



Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G42

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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1. The Grinding Woman's Well

By Pemchand

1

Lying on her deathbed, Gomti said to Chaudhuri Vinayak Singh, 'Chaudhuri, this was the only wish I had in life.'

The Chaudhuri said, 'Don't worry, Kaki, God will fulfil your wish. I will call the labourers today itself and get the work started. If fate so wills, you will drink water from your own well. You must have counted the money?'

Gomti shut her eyes for a moment, gathered her scattered memories, and said, 'Bhaiya, how do I know how much money there is? All of it is in this pot. Manage with whatever there is. Whom can you ask for more?'

The Chaudhuri picked up the closed pot, weighed it in his hands and said, 'I'll manage with this, Kaki. Who else will donate money? People are not willing to give even a few coins in alms; who will bother to donate money for a well to be dug? You are blessed because you are donating your life's earnings for this work of dharma.'

Gomti said with pride, 'Bhaiya, you were very small when your Kaka died and I had not a paisa in hand. I went hungry for days. Whatever money he had was used up during his sickness. He was a great devotee of God and so God called him away soon. You have seen how I have lived from then till now. I have ground as much as a maund of flour a night. Beta! Everyone was amazed at how hard I worked. I don't know how I acquired such strength. My only wish was to build a small well in his name in the village. One's name should survive. That is why people are so anxious to have sons and daughters.'

Thus, having made Chaudhuri Vinayak Singh the executor of her will, the old woman Gomti went to the next world that very night. Before she died, her last words were, 'Don't delay making the well.' People had guessed that she had money, but no one imagined that she had two thousand

rupees. The old woman hid her riches as people hide a vice. The Chaudhuri was the headman of the village and an honest man. That is why the old woman had given him her last instructions.

2

The Chaudhuri did not spend a lot of money on Gomti's last rites. As soon as the rites were over, he sent for his son Harnath Singh and began to discuss arrangements for buying bricks, lime, stones, and so on. Harnath was a trader in grain. He listened for a while, and then said, 'Will any great harm be done if the well is not built for a few months?'

The Chaudhuri grunted and then said, 'No, no harm, but why delay it?

She has given the money, and we will be praised for free. As she was dying, Gomti told me to build the well as soon as possible.'

Harnath: 'Yes, she did, but these days the market is good. If I buy grain for two or three thousand rupees, we can sell it for a quarter more by winter. I'll pay you interest.'

The Chaudhuri's heart filled with doubts and fears; he was in a quandary.

If two thousand became two and a half thousand, it would be great. He could get some flowers and creepers carved on the plinth round the well. But he was worried lest a loss be incurred. He could not hide this anxiety, so he said, 'What if we suffer a loss?'

Harnath said crossly, 'Why should we? That's ridiculous.'

'But if we do?'

Harnath said excitedly, 'Why don't you admit you don't want to give the money because you want to be seen as overly pious.'

Like most old people, the Chaudhuri too generally gave in to his son. He said timidly, 'I didn't say I wouldn't give the money. But it's someone else's money, so one should be very careful with it. Who knows the ways of the market? What if the price suddenly falls? Weevils could appear in the grain, some enemy could set fire to the house. Think carefully about all the possibilities.'

Harnath said sarcastically, 'For that matter, why don't you wonder whether a thief could steal the money or the well wall could collapse? These things also happen.'

The Chaudhuri now had no more arguments to put forward. Like a weak warrior, he had issued a challenge and walked into the arena, but when he saw the glint of a sword, he took fright. Averting his eyes in embarrassment, he said, 'How much do you want?'

Like a skilled warrior who sees the foe retreating, Harnath said arrogantly, 'Give me all of it. What's the point of giving fifty or a hundred rupees?'

They had no fear of losing face. Harnath bought grain. Sacks of grain were heaped up. The Chaudhuri, who always slept soundly, now guarded the grain all night. No mouse dared get into a sack. The Chaudhuri would pounce on it more fiercely than a cat. In this way, six months passed. The grain was sold in winter, at a profit of five hundred rupees.

Harnath said, 'You take fifty rupees of the profit.'

The Chaudhuri grew annoyed. 'Are you giving me fifty rupees as charity? If you had borrowed the money from a moneylender, you would have paid an interest of at least two hundred rupees; give me a little less, what else?'

Harnath did not argue. He gave the Chaudhuri one hundred and fifty rupees. The Chaudhuri had never felt so pleased. That night, when he lay down to sleep in his room, his heart began to beat fast. He was not dreaming nor was he intoxicated. Gomti was standing before him, smiling. There was a strange vigour on her withered face.

3

Several years passed. The Chaudhuri constantly tried to get the money back from Harnath, but Harnath would always find a pretext to postpone returning it. He would pay a little interest annually, but he would make a thousand excuses regarding the principal. Sometimes he had to pay the harvesters and at other times he had not balanced his account books. Yet his business kept expanding. Finally, one day, the Chaudhuri plainly told him that whether his business floated or sank he must return the money that month. Harnath tried many deceptive arguments, but the Chaudhuri was not to be moved.

Harnath said irritably, 'I'm asking you to wait just two months. I'll return the money as soon as the goods are sold.'

The Chaudhuri said firmly, 'Your goods will never be sold nor will your two months ever be up. I will take the money today.'

Harnath got up in a rage, brought two thousand rupees, and threw them down in front of the Chaudhuri.

The Chaudhuri said hesitantly, 'You have the money with you ...' 'Of course, do you think trade runs on words alone?'

'Then give me five hundred right now, and the rest after two months. All of it won't be spent at one time.'

Harnath said haughtily, 'You can spend it or save it as you please, I don't want it. Are all the moneylenders in the world dead? I don't want to put up with your bullying.'

The Chaudhuri picked up the money and put it in a niche in the wall. His enthusiasm for laying the foundations of the well turned cold.

Harnath had returned the money, but he had other ideas in mind. At midnight, when the house was silent, Harnath slid aside the bolt of the Chaudhuri's room and slipped inside. The Chaudhuri was fast asleep. Harnath wanted to pick up both bags of money and slip out, but as he put out his hand, he saw Gomti standing before him. She was holding both bags with her hands. Harnath was terrified, and backed away.

Then, thinking that perhaps he had imagined it, he again stretched out his hand but this time the spectre looked so fearsome that Harnath could not stay there another moment. He fled, but fell down unconscious in the veranda outside.

4

Harnath had withdrawn his money from all his investments and put it together to give the traders. When the Chaudhuri insisted, he had thrown that money down before him. But he had already decided that he would steal it at night. He had planned to raise an alarm, saying he had seen thieves, and thus divert suspicion from himself.

But when this plan went awry, the traders began to demand their money. How long could he put them off with promises? He made all the excuses he could. Finally, things came to such a pass that his creditors threatened to file a suit against him. One actually filed a suit for three hundred rupees. The poor Chaudhuri was caught in a difficult situation. It was Harnath who sat in the shop; the Chaudhuri had nothing to do with it, but Harnath's influence was largely due to the Chaudhuri's good repute. People considered the Chaudhuri a man of integrity, honest in all his dealings.

Although no one complained to him about Harnath, he felt ashamed to show his face in public. But he had resolved not to touch the money for the well, whatever happened.

At night, the Musalman watchman of a merchant came to the Chaudhuri's door and delivered a volley of abuse. The Chaudhuri was furious and felt like going and pulling out the fellow's moustaches, but he told himself, 'It has nothing to do with me. It's not the father's dharma to pay the son's debts.'

When he sat down to eat, he said to his wife, 'What a mess this is!' 'Well, who's responsible for it? The child swears he has just a few goods with him, since you have taken all the money.'

Chaudhuri: 'What else could I do? I don't want to call the tune and have someone else pay the piper.'

Wife: 'You prefer this public disgrace?'

Chaudhuri: 'It's not in my control. Will the well ever be built? Five years have passed.'

Wife: 'He hasn't eaten any dinner. At lunch too, he barely ate a morsel.'

Chaudhuri: 'You should have explained to him that not eating won't get him the money any sooner.'

Wife: 'Why don't you go and explain to him?'

Chaudhuri: 'He must be thinking of me as his enemy right now.'

Wife: 'I will take the money and give it to the child. Whenever you have money, make the well.'

Chaudhuri: 'No, no, don't do that. I cannot be guilty of such a great betrayal, even if it means the ruin of the family.'

But his wife ignored him. She went straight into the inner room and was about to pick up the bags when she screamed and stepped aside. Her whole body was trembling like the vibrating string of a sitar.

Startled, the Chaudhuri asked, 'What happened? Are you feeling dizzy?'

His wife looked with fearful eyes at the niche and said, 'The witch is standing there.'

The Chaudhuri looked towards the niche and said, 'What witch? I don't see anyone.'

Wife: 'My heart is pounding. I felt as if that old woman had caught hold of my hand.'

Chaudhuri: 'It's all a delusion. The old woman died five years ago and you think she is still sitting here?'

Wife: 'I saw her clearly—it was she. The child also said that in the night he saw her with her hands on the bags.'

Chaudhuri: 'When did he come to my room at night?'

Wife: 'He came to talk to you about the money. When he saw her, he fled.'

Chaudhuri: 'All right, come in again, and let me take a look.'

The wife said, putting her hands behind her back, 'No, no, I'm not setting foot in that room again.'

Chaudhuri: 'All right, I'll go and see.'

The Chaudhuri went into the room and picked up both bags. Nothing happened. Not even the shadow of Gomti appeared. His wife stood at the door, peering in. The Chaudhuri came out and said, 'I didn't see anything at all. If she were there, where could she go?'

Wife: 'Who knows why you didn't see anything? She was fond of you, so she must have gone away.'

Chaudhuri: 'You had a hallucination, nothing more.'

Wife: 'I'll call the child and ask him.'

Chaudhuri: 'I'm standing here—why don't you come in and see?'

His wife felt somewhat reassured. She went to the niche and fearfully put out her hand. Then she shrieked loudly and didn't stop running till she reached the courtyard.

The Chaudhuri came out to the courtyard, and said, perplexed, 'What was it? You ran away for nothing. I didn't see anything at all.'

His wife, panting, said dismissively, 'Forget it, you almost cost me my life. I don't know what's wrong with your eyes. That demoness is standing there!'

Just then Harnath came out. Seeing his mother in the courtyard, he asked, 'What's wrong, Amma? Are you all right?'

Wife: 'I saw that witch twice today, Beta. I thought I would fetch the money for you. The well can be built whenever we have the money to spend. But as soon as I put my hand on the bags, the witch caught hold of my hand. I almost died.'

Harnath said, 'We need to call a good witch doctor who'll beat her up and get rid of her.'

Chaudhuri: 'Did you too see her last night?'

Harnath: 'Yes, I went in to discuss something with you. As soon as I stepped in, I saw that witch standing by the niche, and I ran away as fast as I could.'

Chaudhuri: 'All right, go in again now.'

Wife: 'I won't let him go in again, even if someone pays him a lakh of rupees to go.'

Harnath: 'I won't go in again.'

Chaudhuri: 'But I don't see anything. What is the meaning of this?'

Harnath: 'Who knows? Perhaps she's afraid of you. We should call a witch doctor today.'

Chaudhuri: 'I don't understand it at all. What became of Baiju Pande's suit?'

These days, Harnath was so resentful of the Chaudhuri that he never discussed

with him any matter pertaining to the shop. Looking out into the yard as if speaking to the air, he said, 'Whatever is to happen will happen. What more can they take but my life? I cannot spit out what I have eaten.'

Chaudhuri: 'What if he gets a decree in his favour?'

Harnath: 'So what? The goods in the shop, worth four or five hundred, will be auctioned off.'

Chaudhuri: 'That will be the end of the business!'

Harnath: 'I can't help that. If I had known that there was such a rush to build the well, I wouldn't have got into this mess. It's not as if I didn't have enough to eat before. At most, I'll have to go to jail for a few months. What else can happen?'

His mother said, 'I'll scorch the face of whoever tries to take you to jail!

How can you go to jail while we are alive?'

Harnath said in philosophical tones, 'Parents are one's companions in life, but not partakers of one's karma.'

The Chaudhuri loved his son deeply. He had thought his son intended to swallow up the money, which is why he had insisted on taking it back. Now he realized that Harnath really was in difficulties. He thought, 'If the boy goes to prison, the family honour will bite the dust. What harm will it do to give him Gomti's money? After all, the shop is running—some time or other we will make some money.'

Suddenly, someone shouted from outside, 'Harnath Singh!' Harnath turned pale. The Chaudhuri asked, 'Who is it?'

'The bailiff.'

'Has he come to attach the shop?'

'So it seems.'

'How much is the decree for?'

'Twelve hundred rupees.'

'Can't the bailiff be put off with a bribe?'

'He could, but the moneylender must be with him. The bailiff must have already taken money from him too.'

'Well, give him twelve hundred rupees from Gomti's money.'

'Who can touch her money? Who knows what disaster will befall the family?'

'It's not as if we intend to embezzle her money. Come on, I'll get it for you.'

The Chaudhuri was afraid lest he too see her. But his fears were groundless. He took two hundred rupees out of one bag, put them in the other bag, and gave it to Harnath. By evening, not a paisa was left of the two thousand rupees.

5

Twelve years passed. The Chaudhuri is no more in this world, nor is Harnath. As long as he was alive, the Chaudhuri remained anxious about the well; even in his dying moments he kept talking of the well. But there was always a shortage of money in the shop. As soon as the Chaudhuri died, the business collapsed. Not satisfied with regular investments, Harnath tried to double and treble his profits—he began to gamble. Within a year, the shop was closed down. Jewellery, pots and pans, all were lost. A year after the Chaudhuri's death, Harnath too left this world of profit and loss. The mother now had no support. She fell ill, but received no treatment. After suffering for three or four months, she too died.

Only the pregnant daughter-in-law was left. The poor thing had no means of support. In her condition, she could not even work as a labourer. She stitched clothes for the neighbours, and somehow survived for five or six months. Everyone said she would have a son, because all the signs were those of a boy. This was the one hope in her life. When she had a daughter, that hope vanished. The mother's heart turned so hard that she would not put the newborn baby to her breast. When the neighbours talked her into it, she put it to the breast but not a drop of milk emerged. A wave of pity, love and attachment shook the unfortunate mother's heart. If somehow the last drop of blood in her breast could have turned to milk, she would have considered herself blessed.

At the sight of the baby girl's innocent, pathetic, yearning face, her mother's heart began to weep as if from a hundred eyes. All the goodwill, blessings, wealth and love in her heart seemed to come out of her eyes and drench the baby as the cool light of the moon drenches the flowers, but the baby was not destined to experience a mother's love. The mother kept her alive with her blood and with cow's milk, but she herself grew feebler day by day.

One day, people found the woman lying on the ground and the baby girl clinging to her, sucking her breasts. Where was the blood in that body wounded by grief and poverty that could form milk?

That little girl, nourished by the neighbours' kindness and charity, was out digging up grass one day when she came to the spot where Gomti's hut stood. The thatch roof had long since mingled with the five elements. Only a few remnants of the ruined walls were to be found. In some places, half the wall still stood. The girl, who knows why, began digging a hole with her small spade. She kept digging the hole from morning to evening. She forgot to eat or drink. She had no doubts and no fears. Dusk fell, but she remained sitting there, digging the hole. At that hour, the peasants never ventured there even by mistake, but the child sat there, fearlessly turning up the soil. When it grew dark, she went away.

The next day, she got up very early and dug up more grass than she normally used to in the whole day. In the afternoon, she took her bamboo basket and spade and went back to that place, but today she was not alone. There were two other children with her. The three of them kept digging till evening, saying, 'A well, a well.' The girl dug inside the hole and the two boys carried out the soil and threw it away.

The third day, two more boys joined the game. They kept playing till evening. The hole was now two arm-lengths deep. This unique game filled the boys and girls of the village with unprecedented enthusiasm.

On the fourth day, several more children joined in. They discussed who should go in, who should pick up the soil, and who should drag the basket. The pit was now four arm-lengths deep, but no one yet knew of it, except the children.

One night, a farmer searching for his lost buffalo happened to pass that ruin. When he saw the huge pile of mud, the deep pit, and a flickering lamp, he was terrified and fled. Several other men came to find out what was going on. When they drew near, they saw the little girl sitting there. One of them asked her, 'Did you dig this pit?'

'Yes,' said the child.

'Why are you digging it?'

'I'm making a well.'

'How will you make a well?'

'I'll dig as much more as I have already dug. All the village children come to play too.'

'Looks like you want to lose your life and also kill the other kids. Don't you dare dig anymore!'

The next day, the other children did not come, and the little girl worked for wages all day. But at dusk a lamp was lit there once more and she was seen sitting there with her spade.

The villagers beat her, and locked her up, but whenever she could get away, she would go back there.

Villagers are normally devout folks, and the child's otherworldly attachment finally bred love in them too. The well began to be dug.

While it was being dug, the girl started making mud bricks. The children in the village joined in this game as well. On moonlit nights, when the whole village was asleep, she could be seen moulding bricks. Who knows how a child of seven developed so much determination? This seven-year-old girl could outdo people thrice her age in wisdom and conversation.

Finally, the day came when the well was ready and the masonry plinth completed. That day, the little girl slept on the plinth. Today, her joy was immeasurable. She sang and chirped.

In the morning, only her corpse was found on the plinth. From that day, people began to say that the child was that old woman Gombi! The well was named 'the grinding woman's well'.

2. Grammar Page

Unit 42

Passive 1 (is done / was done)

A Study this example:



This house **was built** in 1981.

'This house **was built**' is *passive*.

Compare active and passive:

Somebody **built** **this house** in 1981. (*active*)
subject *object*

This house **was built** in 1981. (*passive*)
subject

When we use an *active* verb, we say *what the subject does*:

- My grandfather was a builder. **He built** this house in 1981.
- It's a big company. **It employs** two hundred people.

When we use a *passive* verb, we say *what happens to the subject*:

- 'How old is this house?' **'It was built** in 1981.'
- Two hundred people are employed** by the company.

B When we use the passive, who or what causes the action is often unknown or unimportant:

- A lot of money **was stolen** in the robbery. (somebody stole it, but we don't know who)
- Is** this room **cleaned** every day? (does somebody clean it? – it's not important who)

If we want to say who does or what causes the action, we use **by**:

- This house was built **by my grandfather**.
- Two hundred people are employed **by the company**.

C The passive is **be (is/was etc.) + past participle (done/cleaned/seen etc.)**:

(be) done (be) cleaned (be) damaged (be) built (be) seen etc.

The *past participle* often ends in **-ed** (cleaned/damaged etc.), but many important verbs are *irregular* (**built/done/stolen** etc.). See Appendix 1.

Compare active and passive, *present simple* and *past simple*:

Present simple

active: **clean(s) / see(s)** etc.

Somebody **cleans** **this room** every day.

passive: **am/is/are + cleaned/seen** etc.

This room **is cleaned** every day.

- Many accidents **are caused** by careless driving.
- I'm **not invited** to parties very often.
- How **is** this word **pronounced**?

Past simple

active: **cleaned/saw** etc.

Somebody **cleaned** **this room** yesterday.

passive: **was/were + cleaned/seen** etc.

This room **was cleaned** yesterday.

- We **were woken** up by a loud noise during the night.
- 'Did you go to the party?' 'No, I **wasn't invited**.'
- How much money **was stolen** in the robbery?