Learn English Through Stories

H Series

H34

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1. Incident on the Kalka Train: Part 3

By Satyajit Ray

Seven

It was now 9.30 p.m. Our train was rushing through the darkness in the direction of Kalka. We would have to change at Kalka to go on to Simla. There were only the three of us in our compartment. The fourth berth was empty. I couldn't guess how the other two were feeling, but in my own mind there was a mixture of so many different emotions that it was impossible to tell which was the uppermost: excitement, pleasure, an eager anticipation or fear.

Lalmohan Babu broke the silence by saying, somewhat hesitantly, 'Tel! me, Mr Mitter, the dividing line between a brilliant detective and a criminal with real cunning is really quite thin, isn't it?'

Feluda was so preoccupied that he did not reply. But I knew very well what had prompted the question. It was related to a certain incident that took place during the evening. I should describe it in some detail, for it revealed a rather unexpected streak in Feluda's character.

It had taken us barely half an hour to collect most of the things we needed to deceive Mr Dhameeja.

The only major problem was the attaché case itself.

Where could we find a blue Air-India case? We didn't know anyone in Delhi we could ask. It might be possible to get a similar blue case in a shop—but that wouldn't have Air India written on it. And that would, naturally, give the whole show away.

In the end, however, in sheer desperation, we did buy a plain blue case and, clutching it in one hand, Feluda led us into the main office of Air-India.

The first person our eyes fell on was an old man, a Parsee cap on his head, sitting right next to the 'Enquiries' counter. On his left, resting against his chair, was a brand new blue Air India attaché case, exactly the kind we were looking for.

Feluda walked straight up to the counter and placed his own case beside the old man's. 'Is there an Air-India flight to Frankfurt from Delhi?' he asked the man behind the counter. In a matter of seconds, he got the necessary

information, said, ‘Thank you,’ picked up the old man’s case and pushed his own to the spot where it had been resting and coolly walked out. Lalmohan Babu and I followed, quite speechless. Then we returned to the hotel and Feluda began to work on the attaché case. By the time he finished, no one—not even Mr Dhameeja—could have said that it was not the one we had been given by Dinanath Lahiri. The same applied to its contents.

Feluda had been staring at his notebook. Now he shut it, rose and began pacing. ‘It was just like this,’ he muttered. ‘Those four men were in a coach exactly like this . . .’

I have always found it difficult to tell what would attract Feluda’s attention. Right now, he was staring at the glasses that stood inside metal rings attached to the wall. Why should these be of any interest to him?

‘Can you sleep in a moving train, or can’t you?’ he asked Lalmohan Babu, rather abruptly. ‘Well, I . . .’ Lalmohan Babu replied, trying to suppress a giant yawn, ‘I quite like being rocked.’

‘Yes. I know the rocking generally helps one sleep. But not everyone, mind you. I have an uncle who cannot sleep a wink in a train,’ said Feluda and jumped up on the empty berth. Then he switched on the reading lamp, opened the book that was in Dhameeja’s attaché case, and turned a few pages. We had bought a second copy at a book stall in the New Delhi railway station.

Laying the book aside, Feluda stretched on the upper berth and stared up at the ceiling. It was completely dark outside. Nothing could be seen except a few flickering lights in the distance.

I was about to ask Lalmohan Babu if he had remembered to bring his weapon and, if so, when would he show it to us, when he spoke unexpectedly.

‘We forgot one thing,’ he said, ‘betel-nuts. We must check with the fellow from the dining car if they have any. If not, we shall have to buy some at the next station. There’s just one left in this little box.’

Lalmohan Babu took out the Kodak container, the only original object left from Dhameeja’s attaché case, and tilted it on his palm. The betel-nut did not slip out.

‘How annoying!’ he exclaimed. ‘I can see it, but it won’t come out!’ He began to shake the container vigorously, showering strong words on the obstinate piece of betel-nut, but it refused to budge.

‘Give it to me!’ said Feluda and leapt down from the upper berth, snatching the container from Lalmohan Babu’s hand. Lalmohan Babu could only stare at him, completely taken aback.

Feluda slipped his little finger into the box and pushed at the small object, using a little force. It now came out like an obedient child. Feluda sniffed a couple of times and said, ‘Araldite. Someone used Araldite on this piece of betel-nut. I wonder why—? Topshe, shut the door.’ There were footsteps outside in the corridor. I did shut the door, but not before I had caught a glimpse of the man who went past our compartment. It was the same old man we had seen at the Jantar Mantar. He was still wearing the dark glasses and his ears were still plugged with cotton wool.

‘Sh-h-h-h,’ Feluda whistled.

He was gazing steadily at the little betel-nut that lay on his palm. I went forward for a closer look. It was clear that it was not a betel-nut at all. Some other object had been painted brown to camouflage it. ‘I should have guessed,’ said Feluda softly. ‘I should have known a long time ago. Oh, what a fool I have been, Topshe!’

Feluda now lifted one of the glasses from its ring, poured a little water from our flask and dipped the betel-nut in it. The water began to turn a light brown as he gently rubbed the object. Then he wiped it with a handkerchief and put it back on his palm.

The betel-nut had disappeared. In its place was a beautifully cut, brilliant stone. From the way it glittered even in our semi-dark compartment, I could tell it was a diamond. And it was pretty obvious that none of us had seen such a large one ever before. At least, Lalmohan Babu made no bones about it.

‘Is that . . .’ he gasped, ‘a d. . .di. . .di. . .?’

Feluda closed his fist around the stone, went over to the door to lock it, then came back and said, ‘We’ve already had warnings threatening our lives. Why are you talking of dying?’

‘No, no, not d-dying. I mean, is that a diam-m-m-?’

‘Very probably, or it wouldn’t be chased so persistently. But mind you, I am no expert.’ ‘Well then, is it val-val-val-?’

‘I’m afraid the value of diamonds is something I don’t know much about. I can only make a rough guess. This one, I think, is in the region of twenty carats. So its value would certainly exceed half a million rupees.’

Lalmohan Babu gulped in silence. Feluda was still turning the stone between his fingers. ‘How did Dhameeja get hold of something so precious?’ I asked under my breath.

‘I don’t know, dear boy. All I know about Dhameeja is that he said he had an orchard and that he likes reading thrillers on trains.’

Lalmohan Babu, in the meantime, had recovered somewhat. ‘Will this stone now go back to Dhameeja?’ he asked.

‘If we can be sure that it is indeed his, then certainly it will go back to him.’
‘Does that mean you suspect it might actually belong to someone else?’

‘Yes, but there are other questions that need to be answered. For instance, I don’t know if people outside Bengal are in the habit of chewing chopped betel-nuts.’

‘But if that is so—’ I began.

‘No. No more questions tonight, Topshe. This whole affair has taken another new turn. We have to take every step with extreme caution. I can’t waste any more time chatting.’

Feluda took out his wallet, put the sparkling stone away safely, pulled the zip and climbed on to his berth. I knew he didn’t want to be disturbed. Lalmohan Babu opened his mouth to speak, but I laid a finger against my lips to stop him. He glanced once at Feluda and then turned to me. ‘I think I’ll give up writing suspense thrillers,’ he confided.

‘Why?’

‘The few things that have happened in the last couple of days . . . they’re beyond one’s imagination, aren’t they? Haven’t you heard the saying, truth is stronger than fiction?’

‘Not stronger. I think the word is stranger.’ ‘Stranger?’

‘Yes, meaning more . . . amazing. More curious.’

‘Oh really? I thought a stranger was someone one hadn’t met before. Oh no, no, I see what you mean. Strange, stranger, strangest . . .’

I decided to cheer him up. ‘We found the diamond only because of you,’ I told him. ‘If you hadn’t finished all the real betel-nuts, that diamond would have remained hidden forever.’

Lalmohan Babu grinned from ear to ear.

‘You mean to say even I have made a little contribution to this great mystery? Heh, heh, heh, heh . ..’

Then he thought for a minute and added, ‘You know what I really think? I am sure your cousin knew about the diamond right from the start. Or how could we have survived two attempts to steal it from us?’

This made me think. The thief had not yet managed to lay his hands on the real stuff. Not even by breaking into our hotel room. That precious stone was still with us. This meant we were probably still being followed, and therefore, in constant danger.

And we wouldn’t be safe even in Simla . . .

Heaven knows when I fell asleep. I woke suddenly in the middle of the night. It was totally dark in the compartment, which meant even Feluda had switched off the reading lamp and gone to sleep.

Lalmohan Babu was sleeping on the lower berth opposite mine. I was about to switch on my own lamp to look at the time, when my eyes fell on the door. The curtain from our side was drawn partially over the frosted glass. But there was a gap, and on this gap fell the shadow of a man.

What was he doing there? It took me a few seconds to realize he was actually trying to turn the handle of the door. I knew the door was locked and would not yield to pressure from outside; but even so, I began to feel breathless with fear.

How long the man would have persisted, it is difficult to say. But, only a few seconds later, Lalmohan Babu shouted ‘Boomerang!’ in his sleep, and the shadow disappeared.

I realized that even in the cool night air, I had broken into a cold sweat.

Eight

I had seen snow-capped mountains before—Kanchenjunga in Darjeeling and the top of Annapurna from a plane; and certainly I had seen snow in films. But nothing had startled me as much as what I saw in Simla. If it wasn't for other Indians strolling on the streets, I could have sworn we were in a foreign country.

'This town was built by the British, like Darjeeling,' Feluda told me, 'so it does have the appearance of a foreign city. One Lt. Ross built a wooden cottage here in 1819 for himself. That was the beginning. Soon, the British turned this into their summer capital, since in the summer months life on the plains became pretty uncomfortable.'

We had taken a metre gauge train at Kalka to reach Simla. Nothing remarkable happened on the way, although I noticed that the old man with the earplugs travelled on the same train and checked in at the Clarkes just like us. Since the main season had not yet started, there were plenty of rooms available and Lalmohan Babu, too, found one at the Clarkes without any problem.

Feluda went looking for a post office soon after checking in. I offered to go with him, but he said someone should stay behind to guard the new attaché case; so Lalmohan Babu and I remained at the hotel. Feluda hadn't made a single remark on the snow or the beautiful town. Lalmohan Babu, on the other hand, appeared to be totally overwhelmed. Everything he saw struck him as 'fanastatic'. When I pointed out that the word was 'fantastic', he said airily that the speed with which he read English was so remarkable that not often did he find the time to look at the words carefully. Besides, there were a number of other questions he wanted answered—was it possible to find polar bears in Simla, did the Aurora Borealis appear here, did the Eskimos use the same snow to build their ilgoos (at which point I had to correct him again and say that it was igloos the Eskimos built, not ilgoos). The man was unstoppable.

The Clarkes Hotel stood on a slope. A veranda ran by the side of its second floor, which led to the street. The manager's room, the lounge, as well as our own rooms, were all on the second floor. Wooden stairs ran down to the first floor where there were more rooms and the dining-hall.

Feluda got delayed on his way back, so it was past 2 p.m. by the time we finished our lunch. A band was playing in one corner of the dining-hall. Lalmohan Babu called it a concert. The old man with the earplugs was also having lunch in the same room, as were three foreigners—two men and a

woman. I had seen a man with dark glasses and a pointed beard leave the room when we came in. It did not appear as though there was anyone else in the hotel apart from these people and ourselves.

‘We are going to see Mr Dhameeja today, aren’t we?’ I asked, slowly sipping the hot soup. ‘Yes, at four o’clock. We needn’t leave before three,’ Feluda replied.

‘Where exactly does he live?’

‘The Wildflower Hall is on the way to Kufri. Eight miles from here.’

‘Why should it take an hour to get there?’

‘Most of the way is snowed under. The car might skid if we try to do anything other than crawl.’ Then Feluda said to Lalmohan Babu, ‘Wear all your warm clothes. This place we’re going to is a thousand feet higher than Simla. The snow there is a lot worse.’

Lalmohan Babu put a spoonful of soup into his mouth, slurping noisily, and asked, ‘Is a sherpa going to accompany us?’

I nearly burst out laughing, but Feluda kept a straight face. ‘No,’ he said seriously, ‘there is actually a road that leads up there. We’ll be going in a car.’

We finished our soup and were waiting for the next course, when Feluda spoke again. ‘What happened to your weapon?’ he asked Lalmohan Babu.

‘I have it with me,’ Lalmohan Babu replied, chewing a bread stick, ‘haven’t had the chance to show it to you, have I?’

‘What is it?’

‘A boomerang.’

Ah, that made sense. I had been wondering why he had shouted ‘boomerang!’ in his sleep. ‘Where did you get a thing like that?’

‘An Australian was selling some of his stuff. He had put an advertisement in the paper. There were many other interesting things, but I couldn’t resist this one. I have heard that if you can throw it correctly, it would hit your target and return to you.’

‘No, that’s not quite true. It would come back to you only if it misses the target, not if it hits it.’ ‘Well yes, you may be right. But let me tell you one

thing. It's damn difficult to throw it. I tried from my terrace, and it went and broke a flower pot on the balcony of the house opposite. Thank goodness, those people knew me and were kind enough to return my weapon without making a fuss about their flower pot.'

'Please don't forget to take it with you today.' Lalmohan Babu's eyes began to shine with excitement. 'Are you expecting trouble?'

'Well, I can't guarantee anything, can I? After all, whoever has been trying to steal that diamond hasn't yet got it, has he?' Feluda spoke lightly, but I could see he was not totally easy in his mind.

At five to three, a blue Ambassador drove up and stopped before the main entrance. 'Here's our taxi,' said Feluda and stood up. Lalmohan Babu and I followed suit. The driver was a local man, young and well built. Feluda joined him on the front seat, clutching Mr Dhameeja's (fake) attaché case. Jatayu and I sat at the back. The boomerang was hidden inside Jatayu's voluminous overcoat. I had taken a good look at it. It was made of wood and looked a bit like the bottom half of a hockey stick, although it was a lot thinner and smoother.

The sky had started to turn grey and the temperature dropped appreciably. But the clouds were not very heavy, so it did not seem as though it might rain. We left for the Wildflower Hall on the dot of 3 p.m.

Our hotel was in the main town. We hadn't had the chance to go out of the hotel since our arrival. The true spirit of the cold, sombre, snow-covered mountains struck me only when our car left the town and began its journey along a quiet, narrow path.

The mountains rose on one side, on the other was a deep ravine. The road was wide enough to allow another car to squeeze past, but that was just about all it could do. A thick pine forest grew on the mountains.

The first four miles were covered at a reasonable speed since the snow on the road was almost negligible. Through the pine trees, I could catch glimpses of heavier snow on the mountains at a distance; but, soon, the snow on the road we were on grew very much thicker. Feluda was right.

We had to reduce our speed and crawl carefully, following the tyre marks of cars that had preceded us. The ground was so slippery that, at times, the car failed to move forward, its wheels spinning furiously.

The tip of my nose and my ears began to feel icy. Lalmohan Babu told me at one point that his ears were ringing. Five minutes later he said he had a blocked nose. I paid little attention. The last thing I was worried about was how my body would cope with the cold. All I could do was look around me and wonder at this remarkable place. Did man indeed live here? Wasn't this a corner nature had created only for animals and birds and insects that lived in snowy mountains? Shouldn't this stay unspoilt and untouched by the human hand? But no, the road we were travelling on had been built by man, other cars had driven on the same road and, no doubt, others would follow. In fact, if this wonderful place had not already been discovered by man, I would not be here today.

The unmarred strange whiteness ended abruptly about twenty minutes later, with a black wooden board by the side of the road that proclaimed in white letters: Wildflower Hall. I had not expected our journey to end so peacefully.

A little later we came upon a gate with The Nook written on it. Our car turned right and drove through this gate. A long driveway led to a large, old-fashioned bungalow, very obviously built during British times. Its roof and parapets were covered with a thick layer of snow. Its occupant had to be a pukka sahib, or he wouldn't live in a place like this.

Our taxi drew up under the portico. A man in a uniform came out and took Feluda's card. A minute later, the owner of the house came out himself with an outstretched arm.

'Good afternoon, Mr Mitter. I must say I am most impressed by your punctuality. Do come in, please.'

Mr Dhameeja might have been an Englishman. His diction was flawless. His appearance fitted Mr Lahiri's description. Feluda introduced me and Lalmohan Babu, and then we all went in. The floor was wooden, as were the walls of the huge drawing-room. A fire crackled in the fireplace.

Feluda handed over the blue attaché case before he sat down. The smile on Mr Dhameeja's face did not falter. Our attempt at deception was thus rewarded with complete success.

'Thank you so much. I've got Mr Lahiri's case and kept it handy.' 'Please check the contents in your case,' said Feluda with a slight smile.

‘If you say so,’ replied Mr Dhameeja, laughing, and opened the case. Then he ran his eyes over the items we had so carefully placed in it and said, ‘Yes, everything’s fine, except that these newspapers are not mine.’

‘Not yours?’ asked Feluda, retrieving the two English dailies. ‘No, and neither is this.’

Mr Dhameeja returned the box of betel-nuts, which had been filled at the Kalka railway station. ‘Oh, I see,’ said Feluda. ‘Those must have got there by mistake.’

Well, at least it proved that Mr Dhameeja knew nothing about the diamond. But, in that case, how did the box get inside the attaché case?

‘And here is Mr Lahiri’s case,’ said Mr Dhameeja, picking up an identical attaché case from a side table and handing it over to Feluda. ‘May I,’ he added, ‘make the same request? Please check its contents.’

‘There’s really only one thing Mr Lahiri is interested in. A bottle of enterovioform tablets.’ ‘Yes, it’s there.’

‘ . . . And, a manuscript?’ ‘Manuscript?’

Feluda had opened the case. A brief glance even from a distance told me that there was not even a scrap of paper in it, let alone a whole manuscript.

Feluda was frowning deeply, staring into the open attaché. ‘What manuscript are you talking about?’ asked Mr Dhameeja.

Feluda said nothing. I could see what a difficult position he was in; either Mr Dhameeja had to be accused of stealing, or we had to take our leave politely, without Shambhucharan’s tale of Tibet.

Mercifully, Mr Dhameeja continued to speak. ‘I am very sorry, Mr Mitter, but that attaché case now contains exactly what I found in it when I opened it in my room in the Grand Hotel. I searched it thoroughly in the hope of finding its owner’s address. But there was nothing, and certainly not a manuscript. On my return to Simla, I kept it locked in my own cupboard. Not for a second did anyone else touch it. I can guarantee that.’

After a speech like that, there was very little that Feluda could do. He rose to his feet and said with a slightly embarrassed air, ‘It must be my mistake, then. Please don’t mind, Mr Dhameeja. Thank you very much for your help. We should perhaps now be making a move.’

‘Why? Allow me at least to offer you a cup of tea. Or would you prefer coffee?’
‘No, no, nothing, thank you. It’s getting late. We really ought to go. Good-bye.’

We came out of the bungalow and got into our taxi. I was feeling even more confused. Where could the manuscript have disappeared? Naresh Pakrashi had told us that he didn’t see Mr Lahiri read on the train. Was that the truth?

Had Dinanath Lahiri simply told us a pack of lies?

Nine

It grew darker soon after we left. But it was only 4.25 p.m. Surely the sun wasn’t setting already? I looked at the sky, and found the reason. The light grey clouds had turned into heavy, black ones. Please God, don’t let it rain. The road was already slippery. Since we were now going to go downhill, the chances of skidding were greater. The only good thing was that traffic was virtually nonexistent, so there was no fear of crashing into another car.

Feluda was sitting next to the driver. I couldn’t see his face, but could tell that he was still frowning. And I also knew what he was thinking. Either Dinanath Babu or Mr Dhameeja had lied to us. Mr Dhameeja’s living-room had been full of books. Perhaps he knew the name of Shambhucharan. An account of a visit to Tibet fifty years ago—and that, too, written in English—might well have been a temptation. It was not totally impossible, was it? But if the manuscript was with Mr Dhameeja, how on earth would Feluda ever retrieve it?

Clearly, there were two mysteries now. One involved the diamond, and the other the missing manuscript. What if such a terrible tangle proved too much to unravel, even for Feluda?

The temperature had dropped further. I could see my breath condensing all the time. Lalmohan Babu undid the top button of his overcoat, slipped his hand in and said, ‘Even the boomerang feels stone cold. It comes from a warm country, doesn’t it? I hope it’ll work here in this climate.’ I opened my mouth to tell him there were places in Australia where it snowed, but had to shut it. Our car had come to a complete halt. And the reason was simple. A black Ambassador blocked our way. About a hundred yards away, diagonally across the road, stood this other car, making it impossible for us to proceed.

When the loud blowing of our horn did not help, it became obvious that something was wrong. The driver of the other car was nowhere in sight.

Feluda placed a hand on the steering wheel and quietly told the driver to move his car to one side, closer to the hill. The driver did this without a word. Then all four of us got out and stepped on to the slushy path.

Everything was very quiet. Not even the twitter of a bird broke the eerie silence. What was most puzzling was that there was neither a driver nor a passenger in the black car. Who would place a car across the road like that and then abandon it totally?

We were making our way very cautiously along the tyre marks on the snow, when a sudden splashing noise made Lalmohan Babu give a violent start, stumble and go sprawling on the snow. He landed flat on his face. I knew the noise had been caused by a chunk of thawing ice that had dislodged itself from a branch. In the total silence of the surroundings, it did sound as loud as a pistol shot. Feluda and I pulled Lalmohan Babu up to his feet and we resumed walking.

A few yards later, I realized I had been wrong. There was indeed a figure sitting in the car, in the driver's seat. 'I know this man,' said our driver, Harbilas, peering carefully, 'he is a taxi driver like me. And this taxi is his own. He's called Arvind. But . . . but . . . I think he's unconscious, or perhaps . . . dead?'

Feluda's right hand automatically made its way to his pocket. I knew he was clutching his revolver. Splash!

Another chunk of ice fell, a lot closer this time. Lalmohan Babu started again, but managed to stop himself from stumbling. In the next instant, however, a completely unexpected ear-splitting noise made him lose control and he went rolling on the snow once more. This time, it was a pistol shot.

The bullet hit the ground less than ten yards ahead of us, making the snow spray up in the air. Feluda had pulled me aside the moment the shot was fired, and we had both thrown ourselves on the ground. Lalmohan Babu came rolling half a second later. The driver, too, had jumped behind the car. Although young and strong, clearly he had never had to cope with such a situation before.

The sound of the shot echoed among the hills. Someone hiding in the pine forest had fired at us.

Presumably, he couldn't see us any more for we were shielded by the black Ambassador.

Lying prostrate on the ground, I tried to come to terms with this new development. Something cold and wet was tickling the back of my neck. I turned my head a few degrees and realized what it was. A fine white curtain of snow had been thrown down from the sky. Even in such a moment of danger, I couldn't help staring— fascinated—at the little flakes that fell like cotton fluff. For the first time in my life, I discovered falling snow made no noise at all. Lalmohan Babu looked as though he was about to make a remark, but one gesture from Feluda made him change his mind.

At this precise moment, the silence was shattered once more, but not by a pistol shot, or a chunk of ice, or the sound of wheels turning in the slippery snow. This time, we heard the voice of a man.

'Mr Mitter!'

Who was this? Why did the voice sound vaguely familiar? 'Listen carefully, Mr Mitter,' it went on. 'You must have realized by now that I have got you where I want you. So don't try any clever tricks. It's not going to work and, in fact, your lives may be in danger.'

It was some time before the final echo of the words died down. Then the man spoke again. 'I want only one thing from you, Mr Mitter.'

'What is it?' Feluda shouted back.

'Come out from where you're hiding. I would like to see you, although you couldn't see me even if you tried. I will answer your question when you come out.'

For a few minutes, I had been aware of a strange noise in my immediate vicinity. At first I thought it was coming from inside the car. Now I turned my head and realized it was simply the sound of Lalmohan Babu's chattering teeth.

Feluda rose to his feet and slowly walked over to the other side of the car, without uttering a word. Perhaps he knew under the circumstances, it was

best to do as he was told. Never before had I seen him grapple with such a difficult situation.

‘I hope,’ said the voice, ‘that your three companions realize that a single move from them would simply spell disaster.’

‘Kindly tell me what you want,’ said Feluda.

I could see him standing from behind one of the wheels. He was looking up at the mountain. In front of him lay a wide expanse of snow. The pine forest started at some distance.

‘Take out your revolver,’ commanded the voice. Feluda obeyed. ‘Throw it across on the slope.’ Feluda did.

‘Do you have the Kodak container?’ ‘Yes.’

‘Show it to me.’

Feluda took out the yellow container from his pocket and raised it. ‘Now show me the stone you found in it.’

Feluda slipped his hand into the pocket of his jacket. Then he brought it out and held it high once more, holding a small object between his thumb and forefinger.

No one spoke for a few seconds. No doubt the man was trying to take a good look at the diamond.

Did he have binoculars, I wondered.

‘All right,’ the voice came back. ‘Now put that stone back into its container and place it on that large grey boulder by the side of the road. Then you must return straight to Simla. If you think . . .’

Feluda cut him short.

‘You really want this stone, don’t you?’ he asked.

‘For God’s sake, do I have to spell it out?’ the voice retorted sharply. ‘Well then, here it is!’

Feluda swung his arm and threw the stone in the direction of the forest. This was followed by a breath-taking sequence of events.

Our invisible adversary threw himself out of his hiding place in an attempt to catch the diamond, but fell on a slab of half-frozen snow. In the next instant, he lost his foothold and was rolling down the hill like a giant snowball. He finally came to rest near the snow-covered nullah that ran alongside the road. By this time, the pistol and binoculars had dropped from his hands. A pair of dark glasses and a pointed beard lay not far from these.

There was no point in our hiding any more. The three of us leapt to our feet and ran forward to join Feluda. I had expected the other man to be at least unconscious, if not dead. He had slipped from a considerable height at enormous speed. But, to my surprise, I found him lying flat on his back, glaring malevolently at Feluda and breathing deeply.

It was easy enough now to understand why his voice had sounded familiar. The figure stretched out on the snow was none other than the unsuccessful film star, Amar Kumar, alias Prabeer Lahiri, Dinanath Babu's nephew.

Feluda spoke with ice in his voice. 'You do realize, don't you, that the tables have turned? So stop playing this game and let's hear what you have to say.'

Prabeer Lahiri did not reply. He continued to lie on his back, snow drifting down on his upturned face, gazing steadily at Feluda.

Nothing was as yet clear to me, but I hoped Prabeer Babu would throw some light on the mystery.

But still he said nothing.

'Very well,' said Feluda, 'if you will not open your mouth, allow me to do the talking. Pray tell me if I get anything wrong. You had got the diamond from that Nepali box, hadn't you? It was possibly the same jewel that the Rana of Nepal had given to Shambhucharan as a token of his gratitude. That box, in fact, must have been Shambhucharan's property; and he must have left it before his death with his friend, Satinath Lahiri. Satinath brought it back to India with him, but was unable to tell anyone about the diamond, presumably because by the time he returned, he was seriously ill. You found it only a few days ago purely by chance. Then you painted it brown and kept it together with chopped betel-nuts in that empty film container. When your uncle gave you the Air India attaché case, you thought it would be perfectly safe to hide your diamond in it. But what you didn't foresee was that only a day later, the case would make its way from your room to mine. You eavesdropped, didn't

you, when your uncle was talking to us that evening in your house? So you decided to steal it from me. When the telephone call from a fictitious Mr Puri and the efforts of your hired hooligans failed, you chased us to Delhi. But even that didn't work, did it? You took a very great risk by breaking into our room in the hotel, but the diamond still eluded your grasp. There was really only one thing you could do after that. You followed us to Simla and planned this magnificent fiasco.'

Feluda stopped. We were all standing round, staring at him, totally fascinated. 'Tell me, Mr Lahiri, is any of this untrue?'

The look in Prabeer Lahiri's eyes underwent a swift change. His eyes glittered and his lips spread in a cunning smile. 'What are you talking about, Mr Mitter?' he asked almost gleefully. 'What diamond? I know nothing about this!'

My heart missed a beat. The diamond was lost in the snow. Perhaps forever. How could Feluda prove—?

'Why, Mr Lahiri,' Feluda said softly, 'are you not acquainted with this little gem?'

We started again. Feluda had slipped his hand into a different pocket and brought out another stone.

Even in the fading light from the overcast sky, it winked merrily.

'That little stone that's buried in the snow was something I bought this morning at the Miller Gem Company in Simla. Do you know how much I spent on it? Five rupees. This one is the real . . .'

He couldn't finish. Prabeer Lahiri sprang up like a tiger and jumped on Feluda, snatching the diamond from his hand.

Clang!

This time, Feluda, too, gave a start. This unexpected noise was simply the result of Lalmohan Babu's boomerang hitting Prabeer Lahiri's head. He sank down on the snow again, unconscious. The diamond returned to Feluda.

'Thank you, Lalmohan Babu.'

But it was doubtful whether Lalmohan Babu heard the words for he was staring, dumbfounded, at the boomerang that had shot out in the air from his own right hand and found its mark so accurately.

Ten

The budding film star, Amar Kumar, was now a sorry sight. He had made a full confession in the car on the way back to Simla. This was made easier by the revolver in Feluda's hand, which he had recovered soon after the drama ended. It had not taken Prabeer Babu long to come round. Lalmohan Babu, having thrown the boomerang at him, had made an attempt at nursing him by scooping up a handful of snow and plastering his head with it. I cannot tell if it helped in any way, but he opened his eyes soon enough.

The driver called Arvind had also regained consciousness and was, reportedly, feeling better. He had, at first, been offered money to join Prabeer Lahiri. But when he refused to be tempted, Prabeer Babu lost his patience and simply knocked him out.

Things had started to go wrong for Prabeer Lahiri ever since he was dropped from the film. It had been a long-cherished dream that he would be a famous film star one day, living in luxury, chased by thousands of admirers. When his voice let him down and this dream was shattered, Prabeer Lahiri, in a manner of speaking, lost his head.

He had to get what he wanted. If it was not possible to fulfil his dream by fair means, he was prepared to adopt unfair ones. By a strange twist of fate, the Nepali box fell into his hands, like manna from heaven. In it he found a stone beautifully cut and sparkling bright. When he had it valued, it took his breath away; and his plans took a different shape. He would produce his own film, he decided, and take the lead role. No one—but no one—could have him dropped. What followed this decision was now history.

We handed him over to the Himachal Pradesh state police. It turned out that Feluda's suspicions had fallen on Prabeer Babu as soon as we had found the diamond. So he had called Dinanath Lahiri immediately on arrival in Simla, and asked him to join us. Mr Lahiri was expected to reach Simla the next day. It would then be up to him to decide what should be done with his nephew. The diamond would probably return to Dinanath Babu, since it had been found amongst his uncle's belongings.

‘That’s all very well,’ I said, after Feluda explained the whole story, ‘but what about Shambhucharan’s travelogue?’

‘That,’ said Feluda, ‘is mystery number two. You’ve heard of double-barrelled guns, haven’t you?

This one’s a double-barrelled mystery.’

‘But are we anywhere near finding its solution?’

‘Yes, my dear boy, yes. Thanks to the newspapers and that glass of water.’

Feluda’s words sounded no less mysterious, so I decided not to probe any further. He, too, said nothing more.

We returned to the hotel without any other excitement on the way. A few minutes later, we were seated on the open terrace of the hotel under a colourful canopy, sipping hot chocolate. Seven other tables stood on the terrace. Two Japanese men sat at the next one and, at some distance, sat the old man who had travelled with us from Delhi. He had removed the cotton wool from his ears.

The sky was now clear, but the evening light was fading rather quickly. The main city of Simla lay among the eastern hills. I could see its streets and houses being lit up one by one.

Lalmohan Babu had been very quiet, lost in his thoughts. Now he took a long sip of his chocolate and said, ‘Perhaps it is true that there is an underlying current of viciousness in the mind of every human being. Don’t you agree, Felu Babu? When one blow from my boomerang made that man spin and fall, I felt so . . . excited. Even pleased. It’s strange!’

‘Man descended from monkeys,’ Feluda remarked. ‘You knew that, didn’t you? Well, a modern theory now says that it was really a special breed in Africa that was man’s ancestor. It’s well known for its killer instinct. So, if you are feeling pleased about having hit Prabeer Lahiri, your ancestors are to blame.’

An interesting theory, no doubt. But I was in no mood to discuss monkeys. My mind kept going back to Shambhucharan. Where was his manuscript? Who had got it? Or could it be that no one did, and the whole thing was a lie? But why should anyone tell such a lie?

I had to speak.

‘Feluda,’ I blurted out, ‘who is the liar? Dhameeja or Dinanath Babu?’ ‘Neither.’

‘You mean the manuscript does exist?’

‘Yes, but whether we’ll ever get it back is extremely doubtful.’ Feluda sounded grave. ‘Do you happen to know,’ I asked tentatively, ‘who has got it?’

‘Yes, I do. It’s all quite clear to me now. But the man who has it is so remarkably clever that it would be very difficult indeed to prove anything against him. To tell you the truth, he almost managed to hoodwink me.’

‘Almost?’ The word pleased me for I would have hated to think Feluda had been totally fooled by anyone.

‘Mitter sahib!’

This came from a bearer who was standing near the door, glancing around uncertainly.

‘Here!’ Feluda shouted, waving. The bearer made his way to our table, clutching a brown parcel. ‘Someone left this for you in the manager’s room,’ he said. Feluda’s name was written on it in large bold letters: MR P. C. MITTER, CLARKES HOTEL.

Feluda’s expression had changed the minute the parcel was handed to him. Now he opened it swiftly and exclaimed, ‘What! Where did this come from?’

A familiar smell came from the parcel. Feluda held up its content. I stared at an ancient notebook, the kind that was impossible to find nowadays. The front page had these words written on it in a very neat hand:

A Bengalee in Lamaland Shambhucharan Bose June 1917:

‘Good heavens! It’s that famous manusprint!’ said Lalmohan Babu.

I did not bother to correct him. I could only look dumbly at Feluda, who was staring straight at something specific. I turned my gaze in the same direction. The two Japanese had gone. There was only one other person left on the terrace, apart from ourselves. It was the same old man we had seen so many times before. He was still wearing a cap and dark glasses. Feluda was looking straight at him.

The man rose to his feet and walked over to our table. Then he took off his glasses and his cap. Yes, he certainly seemed familiar. But there was something odd . . . something missing . . . what had I seen before . . . ?

‘Aren’t you going to wear your false teeth?’ Feluda asked. ‘Certainly.’

The man took out a set of false teeth from his pocket and slipped it into his mouth. Instantly, his hollowed cheeks filled out, his jaw became firm and he began to look ten years younger. And it was easy to recognize him.

This was none other than that supremely irritable man we had visited in Lansdowne Road, Mr Naresh Chandra Pakrashi.

‘When did you get the dentures made?’ asked Feluda.

‘I had ordered them a while ago. But they were delivered the day after I returned to Calcutta from Delhi.’

That explained why Dinanath Babu had thought him old. He had not worn his dentures on the train.

But he had started using them by the time we met him in his house.

‘I had guessed from the start that the attaché cases had been exchanged deliberately,’ Feluda told him. ‘I knew it was no accident. But what I did not know—and it took me a long time to figure that one out—was that you were responsible.’

‘That is natural enough,’ Mr Pakrashi replied calmly. ‘You must have realized that I am no fool.’ ‘No, most certainly you are not. But do you know where you went wrong? You shouldn’t have put those newspapers in Mr Dhameeja’s attaché case. I know why you did it, though. Dinanath Lahiri’s case was heavier than Dhameeja’s because it had this notebook in it. So you stuffed the newspapers in Dhameeja’s case, so that its weight became more or less the same as Dinanath’s. When Dinanath Babu picked it up, naturally he noticed nothing unusual. But people don’t normally bother to pack their cases with papers they’ve read on the train, do they?’

‘You’re right. But then, you are more intelligent than most. Not many would have picked that up.’

‘I have a question to ask,’ Feluda continued. ‘Everyone, with the sole exception of yourself, slept well that night, didn’t they?’

‘Hmmm . . . yes, you might say that.’

‘And yet, Dinanath Lahiri says he cannot sleep in a moving train. Did you drug him?’ ‘Right.’

‘By crushing a pill and pouring it into a glass of water?’

‘Yes. I always carry my sleeping pills with me. Everyone had been given a glass of water when dinner was served, and two of the passengers went to wash their hands. Only Dhameeja didn’t.’

‘Does that mean you couldn’t tamper with Mr Dhameeja’s drinking water?’

‘No, and as a result of that I couldn’t do a thing during the night. At six in the morning, Dhameeja got up to have a shave and then went to the bathroom. I did what I had to do before he came back Lahiri and the other one were still fast asleep.’

‘I see. You took one hell of a risk, didn’t you, with Dhameeja actually in the compartment, when you poured the pill into Dinanath’s water?’

‘I was lucky. He didn’t even glance at me.’

‘Yes, lucky you certainly were. But, later, you did something that gave you away. It was a clever move, no doubt, but what made you offer me money even after you had got hold of Shambhucharan’s manuscript?’

Mr Pakrashi burst out laughing, but said nothing.

‘That phone call in Calcutta and that piece of paper in Delhi . . . you were behind both, weren’t you?’

‘Yes, of course. I did not want you to go to Simla—at least, not at first. I knew a man like you would tear apart my perfect crime. So I rang your house and even slipped a written threat into your friend’s pocket when I found him sitting next to me in the plane. But then . . . slowly, I began to change my mind. By the time I reached Simla, I was convinced I should return the stolen property to you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if you went back without the manuscript, you yourself might have been under suspicion. I did not want that to happen. I have come to appreciate you and your methods in these few days, you see.’

‘Thank you, Mr Pakrashi. One more question.’ ‘Yes?’

‘You made a duplicate copy of the whole manuscript before returning it to me, didn’t you?’ All the colour from Mr Pakrashi’s face receded instantly. Feluda had played his trump card.

‘When we went to your house, you were typing something. It was the stuff in this notebook, wasn’t it? You were typing every word in it.’

‘But . . . you . . .’

‘There was a funny smell in your room, the same as the smell in Shambhucharan’s old Nepali box.

And now I can see that this notebook has it, too.’ ‘But the copy—’

‘Let me finish. Shambhucharan died in 1921. Fifty-one years ago. That means the fifty-year copyright period was over a year ago. So anyone can now have it printed, right?’

‘Of course!’ Mr Pakrashi shouted, displaying signs of agitation. ‘Are you trying to tell me I did wrong? Never! It’s an extraordinary tale, I tell you. Dinanath wouldn’t have known its value, nor would he have had it published. I am going to print it now, and no one can stop me.’

‘Oh, sure. No one can stop you, Mr Pakrashi, but what’s wrong with a bit of healthy competition?’ ‘Competition? What do you mean?’

Feluda’s famous lopsided smile peeped out. He stretched his right hand towards Mr Pakrashi.

‘Meet your rival, Naresh Babu,’ he said. ‘When Dinanath Lahiri arrives tomorrow, I shall not ask for my fees with regard to this mysterious case. All I do want from him is this old notebook. And I happen to know a few publishers who might be interested. Now do you begin to see what I mean?’

Naresh Pakrashi glared in silence.

Lalmohan Babu, however, suddenly found his voice, and uttered one word, without any apparent rhyme or reason.

‘Boomerang!’ he yelled.

2. Grammar Page

Unit **141**

Phrasal verbs 5 **on/off** (2)

A *verb* + **on** = continue doing something

go on = *continue*
- The party **went on** until 4 o'clock in the morning.

go on / **carry on** doing something = *continue doing it*
- We can't **go on** spending money like this. We'll have nothing left soon.
- I don't want to **carry on** working here. I'm going to look for another job.

go on with / **carry on with** something = *continue it*
- Don't let me disturb you. Please **carry on with** what you're doing.

keep on doing (*or* **keep** doing) something = *do it continuously or repeatedly*
- He **keeps on** criticising me. It's not fair! (*or* He **keeps** criticising me.)

drive on / **walk on** / **play on** = *continue driving/walking/playing etc.*
- Shall we stop at this petrol station or shall we **drive on** to the next one?

B **get on**

get on = *progress*
- How are you **getting on** in your new job? (= How is it going?)

get on (**with** somebody) = *have a good relationship*
- Joanne and Karen don't **get on**. They're always arguing.
- Richard **gets on** well **with** his neighbours. They're all very friendly.

get on with something = *continue something you have to do, usually after an interruption*
- I must **get on with** my work. I have a lot to do.

C *verb* + **off**

doze off / **drop off** / **nod off** = *fall asleep*
- I **dozed off** during the lecture. It was very boring.

finish something **off** = *do the last part of it*
- A: Have you finished painting the kitchen?
  B: Nearly. I'll **finish** it **off** tomorrow.

go off = *make an alarm sound*
- Did you hear the alarm **go off**?

put somebody **off** (doing) something *so that they don't want it or want to do it any more*
- We wanted to go to the exhibition, but we were **put off** by the long queue. (= we didn't go because of the long queue)
- What **put** you **off** applying for the job? Was the salary too low?

rip somebody **off** / be **ripped off** = *cheat somebody / be cheated*
- Did you really pay £2,000 for that painting? I think you were **ripped off**. (= you paid too much)

show off = *try to impress people with your ability, your knowledge etc.*
- Look at that boy on the bike riding with no hands. He's just **showing off**.

tell somebody **off** = *speak angrily to somebody because they did something wrong*
- Clare's mother **told** her **off** for wearing dirty shoes in the house.