



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F46

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1. Lawley Road

By R K Narayan

The Talkative Man said:

For years people were not aware of the existence of a Municipality in Malgudi. The town was none the worse for it. Diseases, if they started, ran their course and disappeared, for even diseases must end someday. Dust and rubbish were blown away by the wind out of sight; drains ebbed and flowed and generally looked after themselves. The Municipality kept itself in the background, and remained so till the country got its independence on the fifteenth of August 1947. History holds few records of such jubilation as was witnessed on that day from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. Our Municipal Council caught the inspiration. They swept the streets, cleaned the drains and hoisted flags all over the place. Their hearts warmed up when a procession with flags and music passed through their streets.

The Municipal Chairman looked down benignly from his balcony, muttering, 'We have done our bit for this great occasion.' I believe one or two members of the Council who were with him saw tears in his eyes. He was a man who had done well for himself as a supplier of blankets to the army during the war, later spending a great deal of his gains in securing the chairmanship. That's an epic by itself and does not concern us now. My present story is different. The satisfaction the Chairman now felt was, however, short-lived. In about a week, when the bunting was torn off, he became quite dispirited. I used to visit him almost every day, trying to make a living out of news-reports to an upcountry paper which paid me two rupees for every inch of published news. Every month I could measure out about ten inches of news in that paper, which was mostly a somewhat idealized account of municipal affairs. This made me a great favourite there. I walked in and out of the Municipal Chairman's office constantly. Now he looked so unhappy that I was forced to ask, 'What is wrong, Mr Chairman?'

'I feel we have not done enough,' he replied. 'Enough of what?' I asked.

'Nothing to mark off the great event.' He sat brooding and then announced, 'Come what may, I am going to do something great!' He called up an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, and harangued them, and at once they decided to nationalize the names of all the streets and parks, in honour of the birth of independence. They made a start with the park at the Market Square. It used to be called the Coronation Park—whose coronation God alone knew; it might have been the coronation of Victoria or of Asoka. No one bothered about it. Now the old board was uprooted and lay on the lawn, and a brand-new sign stood in its place declaring it henceforth to be Hamara Hindustan Park.

The other transformation, however, could not be so smoothly worked out. Mahatma Gandhi Road was the most sought-after name. Eight different ward councillors were after it. There were six others who wanted to call the roads in front of their houses Nehru Road or Netaji Subash Bose Road.

Tempers were rising and I feared they might come to blows. There came a point when, I believe, the Council just went mad. It decided to give the same name to four different streets. Well, sir, even in the most democratic or patriotic town it is not feasible to have two roads bearing the same name. The result was seen within a fortnight. The town became unrecognizable with new names. Gone were the Market Road, North Road, Chitra Road, Vinayak Mudali Street and so on. In their place appeared the names, repeated in four different places, of all the ministers, deputy ministers and the members of the Congress Working Committee. Of course, it created a lot of hardship—letters went where they were not wanted, people were not able to say where they lived or direct others there. The town became a wilderness with all its landmarks gone.

The Chairman was gratified with his inspired work—but not for long. He became restless again and looked for fresh fields of action.

At the corner of Lawley Extension and Market there used to be a statue. People had got so used to it that they never bothered to ask whose it was or even to look up. It was generally used by the birds as a perch. The Chairman suddenly remembered that it was the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley. The Extension had been named after him. Now it was changed to Gandhi Nagar, and it seemed impossible to keep Lawley's statue there any longer. The Council unanimously resolved to remove it. The Council with the Chairman sallied forth triumphantly next morning and circumambulated the statue. They now realized their mistake. The statue towered twenty feet above them and seemed to arise from a pedestal of molten lead. In their imagination they had thought that a vigorous resolution would be enough to topple down the statue of this satrap, but now they found that it stood with the firmness of a mountain. They realized that Britain, when she was here, had attempted to raise herself on no mean foundation. But it made them only firmer in their resolve. If it was going to mean blasting up that part of the town for the purpose, they would do it. For they unearthed a lot of history about Sir Frederick Lawley. He was a combination of Attila, the Scourge of Europe, and Nadir Shah, with the craftiness of a Machiavelli. He subjugated Indians with the sword and razed to the ground the villages from which he heard the slightest murmur of protest. He never countenanced Indians except when they approached him on their knees.

People dropped their normal occupations and loitered around the statue, wondering how they could have tolerated it for so many years. The gentleman seemed to smile derisively at the nation now, with his arms locked behind and his sword dangling from his belt. There could be no doubt that he must have been the worst tyrant imaginable: the true picture—with breeches and wig and white waistcoat and that hard, determined look—of all that has been hatefully familiar in the British period of Indian history. They shuddered when they thought of the fate of their ancestors who had to bear the tyrannies of this man.

Next the Municipality called for tenders. A dozen contractors sent in their estimates, the lowest standing at fifty thousand rupees, for removing the statue and carting it to the Municipal Office, where they were already worried about the housing of it. The Chairman thought it over and told me, 'Why don't you take it yourself? I will give you the statue free if you do not charge us anything for removing it.' I had thought till then that only my municipal friends were mad, but now I found I could be just as mad as they. I began to calculate the whole affair as a pure investment. Suppose it cost me five thousand rupees to dislodge and move the statue (I knew the contractors were overestimating), and I sold it as metal for six thousand . . . About three tons of metal might fetch anything. Or I could probably sell it to the British Museum or Westminster Abbey. I saw myself throwing up the upcountry paper job.

The Council had no difficulty in passing a resolution permitting me to take the statue away. I made elaborate arrangements for the task . . . I borrowed money from my father-in-law, promising him a fantastic rate of interest. I recruited a team of fifty coolies to hack the pedestal. I stood over them like a slave-driver and kept shouting instructions. They put down their implements at six in the evening and returned to their attack early next day. They were specially recruited from Koppal, where the men's limbs were hardened by generations of teak-cutting in Mempi Forest.

We hacked for ten days. No doubt we succeeded in chipping the pedestal here and there, but that was all; the statue showed no sign of moving. At this rate I feared I might become bankrupt in a fortnight. I received permission from the District Magistrate to acquire a few sticks of dynamite, cordoned off the area and lighted the fuse. I brought down the knight from his pedestal without injuring any limb. Then it took me three days to reach the house with my booty. It was stretched out on a specially designed carriage drawn by several bullocks. The confusion brought about by my passage along Market Road, the crowd that followed uttering jokes, the incessant shouting and instructions I had to be giving, the blinding heat of the day, Sir F.'s carriage coming to a halt at every inconvenient spot and angle, moving neither forwards nor backwards, holding up the traffic on all sides, and darkness coming on suddenly with the statue nowhere near my home—all this was a nightmare I wish to pass over. I mounted guard over him on the roadside at night. As he lay on his back staring at the stars, I felt sorry for him and said, 'Well, this is what you get for being such a haughty imperialist. It never pays.' In due course, he was safely lodged in my small house. His head and shoulders were in my front hall, and the rest of him stretched out into the street through the doorway. It was an obliging community there at Kabir Lane and nobody minded this obstruction.

The Municipal Council passed a resolution thanking me for my services. I wired this news to my paper, tacking onto it a ten-inch story about the statue. A week later the Chairman came to my house in a state of agitation. I seated him on the chest of the tyrant. He said, 'I have bad news for you. I wish you had not sent up that news item about the statue. See these . . .' He held out a sheaf of telegrams. They were from every kind of historical society in India, all protesting against the removal of

the statue. We had all been misled about Sir F. All the present history pertained to a different Lawley of the time of Warren Hastings. This Frederick Lawley (of the statue) was a military governor who had settled down here after the Mutiny. He cleared the jungles and almost built the town of Malgudi. He established here the first cooperative society for the whole of India, and the first canal system by which thousands of acres of land were irrigated from the Sarayu, which had been dissipating itself till then. He established this, he established that, and he died in the great Sarayu floods while attempting to save the lives of villagers living on its banks. He was the first Englishman to advise the British Parliament to involve more and more Indians in all Indian affairs. In one of his despatches he was said to have declared, 'Britain must quit India someday for her own good.'

The Chairman said, 'The government have ordered us to reinstate the statue.' 'Impossible!' I cried. 'This is my statue and I will keep it. I like to collect statues of national heroes.' This heroic sentiment impressed no one. Within a week all the newspapers in the country were full of Sir Frederick Lawley. The public caught the enthusiasm. They paraded in front of my house, shouting slogans. They demanded the statue back. I offered to abandon it if the Municipality at least paid my expenses in bringing it here. The public viewed me as their enemy. 'This man is trying to black-market even a statue,' they remarked. Stung by it, I wrote a placard and hung it on my door: STATUE FOR SALE. TWO AND A HALF TONS OF EXCELLENT METAL. IDEAL GIFT FOR A PATRIOTIC FRIEND. OFFERS ABOVE TEN THOUSAND WILL BE CONSIDERED.

It infuriated them and made them want to kick me, but they had been brought up in a tradition of non-violence and so they picketed my house; they lay across my door in relays holding a flag and shouting slogans. I had sent away my wife and children to the village in order to make room for the statue in my house, and so this picketing did not bother me—only I had to use the back door a great deal. The Municipality sent me a notice of prosecution under the Ancient Monuments Act which I repudiated in suitable terms. We were getting into bewildering legalities—a battle of wits between me and the municipal lawyer. The only nuisance about it was that an abnormal quantity of correspondence developed and choked up an already congested household.

I clung to my statue, secretly despairing how the matter was ever going to end. I longed to be able to stretch myself fully in my own house.

Six months later relief came. The government demanded a report from the Municipality on the question of the statue, and this together with other lapses on the part of the Municipality made them want to know why the existing Council should not be dissolved and re-elections ordered. I called on the Chairman and said, 'You will have to do something grand now. Why not acquire my house as a National Trust?'

'Why should I?' he asked.

'Because,' I said, 'Sir F. is there. You will never be able to cart him to his old place. It'll be a waste of public money. Why not put him up where he is now? He has stayed in the other place too long. I'm prepared to give you my house for a reasonable price.'

'But our funds don't permit it,' he wailed.

'I'm sure you have enough funds of your own. Why should you depend on the municipal funds? It'll indeed be a grand gesture on your part, unique in India . . .' I suggested he ought to relieve himself of some of his old blanket gains. 'After all . . . how much more you will have to spend if you have to fight another election!' It appealed to him. We arrived at a figure. He was very happy when he saw in the papers a few days later: 'The Chairman of Malgudi Municipality has been able to buy back as a present for the nation the statue of Sir Frederick Lawley. He proposed to install it in a newly acquired property which is shortly to be converted into a park. The Municipal Council have resolved that Kabir Lane shall be changed to Lawley Road.'

2. Grammar Page



GRAMMAR STUDY: Types and Uses

Generally conditional clauses contain if, unless and provided that. Here are the general structures of conditional sentences:

Types	Uses	Structures and examples
Zero	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It expresses cause and effect. ➤ The time is now or always. ➤ The situation is real and possible. ➤ It is used to make statements about the real world, and often refers to general truths, such as scientific facts. 	<p><i>simple present, simple present</i></p> <p>If you heat water, it boils. Plants die if you don't water them. Ice floats if you drop it in water. Wood doesn't burn if there is no air. If it rains, the grass gets wet. Iron rusts if it gets wet. If it's a day off, I sleep late.</p>
First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It shows a simple possible condition. ➤ The possibility expressed in the main clause is a real one. ➤ It refers to something happening in the present or future. 	<p><i>simple present, will//shall/can/may + v¹</i></p> <p>If he meets me, I will help him. He will dance if we request him. You'll be sick unless you stop eating spicy food. I'll be there at nine, unless the bus is late. Provided that he finishes his studies, he will find an excellent job.</p>
		<p><i>simple present, imperatives</i></p> <p>If you want to pass the test, work hard. If you need any help, meet me tomorrow. If you wake up before me, give me a call. Press the button if you want a receipt. If you want to leave a message, speak after the tone.</p>
Second	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It shows a doubtful condition. ➤ The possibility expressed in the main clause is unreal or doubtful. ➤ It also expresses hypothetical conditions. 	<p><i>simple past, would//could/might + v¹</i></p> <p>If he met me, I would help him. If they invited me, I could come. He would dance if we requested him. If I were a bird, I would fly high in the sky. Unless he was very ill, he would be at work. If I were you, I would not do that. If she studied for exams, she would get better grades.</p>
Third	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It shows unfulfilled conditions. ➤ The condition was possible only in the past and there is no possibility of it being fulfilled now. ➤ It expresses regrets or repentance. 	<p><i>past perfect, would//could/might + have+ v³</i></p> <p>If he had met me, I would have helped him. If they had invited me, I could have come. He would have danced if we had requested him. I wouldn't have phoned him unless you'd suggested it. If we had caught the first bus, we'd have arrived on time. If she'd taken the medicine, she'd have felt much better sooner. If she had studied for exams, she would have got better grades.</p>