sahib continued, 'I'll write a dedication in your name on this skin with black wool.'

Vasudha was tired. She stretched herself on the bed and replied, 'Now,

when you go hunting, I'll go with you.' Kunwar Sahib smiled.

4.

Vasudha loved listening to accounts of hunting. Till then, Kunwar Sahib had lived in his own world with its joys and sorrows, its gains or losses, its hopes and despairs. Vasudha had nothing to do with it. Kunwar Sahib had to conceal the realities of this world from her. But now Vasudha rose in his world like a bright star.

In time, the doctor gave permission for them to go hunting without demur. Vasudha had regained her health. On an auspicious day Kunwar Sahib gave Vasudha her first lesson. Since that day, she could often be seen standing under shady trees, target shooting, while Kunwar Sahib stood by, testing her skill. The day Vasudha shot her first falcon, Kunwar Sahib was overjoyed. Servants were given gifts and Brahmins, offerings. The falcon was mummified to commemorate the joyful event.

Vasudha's life was now imbued with a new enthusiasm, a new joy, a new hope. Her earlier apprehensions disappeared. They were replaced by courage, strength and love.

5.

In a couple of days, Vasudha's wish was fulfilled. Kunwar Sahib finally agreed to take her along on a hunting spree. The hunt was for a lion that had been spreading terror in the neighbouring villages for a month.

It was very dark and the earth seemed to groan under its weight. Kunwar Sahib and Vasudha sat with bated breath on a machan, a small platform hitched high up among the branches of a tree. It was a dangerous animal. Only a day ago, it had pulled down a man sleeping on a machan on to the field. Now, seated on the machan, they lay in wait for this same animal. A buffalo had been tied to a tree some distance away as bait for the lion

whose arrival was awaited.

Kunwar Sahib was calm, but Vasudha's heart was pounding. She started even if a leaf moved slightly and instead of steadying her gun, she pressed close to him. Kunwar Sahib did his best to keep up her spirits.

'The moment it pounces on the buffalo, I'll finish it. There'll be no need to use your gun.'

Vasudha asked with a shudder, 'And should you miss, will it jump on us?' 'Then I'll fire a second time. All three guns are fully loaded. You aren't afraid, are you?'

'Not at all. Actually, I'd have liked to fire the first shot.'

Suddenly, the rustling of leaves was heard. Vasudha startled and pressed closer to her husband. Kunwar Sahib put his arm around her and said, 'Have courage, sweetheart.'

Embarrassed, Vasudha replied, 'Oh no! I'm not scared, only a bit startled.' Suddenly, two orbs dazzled near the buffalo. Kunwar Sahib pressed Vasudha's hand to indicate that the lion has arrived. They became alert. When the lion came close, he fired. The bullet missed the target. He fired again. The lion was wounded but did not fall to the ground. The infuriated animal groaned so loudly that Vasudha's heart quaked with fear. Kunwar Sahib was going to fire for the third time when the lion leapt at the machan. It struck the machan with its front claws and shook it with such force that Kunwar Sahib tumbled down from it with his gun. It was a critical moment! A second's delay would put Kunwar Sahib's life in danger. The burning eyes of the lion blazed before Vasudha. Her hands and feet were shaking. But the imminent danger seemed to electrify every pore of her body. She steadied her gun. There was hardly a distance of two feet between her and the lion. It was about to leap at her when Vasudha fired. Boom! The lion's paws went limp and it fell to the ground.

The situation was dire. Kunwar Sahib lay just three or four feet away from the animal. Perhaps he was badly wounded. If there was any strength left in the lion, it would definitely attack him. Alert, Vasudha seemed to focus all her energy in her eyes as she grabbed the gun. If someone had pierced her with a spear at that moment, she would have been oblivious of it. She was not in her senses and it was her trance-like state that saved her. She ignited the torch and saw that the lion was trying to stand up. She fired at the lion's

head and jumped down from the machan holding a revolver. The lion let out a loud groan. Vasudha emptied the bullets into its mouth. Kunwar Sahib gathered his strength and stood up. He rushed forward and clasped her in his arms.

‘Oh God, what’s this?’

Vasudha had fainted. Fear was the shield that had protected her. When it vanished, she was overwhelmed and became unconscious.

6.

Vasudha regained consciousness after three hours. But she was still nervous. Slowly and fearfully, she opened her eyes. Kunwar Sahib inquired, ‘How do you feel, sweetheart?’

Still half-conscious, Vasudha formed a circle with her arms and said, ‘Move away from there! It’ll jump on you!’

Kunwar Sahib laughed. ‘The lion went cold a long time ago. It’s lying in the veranda. I’ve never seen such a huge lion in all my life. I hope you aren’t hurt.’

‘Not at all.’

‘Why did you jump down? You must have hurt yourself. I’m amazed that you survived. I couldn’t have jumped from such a height.’

Vasudha was taken by surprise. ‘Are you saying I jumped? I just remember that the lion leapt at the machan. I have no idea what happened after that.’

Kunwar Sahib couldn’t believe his ears. ‘Bravo! You shot at it twice. When it fell, you jumped down and emptied the remaining bullets into its mouth. It was a brazen animal. Had you missed your aim, it would surely have attacked me after it fell. I didn’t even have a knife. My gun had dropped on the other side when I fell. I couldn’t see a thing in the darkness. You saved my life. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be standing here at this moment.’

They left for home the following morning.

The palace that seemed so desolate earlier, now seemed like a long-lost friend.

Every object seemed to welcome her. She talked laughingly with the servants with whom she had been curt earlier. It was as if she was compensating for her past rudeness.

The evening sun had turned the western sky crimson. Sitting on a chair, Vasudha watched this spectacle from her window. Today, this spectacle was imbued with life, hope and passion. Even the boatman's solitary hut looked beautiful today. Nature had filled the environs with its bounty.

Muniya was playing with the prince in front of the temple. Vasudha thought of going to the temple to perform a puja. She asked the servants to make arrangements for the puja and walked to the temple. From her plentiful treasure of happiness, she could now give away some. Her heart was bursting with the desire of giving!

'It seems you're going to perform a puja,' Kunwar Sahib said. 'I'm going there too. I'd made a wish some time ago.'

'And what was that wish?'

'I can't tell you.'

2. Grammar Page

Adverbs of time:

We use the future perfect tense with the time adverbials like *by the time*; *by 2015*, *by tomorrow*, *before*, *when* (in the meaning 'by the time'), etc.

By the time she returns, I will have finished my work on the report.

She will have typed the report by the time you return.

When he calls, I will have left already.

By tomorrow, he will have left London.

By 2050, scientists will have found the cure for cancer.



GRAMMAR STUDY: The Future Perfect Continuous Tense

Structures:

Affirmative: sub + will have been/shall have been+ v^t + obj

He will have been writing a letter.

Negative: sub + will not have been/shall not have been+ v^t + obj

He will not have been writing a letter.

Questions: Will/shall + sub + have been + v^t + obj + ?

Will he have been writing a letter?

WH + will/shall + sub + have been + v^t + obj + ?

Why will he have been writing a letter?

Active: sub + will have been/shall have been + v^t + obj

He will have been writing a letter.

Passive: (no passive structure)

Uses:

⇒ We use the future perfect continuous tense to show that something will continue up until a particular event or time in the future.

By the time you return, I will have been waiting here for 3 days.

When he finally reaches Dharan, Tom will have been driving for 10 hours.

By 2020, she will have been living in Canada for ten years.

They will have been talking for over an hour by the time Tina arrives.

You will only have been waiting for a few minutes when her plane arrives.

He will have been painting the mural for over six months by the time it is finished.

Goma will have been teaching in this school for more than two years by the time she leaves for Chitwan.



GRAMMAR STUDY: Be going to

Uses:

⇒ 'Be going to' expresses that something is a plan. It expresses the idea that a person intends to do something in the future. It does not matter whether the plan is realistic or not.

He is going to spend his vacation in Dubai.

She is not going to spend her vacation in Singapore.

“When are we going to meet each other tonight?” “We are going to meet at 6 PM.”

I'm going to be an actor when I grow up.

Michelle is going to begin medical school next year.

They are going to drive all the way to Alaska.

Who are you going to invite to the party?

“Who is going to make John's birthday cake?” “Anu is going to make John's birthday cake.”