



**Learn English Through Stories**

**G Series**

**G50**

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# 1. A Willing Slave

By R K Narayan

No one in the house knew her name; no one for a moment thought that she was any other than Ayah. None of the children ever knew when she had first come into the family, the eldest being just six months old when she entered service; now he was seventeen and studied in a college. There were five children after him, and the last was four years old.

The Ayah repeatedly renewed her infancy with each one of them, kept pace with them till they left her behind and marched forward. And then she slipped back to the youngest and grew up with him or her. It might be said that the limit to which she could go in years was six; if she stepped beyond that boundary she proved herself a blundering nuisance. For instance, how hard it was for her to conduct herself in the servant world, which consisted of the cook, two men servants, a maid servant, a gardener and his unpaid assistant. Their jokes fell flat on her, their discussions did not interest her and she reported to her mistress everything that she heard. The gardener very nearly lost his job once for his opinion of his master, which was duly conveyed by the Ayah. She was fairly unpopular in the servants' quarters. She constituted herself a time-keeper, and those who came late for work could not escape her notice. The moment a latecomer was sighted, the old woman would let out such a scream demanding an explanation that the mistress of the house would come out and levy a fine.

This was an entirely self-imposed task, just as she also kept an eye on the home-tutor who came in the mornings and taught children arithmetic and English. The Ayah hovered about all the time the teacher was present, for she had a suspicion that he would torture the children. She viewed all teachers as her enemies and all schools as prison houses. She thought it was a cruel perversity that made people send children to school. She remembered how her two children (now grandfathers) used to come home and demand three pies for buying some herb, a paste of which was indispensable for preparing their skins for the next day's pinching and caning. They said that the school inspector himself had ordered the purchase of the herb. It was a part of their education.

She had asked once or twice, 'Why do you stand there and allow yourselves to be beaten?'

'We have got to do it,' the boys answered. 'It is a part of our studies. It seems that our teachers won't get their wages unless they cane us a certain number of times every day.'

The old woman had no occasion to know more about teachers. And so she kept a watch over the home-tutor. If he so much as raised his voice, she checked him with, 'Don't you try any of your tricks on these angels. These are no ordinary children. If you do anything, my master will lock you up in jail. Be careful.' Her other self-imposed tasks were to see that the baker's boy didn't cycle on the lawn, that the newspaper man didn't drop the paper into the nursery and that the servant didn't doze off in the afternoon; she also attended on guests, took charge of their clothes and acted as an intermediary between them and washing boy; and above all, when everyone in the house was out, she shut and bolted all the doors, sat down on the front porch and acted as the watchman. These were all her secondary duties. Her main job, for which she received two meals a day, fifteen rupees a month and three saris a year, kept her active for over twelve hours in the day.

At six in the morning, Radha, the last child of the house, shouted from her bed upstairs, 'Ayah!' And the Ayah would run up the stairs as fast as her size permitted, because Radha would not give more than a quarter of an hour's interval between shouts. And now when the Ayah stood near the cot and parted the mosquito net, Radha would ask, 'Where were you, Ayah?'

'Here all the time, my darling.'

'Were you here all night?'

'Of course I was.'

'Were you sleeping or sitting up?'

'Oh, would I lie down when my Radha was sleeping? I was sitting up with a knife in my hand. If any bad men had tried to come near you, I would have chopped off their heads.'

'Where is the knife?'

'I just went down and put it away.'

'Won't you let me have a look at the knife, Ayah?'

'Oh, no. Children must never see it. When you grow up into a big girl, when you are tall enough to touch the lock of that *almirah*, I will show you the knife. Would you like to be very tall?'

'Yes, I can then open the *almirah* and take the biscuits myself, isn't it so, Ayah?'

'Yes, yes. But you will never be tall if you stay in bed in the mornings. You must get up, wash and drink milk, and you will see how very fast you grow. Three days ago you were so high because you got up without giving me any

trouble.'

After drinking her glass of milk Radha would run into the garden and suggest that they play trains. The Ayah now had to take out a tricycle and a doll.

Radha sat on the tricycle clasping the doll to her bosom, and the Ayah bent nearly double and pushed the tricycle. The tricycle was the train, the flower pots were stations and the circular fern-house was Bangalore. Ayah was the engine-driver, the doll was Radha and Radha was her mother sometimes and sometimes the man who commanded the train to stop or go. Now and then the Ayah stopped to take out her pouch and put a piece of tobacco into her mouth. 'Why has the train stopped?' demanded Radha.

'The screw is loose, I am fixing it up.'

'You are chewing?'

'Yes, but it is not tobacco. It is a medicine for headache. I bought it from the medicine-seller at this station.'

'Is there a medicine-seller here?'

'Yes, yes,' said the Ayah and pointed at the jasmine bush.

Radha looked at the bush and said, 'Oh, Seller, give some good medicine for my poor Ayah. She has such a bad headache, Doctor.'

At Bangalore the train stopped for a long time. There the Ayah was asked to lie down and sleep on a patch of sand and Radha went round the town with the child . . . The game went on till Radha's mother called her in for a bath, and after that the Ayah was free for an hour or more.

At midday she squatted amidst toys in the nursery, her immense figure contrasting grotesquely with the tiny elephants and horses, cooking vessels and dolls around her. She and Radha sat a yard apart, but each was in her own house. They cooked, performed *pūja* and called on each other. It was easy for Radha to spring up and pay Ayah a visit, but it would be an extreme torture for the Ayah to return the call in the same manner, and so if the Ayah stooped forward it was accepted as a visit. After playing this game for an hour the Ayah felt drowsy and said, 'Radha, night has come. Let us go to bed so that we may get up early in the morning.'

'Is it already night?'

'It is. I lit the lamp hours ago,' replied the Ayah, indicating some knick-knack which stood for the lamp.

'Good night, Ayah . . . You must also lie down.' The Ayah cleared a space for herself and lay down.

‘Are you asleep, Ayah?’

‘Yes, just “play” sleep, not real . . .’ the Ayah said every five minutes, and very soon Radha fell asleep.

The Ayah’s duties commenced again at four o’clock. Radha kept her running continuously till eight, when she had to be carried off to her bed. In bed she had to have her stories. The Ayah squatted below the cot and narrated the story of the black monkey which rolled in a sack of chalk powder, became white and married a princess; at the wedding somebody sprinkled water on him and he came out in his true colour; he was chased out; presently a *dhobi* took pity on him and washed, bleached and ironed him, in which state he regained the affection of the princess. When the story was over, Radha said, ‘I don’t like to sleep. Let us play something.’

Ayah asked, ‘Do you want the Old Fellow in?’ The mention of the Old Fellow worked wonders, and child after child was kept in terror of him. He was supposed to be locked up in a disused dog kennel in the compound. He was always shouting for the Ayah. He was ever ready to break the door open and carry her away. The Ayah always referred to him in scathing language: ‘I have beaten that scoundrel into pulp. Very bad fellow, disgusting monkey. He won’t leave me in peace even for a moment. If you don’t sleep, how can I find the time to go and kick him back into his house?’

Once in three months the Ayah oiled and combed her hair, put on a bright sari, bade everyone in the house an elaborate goodbye and started for Saidapet. There she had her home. The only evidence others had of her far-off home was the presence of a couple of rowdy-looking men in the back yard of the bungalow at the beginning of every month. The Ayah spoke of them as ‘those Saidapet robbers’.

‘Why do you encourage them?’ asked her mistress sometimes.

‘What can I do? It is the price I pay for having borne them for nine months.’ And she received her month’s pay and divided most of it between them.

So old, clumsy and so very unwieldy, it was often a wonder to others how she was going to get in and out of buses, reach Saidapet and return. But she would be back by the evening, bringing a secret gift of peppermints for Radha, secret because she had often been warned not to give unclean sweets to the children.

Once she went to Saidapet and did not return in the evening. Radha stood on the porch gazing at the gate. Even the next day there was no sign of her. Radha wept. Her mother and others were furious. ‘She has perhaps been run over and killed,’ they said. ‘Such a blundering, blind fool. I am surprised it

didn't happen before. She must have taken it into her head to give herself a holiday suddenly. I will dismiss her for this. No one is indispensable. These old servants take too much for granted, they must be taught a lesson.'

Three days later the Ayah stood before the lady of the house and saluted her. The lady was half-glad to see her and half-angry. 'You will never get leave again or you may go away once and for all. Why didn't you return in time? . . .'

The Ayah laughed uncontrollably; even her dark face was flushed, and her eyes were bright.

'Why do you laugh, you idiot? What is the matter?'

The Ayah covered her face with her sari and mumbled, 'He has come . . .'

 And she giggled.

'Who?'

'The Old Fellow . . .'

 At the mention of the Old Fellow, Radha, who had all the time been tightly hugging the Ayah, freed herself, ran into the kitchen and shut the door.

'Who is the Old Fellow?' asked the lady.

'I can't tell his name,' the Ayah said shyly.

'Your husband?'

'Yes,' said Ayah and writhed awkwardly. 'He wants me to cook for him and look after him . . . The man was there when I went home. He sat as if he had never gone out of the house. He gave me a fright, madam. He is out there in the garden. Please, won't you look at him?'

The lady went out and saw a wizened old man standing in the drive.

'Salute our lady, don't stand there and blink,' the Ayah said. The old man raised his arm stiffly and salaamed. He said, 'I want Thaiyi.' It seemed odd to hear the Ayah being called by her name. 'I want Thaiyi. She is to cook for me. She must go with me,' he said sullenly.

'You want to go, Ayah?'

The Ayah averted her face and shook with laughter. 'He went away years ago. He was in Ceylon tea gardens. How could anyone know he was coming? The government sent him back. Who will take care of him now?'

Half an hour later she walked out of the house, led by a husband proud of his slave. She took leave, in a most touching and ceremonious manner, of everyone except Radha, who refused to come out of the kitchen. When the Ayah stood outside the kitchen door and begged her to come out, Radha

asked, 'Is the Old Fellow carrying you off?'

'Yes, dear, bad fellow.'

'Who left the door of the dog house open?'

'No one. He broke it open.'

'What does he want?'

'He wants to carry me off,' said the Ayah.

'I won't come out till he is gone. All right. Go, go before he comes here for you.'

The Ayah acted on this advice after waiting at the kitchen door for nearly half an hour.



## 2. Employing Older People

Some people claim that due to the rapid changes occurring in modern work places, it is better to employ younger than older people. I do not believe that this is the case.

One argument in support of younger employees is that older employees could be more set in their ways and potentially against any change. To an extent this may be true, but there are many flexible and intelligent workers over 50, while there are inflexible and narrow-minded younger ones. Attitude towards change is a result not of age but of personality traits.

That said, physical changes occurring with age could mean certain jobs are more suited to a younger person. For instance, psychologists seem to be in agreement that memory declines with age for people not remaining mentally active. In high-tech industries such as computer programming, where it is so important to be able to work with so much information, numbers and calculations, being younger may be an advantage.

However, older workers have a wide range of other positive attributes that they can bring to their working environment. Generally, they have more work experience than those who are younger. In addition, as can be seen with the trend of many department stores in the UK to take on older people, they are seen to be more reliable and respectful. These are important in any kind of working environment.

In conclusion, therefore, there is not the evidence to support employing young people as opposed to those over 50. It would seem that a mix of the best qualities of old and young is preferential in order to ensure the most productive environment evolves.

### 3. Grammar Page

Unit  
50

#### Questions 2 (do you know where ... ? / he asked me where ...)

**A** Do you **know where ... ?** / **I don't know why ...** / **Could you tell me what ... ?** etc.

We say: Where **has Tom** gone?

but **Do you know** where **Tom has** gone? (*not has Tom gone*)

When the question (**Where has Tom gone?**) is part of a longer sentence (**Do you know ... ?** / **I don't know ...** / **Can you tell me ... ?** etc.), the word order changes. We say:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> What time <b>is it</b> ?        | but <b>Do you know</b> what time <b>it is</b> ?           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Who <b>are those people</b> ?   | <b>I don't know</b> who <b>those people are</b> .         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Where <b>can I</b> find Louise? | <b>Can you tell me</b> where <b>I can</b> find Louise?    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> How much <b>will it</b> cost?   | <b>Do you have any idea</b> how much <b>it will</b> cost? |

Be careful with **do/does/did** questions. We say:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> What time <b>does the film start</b> ? | but <b>Do you know</b> what time <b>the film starts</b> ? |
|   | ( <i>not does the film start</i> )                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> What <b>do you mean</b> ?              | <b>Please explain</b> what <b>you mean</b> .              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Why <b>did she leave</b> early?        | <b>I wonder</b> why <b>she left</b> early.                |

Use **if** or **whether** where there is no other question word (**what, why** etc.):

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Did anybody see you? | but I don't know <b>if</b> anybody saw me. |
|   | or ... <b>whether</b> anybody saw me.      |

**B** He asked me where ...

The same changes in word order happen in questions in reported speech. Compare:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>direct</i> | The police officer said to us 'Where <b>are you going</b> ?' |
| <i>reported</i>                        | The police officer asked us where <b>we were going</b> .     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>direct</i> | Clare asked 'What time <b>do the shops close</b> ?'          |
| <i>reported</i>                        | Clare wanted to know what time <b>the shops closed</b> .     |

In reported speech the verb usually changes to the past (**were, closed** etc.). See Unit 47.

Study these examples. You had a job interview and the interviewer asked you these questions:



Are you willing to travel?

What do you do in your spare time?

How long have you been working in your present job?

Why did you apply for the job?

Can you speak any other languages?

Do you have a driving licence?

Later you tell a friend what the interviewer asked you. You use *reported* speech:

- ☐ She asked if (or whether) **I was** willing to travel.
- ☐ She wanted to know what **I did** in my spare time.
- ☐ She asked how long **I had been working** in my present job.
- ☐ She asked why **I had applied** for the job. or ... why **I applied** ...
- ☐ She wanted to know if (or whether) **I could** speak any other languages.
- ☐ She asked if (or whether) **I had** a driving licence.