Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G43

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Contents

Fool's Gold

By Rabindranath Tagore

Adyanath and Baidyanath Chakrabarti were co-legatees; but Baidyanath was much the worse off of the two. His father Maheshchandra had no head for money, and left the management of his affairs to his elder brother Shibanath. In return, Shibanath, with many a soothing word, appropriated the inheritance to himself. Some Company Bonds were all that was left to Baidyanath, and were his only security in the rough ocean of life. After much searching, Shibanath managed to marry his son Adyanath to a rich man's only daughter, thereby giving himself a further opportunity to increase his wealth. Maheshchandra gave his son to the eldest of the seven daughters of a poor Brahmin he had taken pity on, and asked for not a paisa in dowry. He would have taken all seven daughters into his home; but he had only one son – and besides, the Brahmin didn't request this. But he gave him more than enough help with the cost of marrying them off.

After his father's death, Baidyanath was perfectly happy and satisfied with the Company Bonds. He gave no thought to earning a living. He occupied himself by cutting branches off trees and carefully carving them into walking-sticks. If young men or boys pressed him for one of these, he gave it away. He also spent many hours making – out of sheer generosity – fishing-rods, kites and reels. These required a great deal of careful carving and smoothing; and though the labour and time were of little benefit to his family, handiwork of this kind gave him enormous satisfaction. At times when, under every sacred *caṇḍimaṇḍap*, the air became thick with village feuds and intrigues, Baidyanath would often be seen alone on his verandah, working from dawn to afternoon and between siesta-time and evening, with a penknife and a piece of wood.

Through the grace of Shashti – and in defiance of his enemies – Baidyanath produced two sons and one daughter.

His wife Mokshada, however, grew daily more dissatisfied. Why did they not have the home comforts that Adyanath's family enjoyed? It was against all reason that Mokshada should be deprived of the ornaments, Benares saris, refined conversation and imperious manners that Adyanath's wife Bindhyabasini had! They were the same family, after all. This higher standard of living had been achieved by cheating a brother out of his inheritance. The more she heard about her father-in- law, the more resentful Mokshada felt towards his only son. Nothing in her own house pleased her. Everything was

inconvenient and humiliating. The beds were not fit for carrying a corpse on; the walls were so decayed that even an orphaned titmouse would not want to live in them, and the furnishings would make a saint weep. Men are too cowardly to oppose such exaggerated complaints. All Baidyanath could do was sit on his verandah and scrape at sticks with doubled concentration.

But to keep silence is not a permanent way of avoiding trouble.

Sometimes Mokshada would interrupt her husband's woodcarving and call him into the house. Solemnly, looking away from him, she said, 'Stop the milkman from delivering milk.'

Baidyanath would be silent for a moment and then say, head bowed, 'How can I stop the milk? What will the children drink?'

'Stale rice-water,' his wife replied.

Or else, on other days, she would try a different tack: she would call him and say, 'I give up. You do what needs to be done.'

'What needs to be done?' Baidyanath asked wearily.

'You buy the food this month,' she replied. Then she gave him a shopping list worthy of a royal ceremonial feast. If Baidyanath plucked up courage to ask, 'Do we really need all this?' she answered, 'I suppose if the children didn't eat and they died and I too, you'd be able to run the house on your own, nice and cheaply!'

Baidyanath gradually realized he could not go on carving walking- sticks. Some solution would have to be found. But employment or business seemed out of the question. He needed to discover a short cut that would take him straight to Kubera's treasure-house.

One night he lay in bed and prayed passionately: 'O Mother Durga, if only you could reveal in a dream a patent medicine for a serious illness! I'd take care of advertising it in the papers.' But that night he dreamed his wife had furiously vowed she would 'marry again when she was widowed'. Baidyanath had objected to this by asking her where she would find – in their present state of poverty – the necessary ornaments. She refuted his objection by saying that widows didn't need ornaments to get married. He was groping vainly for some kind of clinching rejoinder, when he woke up and saw that it was morning; and on realizing why it was truly not possible for his wife to remarry, he felt rather dejected.

The next day, after his morning rites and ablutions, he was sitting alone

making a kite-string, when a *sannyasi* arrived at his door, chanting blessings. Instantly Baidyanath had a brilliant vision of future wealth. He invited the *sannyasi* in, and fed and welcomed him lavishly. He managed, with difficulty, to establish that the *sannyasi* could make gold, and was willing to impart his method.

Mokshada was enthralled. Like people with jaundice finding that everything looks yellow, the world seemed full of gold to her. As her imagination magically turned beds, furnishings and the walls of the house to gold, she mentally invited Bindhyabasini for a visit. The *sannyasi*, meanwhile, consumed two seers of milk a day and one-and-a- half seers of *mohanbhog*; and by extracting the Company Bonds from Baidyanath raised large sums of money.

The seekers of fishing-rods, sticks and reels had to go away disappointed when they knocked on Baidyanath's door. His children might not get their meals on time, might fall and bruise their foreheads, might shake the heavens with their howls, but neither parent took notice. They sat stock-still in front of the *sannyasi's* cauldron – unblinking, speechless. The restless flames, casting reflections, turned the pupils of their eyes into touchstones. Their gaze grew red and fiery as a setting sun.

When two of the Company Bonds had become burnt offerings to that gold-creating fire, the *sannyāsī* said encouragingly, 'Tomorrow the gold colour will come.'

They couldn't sleep that night: husband and wife lay building a city of gold in their minds. Sometimes they argued over details, but were so happy that they quickly reached agreement. They were perfectly willing to forgo their individual views, so deep was their marital harmony that night. The next day the *sannyāsī* was nowhere to be found. The gold all around them was obliterated: even the rays of the sun fell dark. Beds, furnishings and walls looked four times poorer and shabbier. If Baidyanath now offered some sort of trivial opinion on a domestic matter, his wife would say sweetly, 'You've shown how intelligent you are. Why not leave off for a bit?' He was utterly crushed. Mokshada acted superior, as if she had not believed for a minute in the golden mirage.

The crestfallen Baidyanath tried to think of ways to please his wife.

One day he produced a present in a square packet, and smiling broadly, nodding his head sagely, said, 'Guess what I've brought you.'

Concealing her curiosity she said casually, 'How should I know? I'm not a soothsayer.' Without further ado, Baidyanath slowly untied the knots in the string, blew the dust off the wrapping-paper, and gingerly unfolded the paper

to reveal an ‘Art Studio’ coloured print of the ten forms of Durga. Turning it to the light, he held it up before his wife. She immediately thought of the English oil-paintings hanging in Bindhyabasini’s bedroom. In a tone of excessive indifference she said, ‘Well, I never. You can hang it in your sitting-room and admire it there. It’s not my style.’ Baidyanath glumly realized that, along with other skills, God had denied him the difficult art of pleasing his wife.

Meanwhile Mokshada was consulting fortune-tellers of every kind, showing them her palms or getting them to study her horoscope. They all said her husband would outlive her. Although she was not very enthused by that joyous prospect, her curiosity remained unabated. She heard that her childbearing chances were good, that the house would soon be full of sons and daughters: she was not overjoyed about that.

Eventually, however, an astrologer told her he would burn every one of his scrolls if Baidyanath failed to find hidden treasure within a few years. So powerful an oath convinced Mokshada of the truth of his prediction. The astrologer took his leave, lavishly rewarded, but life now became unbearable for Baidyanath. There were several common-or- garden routes to wealth, such as farming, employment, theft or deception. But there was no standard way of finding hidden treasure. So the more Mokshada urged him and scolded him the less he could see which road to take. He could not decide where to begin digging, which pond to dredge, which wall in the house to demolish.

Greatly annoyed, Mokshada told her husband that she never knew a man could have dung instead of brains in his head. ‘Get moving!’ she said. ‘Do you think the sky will rain money if you sit gaping like that?’ She was right, and Baidyanath too was desperate to make some sort of move; but where and by what means, no one could tell him. So he continued to sit on the verandah carving sticks.

It was the month of Āśvin, and the *Durgā-pūjā* was drawing near. From the fourth of the month on, boats were arriving at the *ghāt*. People were returning home. They brought baskets of arum, pumpkins, dry coconuts; trunkfuls of clothes, umbrellas and shoes for the children; perfume, soap, new story-books and sweet-smelling coconut-oil for their loved ones.

Autumn sunshine filled the wide, cloudless sky like a festive smile; ripening paddy-fields rippled; glossy, rain-washed leaves rustled in the fresh cool breeze; and returning villagers, in raw-silk China-coats, made their way home along field-paths. Each had an umbrella over his head, and a twisted chadar swinging from his shoulder.

Baidyanath sat and watched, and sighed from the bottom of his heart.

He compared his joyless home with the atmosphere of festivity and homecoming in so many other houses, and said to himself, 'Why did God make me so useless?'

His sons rose at dawn to see the image of Durga being made in Adyanath's yard. At meal-times the maid had to go and drag them home. Baidyanath sat and reflected on the fruitlessness of his life amidst such universal festivity. Rescuing his two sons from the maid, he took them on to his lap and hugged them, and asked the elder one, 'Well, Abu, tell me what you would like for the *pūjā*?'

'I'd like a model boat, Father,' said Abinash at once.

The younger one, not wanting to be inferior to his brother in any respect, said, 'I'd like a boat too, Father.'

Sons worthy of their father! All he could do was make useless things, so that was what they wanted. 'Very well,' he said.

Meanwhile a paternal uncle of Mokshada's – a lawyer – had returned home from Benares for the *pūjā*-holidays. Mokshada visited his house several days running. One day she said to her husband, 'I think you should go to Benares.' Baidyanath immediately imagined that his death was near, that astrologers had discovered the date in his horoscope. His partner-in-life had found out, and was making preparations for his life beyond death. She told him, however, that there were rumours about a house in Benares where hidden treasure might be found: he must go and buy the house and bring home the treasure.

'Heaven forbid,' said Baidyanath. 'I can't go to Benares.' He had never been away from home. Women – so say the writers of the ancient Shastras – know instinctively how to make a family man adopt a life of asceticism. Mokshada's rhetoric filled the house like chilli-smoke; but it only made poor Baidyanath's eyes water: it failed to make him go to Benares.

Two or three days went by. Baidyanath sat cutting, carving and gluing pieces of wood to make two model boats. He fitted them with masts; cut up cloth to fix as sails; gave each a red cotton pennant; added oars and rudders. He even gave them passengers and a tiny helmsman. In all this he showed great care and astonishing skill. There is no boy alive whose heart would not have skipped a beat at the sight of such boats. So when Baidyanath gave them to his sons on the eve of the seventh day of the *pūjā*, they danced for joy. Even the shell of a boat would have been sufficient, but these had rudders, sails, boatmen in position: they were wonderful.

Attracted by the whoops of delight from the boys, Mokshada came and saw their indigent father's *pūjā* presents. At the sight, she raged, sobbed and beat her brow; then she snatched the two boats and threw them out of the window. Others were getting gold necklaces, satin shirts, embroidered caps: this miserable husband of hers had fobbed his sons off with two toy boats! Not a paisa had been spent on them; he'd made

them himself!

The younger boy wailed loudly. 'Stupid boy,' she said, giving him a clout. The elder boy forgot his own distress when he saw his father's face. Trying to seem cheerful, he said, 'I'll look for the boats early tomorrow morning, Father, and bring them back.'

The next day Baidyanath agreed to go to Benares. But where was the necessary money? His wife sold some jewellery to raise cash: jewellery from his grandmother's era. Heavy, pure gold ornaments like that are unobtainable today. Baidyanath felt he was going to his death. He embraced and kissed his children and left home with tears in his eyes. Even Mokshada wept.

The owner of the house in Benares was a client of Mokshada's uncle. Probably that was why it was sold at such a steep price. Baidyanath took sole possession of it. It was right on the river: water lapped against its foundations.

At night Baidyanath shivered all over. He lay in an empty room, wrapped in his chadar, with a lamp by his pillow – but he couldn't sleep. At dead of night, when all noise outside had stopped, he was roused by a clinking noise from somewhere. It was faint, but clear – as if the King of the Underworld's treasurer was sitting and counting money. Baidyanath was afraid, but was also curious and full of impossible hope. Carrying the lamp in his trembling hand, he went round the rooms of the house. If he went into one room the sound seemed to be coming from another; if he went to that room it seemed to be coming from the previous one. He spent the whole night wandering from room to room. When day came, the underground clinking blended with other sounds, and was no longer distinct.

The following night, at two or three o'clock, when the world was asleep, the noise started again. Baidyanath's heart was pounding. He could not decide where to go to trace the noise. In a desert the gurgle of water can sometimes be heard, but it is impossible to say where it is coming from: one is afraid of losing it completely by following a false path. The thirsty traveller stands stock still, straining his ears with all his might, his thirst growing and growing – Baidyanath was like that.

He spent many days in this state of uncertainty. Sleeplessness and futile

anxiety spread deep furrows over his formerly serene and kindly face. His sunken eyes blazed like desert sand in the afternoon. Then, one night, at two o'clock, he locked all the doors in the house and started to tap the floors with a crowbar. The floor of a small side room sounded hollow. While the rest of the town slept, Baidyanath crouched alone, digging down into the floor. When it was nearly dawn, his excavations were complete. He saw that there was a sort of lower room – in the darkness of the night he was not brave enough to step down into it recklessly. He spread his bedding over the hole and lay down. But the clinking noise was so distinct now that he had to get up again – though he was not prepared to go away, leaving the room unprotected. Greed and fear pulled at him in two opposite directions, as the night came to an end.

The noise could now be heard in the daytime too. He stopped the servant from coming into the room, and had his dinner outside. Then he went back into the room and locked the door. With Durga's name on his lips, he removed the bedding from the mouth of the hole. A gurgling of water and the clinking of something metallic could be heard clearly. As he nervously hung his head down into the hole he saw that water flowed over the floor of the low underground room: it was too dark to see much else. Jabbing a stick down into the water he found it was not more than knee-deep. Clutching matches and a lamp, he lightly jumped down into the shallow room. He so feared the extinction of all his hopes that his hands trembled as he tried to light the lamp. He wasted many matches before it was lit.

The lamp revealed a huge copper jar attached to a thick, heavy chain; whenever the water surged, the chain knocked against the jar and made a clinking noise. Splashing through the water, Baidyanath quickly reached the jar. It was empty. He could not believe his eyes: he picked up the jar and shook it violently. There was nothing inside. He turned it upside down. Nothing fell out. He noticed that the neck of the jar was broken. It appeared that it had at one time been completely sealed, but someone had broken into it. He started to thrash around in the water with his hands, like a madman. He felt an object in the mud – he lifted it up and found it was a skull. This too he lifted up to his ears and shook – there was nothing inside it. He hurled it away. He searched everywhere, but all he found were a few human bones. He saw that part of the wall which backed on to the river was broken: water was coming in there, and someone whose horoscope had also predicted the discovery of hidden treasure had possibly come in through that hole.

In utter despair, Baidyanath gave a long, heart-rending groan – '*Mā-ā- ā!*' – and the echo seemed to include the groans of many disappointed people from ages past, groans rising from deep underground with gloomy resonance. Then,

covered with mud, he climbed out of the underground room.

The crowded world outside seemed a complete lie, as empty as that broken chained jar. He couldn't bear the thought of having to pack up his things, buy a ticket, get on to the train, return home, quarrel with his wife, carry on with his daily existence. He just wanted to slide and slump into the water, like the crumbling river-bank.

He did, even so, pack up his things, buy his ticket and climb on to the train. And one winter evening he arrived back at his house. On autumn mornings in Āśvin, Baidyanath had sat by his door and watched many people returning home, and had often sighed with envy at their joy at returning from afar: he never dreamed he would one day suffer an evening like this. He entered the house and sat on a wooden seat in the yard as if in a trance: he did not go indoors. The maid was the first to see him, and broke into shrieks of delight; the children then came running, and finally Mokshada sent someone to fetch him. Baidyanath felt as if he was coming out of a trance, waking up in his former, familiar world. With a pale face and weak smile he lifted up one of the boys, and taking the hand of the other went indoors. Lamps were alight, and though it was not yet fully dark the winter evening was as still as night. For a while Baidyanath said nothing; then he gently asked his wife, 'How are you?'

His wife did not reply, but asked, 'What happened?' Baidyanath struck his brow with his palm, and said nothing.

Mokshada's expression was grim. The children, sensing that something was very badly wrong, softly withdrew. They went to the maid and said, 'Tell us that story about the barber.' Then they went to bed.

Darkness fell, but no word passed between Baidyanath and his wife. An eerie silence reigned, and Mokshada's lips were tight shut, ominous as thunder. At last, still without a word, she slowly went into her bedroom and locked the door from inside. Baidyanath waited silently outside. The night-watchman called out the hours. The world sank exhausted into untroubled sleep. From his family all the way up to the stars in the sky, no one had anything to ask the sleepless, disgraced Baidyanath.

Very late at night, his eldest son, probably waking from a dream, got up, tiptoed out on to the verandah and called, 'Father.' His father was not there. Raising his voice, going right outside the closed doors, he called, 'Father.' But no answer came. Fearfully, he went back to bed.

In the morning, the maid prepared Baidyanath's tobacco as she had always done before, but she couldn't find him anywhere. Later in the day, neighbours came to visit their recently returned friend, but he was not there.

The End.

*Note: **Caṇḍimaṇḍap --** Strictly, a shrine for the goddess Chandi, but it normally refers to the roofed structure used for community gatherings and festive occasions in Bengali villages*.

2. Grammar Page

Unit **43**

Passive 2 (**be done / been done / being done**)

A

Infinitive

active: (to) **do/clean/see** etc. — Somebody **will clean** this room later.

passive: (to) **be** + **done/cleaned/seen** etc. — This room **will be cleaned** later.

- The situation is serious. Something must **be done** before it's too late.
- A mystery is something that can't **be explained**.
- The music was very loud and could **be heard** from a long way away.
- A new supermarket is going **to be built** next year.
- Please go away. I want **to be left** alone.

B

Perfect infinitive

active: (to) **have** + **done/cleaned/seen** etc. — Somebody **should have cleaned** the room.

passive: (to) **have been** + **done/cleaned/seen** etc. — The room **should have been cleaned**.

- I haven't received the letter yet. It might **have been sent** to the wrong address.
- If you had locked the car, it wouldn't **have been stolen**.
- There were some problems at first, but they seem **to have been solved**.

C

Present perfect

active: **have/has** + **done** etc. — The room looks nice. Somebody **has cleaned** it.

passive: **have/has been** + **done** etc. — The room looks nice. It **has been cleaned**.

- Have you heard? The trip **has been cancelled**.
- **Have** you ever **been bitten** by a dog?
- 'Are you going to the party?' 'No, I **haven't been invited**.'

Past perfect

active: **had** + **done** etc. — The room looked nice. Somebody **had cleaned** it.

passive: **had been** + **done** etc. — The room looked nice. It **had been cleaned**.

- The vegetables didn't taste good. They **had been cooked** too long.
- The car was three years old, but **hadn't been used** very much.

D

Present continuous

active: **am/is/are** + (**do**)**ing** — Somebody **is cleaning** the room at the moment.

passive: **am/is/are** + **being** (**done**) — The room **is being cleaned** at the moment.

- There's somebody walking behind us. I think we **are being followed**.
- A new bridge **is being built** across the river. It will be finished next year.

Past continuous

active: **was/were** + (**do**)**ing** — Somebody **was cleaning** the room when I arrived.

passive: **was/were** + **being** (**done**) — The room **was being cleaned** when I arrived.

- There was somebody walking behind us. I think we **were being followed**.