



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F62

**Adapted and modified by
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1. Naga

By R K Narayan

The boy took off the lid of the circular wicker basket and stood looking at the cobra coiled inside, and then said, 'Naga, I hope you are dead, so that I may sell your skin to the purse-makers; at least that way you may become useful.' He poked it with a finger. Naga raised its head and looked about with a dull wonder. 'You have become too lazy even to open your hood. You are no cobra. You are an earthworm. I am a snake charmer attempting to show you off and make a living. No wonder so often I have to stand at the bus stop pretending to be blind and beg. The trouble is, no one wants to see you, no one has any respect for you and no one is afraid of you, and do you know what that means? I starve, that is all.'

Whenever the boy appeared at the street door, householders shooed him away. He had seen his father operate under similar conditions. His father would climb the steps of the house unmindful of the discouragement, settle down with his basket and go through his act heedless of what anyone said. He would pull out his gourd pipe from the bag and play the snake tune over and over, until its shrill, ear-piercing note induced a torpor and made people listen to his preamble: 'In my dream, God Shiva appeared and said, "Go forth and thrust your hand into that crevice in the floor of my sanctum." As you all know, Shiva is the Lord of Cobras, which he ties his braid with, and its hood canopies his head; the great God Vishnu rests in the coils of Adi Shesha, the mightiest serpent, who also bears on his thousand heads this Universe. Think of the armlets on Goddess Parvathi! Again, elegant little snakes. How can we think that we are wiser than our gods? Snake is a part of a god's ornament, and not an ordinary creature. I obeyed Shiva's command—at midnight walked out and put my arm into the snake hole.'

At this point his audience would shudder and someone would ask, 'Were you bitten?'

'Of course I was bitten, but still you see me here, because the same god commanded, "Find that weed growing on the old fort wall." No, I am not going to mention its name, even if I am offered a handful of sovereigns.'

'What did you do with the weed?'

'I chewed it; thereafter no venom could enter my system. And the terrible fellow inside this basket plunged his fangs into my arm like a baby biting his mother's nipple, but I laughed and pulled him out, and knocked off with a piece of stone the fangs that made him so arrogant; and then he understood

that I was only a friend and well-wisher, and no trouble after that. After all, what is a serpent? A great soul in a state of penance waiting to go back to its heavenly world. That is all, sirs.'

After this speech, his father would flick open the basket lid and play the pipe again, whereupon the snake would dart up like spring-work, look about and sway a little; people would be terrified and repelled, but still enthralled. At the end of the performance, they gave him coins and rice, and sometimes an old shirt, too, and occasionally he wangled an egg if he observed a hen around; seizing Naga by the throat, he let the egg slide down its gullet, to the delight of the onlookers. He then packed up and repeated the performance at the next street or at the bazaar, and when he had collected sufficient food and cash he returned to his hut beside the park wall, in the shade of a big tamarind tree. He cooked the rice and fed his son, and they slept outside the hut, under the stars.

The boy had followed his father ever since he could walk, and when he attained the age of ten his father let him handle Naga and harangue his audience in his own style. His father often said, 'We must not fail to give Naga two eggs a week. When he grows old, he will grow shorter each day; someday he will grow wings and fly off, and do you know that at that time he will spit out the poison in his fangs in the form of a brilliant jewel, and if you possessed it you could become a king?'

One day when the boy had stayed beside the hut out of laziness, he noticed a tiny monkey gambolling amidst the branches of the tamarind tree and watched it with open-mouthed wonder, not even noticing his father arrive home.

'Boy, what are you looking at? Here, eat this,' said the father, handing him a packet of sweets. 'They gave it to me at that big house, where some festival is going on. Naga danced to the pipe wonderfully today. He now understands all our speech. At the end of his dance, he stood six feet high on the tip of his tail, spread out his hood, hissed and sent a whole crowd scampering. Those people enjoyed it, though, and gave me money and sweets.' His father looked happy as he opened the lid of the basket. The cobra raised its head. His father held it up by the neck, and forced a bit of a sweet between its jaws, and watched it work its way down. 'He is now one of our family and should learn to eat what we eat,' he said. After struggling through the sweet, Naga coiled itself down, and the man clapped the lid back.

The boy munched the sweet with his eyes still fixed on the monkey. 'Father, I wish I were a monkey. I'd never come down from the tree. See how he is nibbling all that tamarind fruit . . . Hey, monkey, get me a fruit!' he cried.

The man was amused, and said, 'This is no way to befriend him. You should give him something to eat, not ask him to feed you.'

At which the boy spat out his sweet, wiped it clean with his shirt, held it up and cried, 'Come on, monkey! Here!'

His father said, 'If you call him "monkey", he will never like you. You must give him a nice name.'

'What shall we call him?'

'Rama, name of the master of Hanuman, the Divine Monkey. Monkeys adore that name.'

The boy at once called, 'Rama, here, take this.' He flourished his arms, holding up the sweet, and the monkey did pause in its endless antics and notice him. The boy hugged the tree trunk, and heaved himself up, and carefully placed the sweet on the flat surface of a forking branch, and the monkey watched with round-eyed wonder. The boy slid back to the ground and eagerly waited for the monkey to come down and accept the gift. While he watched and the monkey was debating within himself, a crow appeared from somewhere and took away the sweet. The boy shrieked out a curse.

His father cried, 'Hey, what? Where did you learn this foul word? No monkey will respect you if you utter bad words.' Ultimately, when the little monkey was tempted down with another piece of sweet, his father caught him deftly by the wrist, holding him off firmly by the scruff to prevent his biting.

Fifteen days of starvation, bullying, cajoling and dangling of fruit before the monkey's eyes taught him what he was expected to do. First of all, he ceased trying to bite or scratch. And then he realized that his mission in life was to please his master by performing. At a command from his master, he could demonstrate how Hanuman, the Divine Monkey of the *Ramayana*, strode up and down with tail ablaze and set Ravana's capital on fire; how an oppressed village daughter-in-law would walk home carrying a pitcher of water on her head; how a newlywed would address his beloved (chatter, blink, raise the brow and grin); and, finally, what was natural to him—tumbling and acrobatics on top of a bamboo pole. When Rama was ready to appear in public, his master took him to a roadside-tailor friend of his and had him measured out for a frilled jacket, leaving the tail out, and a fool's cap held in position with a band under his small chin. Rama constantly tried to push his cap back and rip it off, but whenever he attempted it he was whacked with a switch, and he soon resigned himself to wearing his uniform until the end of the day. When his master stripped off Rama's clothes, the monkey performed spontaneous somersaults in sheer relief.

Rama became popular. Schoolchildren screamed with joy at the sight of him. Householders beckoned to him to step in and divert a crying child. He performed competently, earned money for his master and peanuts for himself. Discarded baby clothes were offered to him as gifts. The father-son team started out each day, the boy with the monkey riding on his shoulder and the cobra basket carried by his father at some distance away—for the monkey chattered and shrank, his face disfigured with fright, whenever the cobra hissed and reared itself up. While the young fellow managed to display the tricks of the monkey to a group, he could hear his father's pipe farther off. At the weekly market fairs in the villages around, they were a familiar pair, and they became prosperous enough to take a bus home at the end of the day. Sometimes as they started to get on, a timid passenger would ask, 'What's to happen if the cobra gets out?'

'No danger. The lid is secured with a rope,' the father replied.

There would always be someone among the passengers to remark, 'A snake minds its business until you step on its tail.'

'But this monkey?' another passenger said. 'God knows what he will be up to!'

'He is gentle and wise,' said the father, and offered a small tip to win the conductor's favour.

They travelled widely, performing at all market fairs, and earned enough money to indulge in an occasional tiffin at a restaurant. The boy's father would part company from him in the evening, saying, 'Stay. I've a stomach ache; I'll get some medicine for it and come back,' and return tottering late at night. The boy felt frightened of his father at such moments, and, lying on his mat, with the monkey tethered to a stake nearby, pretended to be asleep. Father kicked him and said, 'Get up, lazy swine. Sleeping when your father slaving for you all day comes home for speech with you. You are not my son but a bastard.' But the boy would not stir.

One night the boy really fell asleep, and woke up in the morning to find his father gone. The monkey was also missing. 'They must have gone off together!' he cried. He paced up and down and called, 'Father!' several times. He then peered into the hut and found the round basket intact in its corner. He noticed on the lid of the basket some coins, and felt rather pleased when he counted them and found eighty paise in small change. 'It must all be for me,' he said to himself. He felt promoted to adult-hood, handling so much cash. He felt rich but also puzzled at his father's tactics. Ever since he could remember, he had never woken up without finding his father at his side.

He had a foreboding that he was not going to see his father any more. Father would never at any time go out without announcing his purpose—for a bath at the street tap, or to seek medicine for a 'stomach ache', or to do a little shopping.

The boy lifted the lid of the basket to make sure that the snake at least was there. It popped up the moment the lid was taken off. He looked at it, and it looked at him for a moment. 'I'm your master now. Take care.' As if understanding the changed circumstances, the snake darted its forked tongue and half-opened its hood. He tapped it down with his finger, saying, 'Get back. Not yet.' Would it be any use waiting for his father to turn up? He felt hungry. Wondered if it'd be proper to buy his breakfast with the coins left on the basket lid. If his father should suddenly come back, he would slap him for taking the money. He put the lid back on the snake, put the coins back on the lid as he had found them and sat at the mouth of the hut, vacantly looking at the tamarind tree and sighing for his monkey, which would have displayed so many fresh and unexpected pranks early in the morning. He reached for a little cloth bag in which was stored a variety of nuts and fried pulses to feed the monkey. He opened the bag, examined the contents and put a handful into his mouth and chewed: 'Tastes so good. Too good for a monkey, but Father will . . .' His father always clouted his head when he caught him eating nuts meant for the monkey. Today he felt free to munch the nuts, although worried at the back of his mind lest his father should suddenly remember and come back for the monkey food. He found the gourd pipe in its usual place, stuck in the thatch. He snatched it up and blew through its reeds, feeling satisfied that he could play as well as his father and that the public would not know the difference; only it made him cough a little and gasp for breath. The shrill notes attracted the attention of people passing by the hut, mostly day labourers carrying spades and pickaxes and women carrying baskets, who nodded their heads approvingly and remarked, 'True son of the father.' Everyone had a word with him. All knew him in that colony of huts, which had cropped up around the water fountain. All the efforts of the municipality to dislodge these citizens had proved futile; the huts sprang up as often as they were destroyed, and when the municipal councillors realized the concentration of voting power in this colony, they let the squatters alone, except when some V.I.P. from Delhi passed that way, and then they were asked to stay out of sight, behind the park wall, till the eminent man had flashed past in his car.

'Why are you not out yet?' asked a woman.

'My father is not here,' the boy said pathetically. 'I do not know where he is gone.' He sobbed a little.

The woman put down her basket, sat by his side and asked, 'Are you hungry?' 'I have money,' he said.

She gently patted his head and said, 'Ah, poor child! I knew your mother. She was a good girl. That she should have left you adrift like this and gone heavenward!' Although he had no memory of his mother, at the mention of her, tears rolled down his cheeks, and he licked them off with relish at the corner of his mouth. The woman suddenly said, 'What are you going to do now?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Wait till my father comes.' 'Foolish and unfortunate child. Your father is gone.' 'Where?' asked the boy.

'Don't ask me,' the woman said. 'I talked to a man who saw him go. He saw him get into the early-morning bus, which goes up the mountains, and that strumpet in the blue sari was with him.'

'What about the monkey?' the boy asked. 'Won't it come back?'

She had no answer to this question. Meanwhile, a man hawking rice cakes on a wooden tray was crying his wares at the end of the lane. The woman hailed him in a shrill voice and ordered, 'Sell this poor child two *idlies*. Give him freshly made ones, not yesterday's.'

'Yesterday's stuff not available even for a gold piece,' said the man.

'Give him the money,' she told the boy. The boy ran in and fetched some money. The woman pleaded with the hawker, 'Give him something extra for the money.'

'What extra?' he snarled.

'This is an unfortunate child.'

'So are others. What can I do? Why don't you sell your earrings and help him? I shall go bankrupt if I listen to people like you and start giving more for less money.' He took the cash and went on. Before he reached the third hut, the boy had polished off the *idlies*—so soft and pungent, with green chutney spread on top.

The boy felt more at peace with the world now, and able to face his problems. After satisfying herself that he had eaten well, the woman rose to go, muttering, 'Awful strumpet, to seduce a man from his child.' The boy sat and brooded over her words. Though he gave no outward sign of it, he knew who the strumpet in the blue sari was. She lived in one of those houses beyond the

park wall and was always to be found standing at the door, and seemed to be a fixture there. At the sight of her, his father would slow down his pace and tell the boy, 'You keep going. I'll join you.' The first time it happened, after waiting at the street corner, the boy tied the monkey to a lamp-post and went back to the house. He did not find either his father or the woman where he had left them. The door of the house was shut. He raised his hand to pound on it, but restrained himself and sat down on the step, wondering. Presently the door opened and his father emerged, with the basket slung over his shoulder as usual; he appeared displeased at the sight of the boy and raised his hand to strike him, muttering, 'Didn't I say, "Keep going"?' The boy ducked and ran down the street, and heard the blue-sari woman remark, 'Bad, mischievous devil, full of evil curiosity!' Later, his father said, 'When I say go, you must obey.'

'What did you do there?' asked the boy, trying to look and sound innocent, and the man said severely, 'You must not ask questions.'

'Who is she? What is her name?'

'Oh, she is a relative,' the man said. To further probing questions he said, 'I went in to drink tea. You'll be thrashed if you ask more questions, little devil.'

The boy said, as an afterthought, 'I only came back thinking that you might want me to take the basket,' whereupon his father said sternly, 'No more talk. You must know, she is a good and lovely person.' The boy did not accept this description of her. She had called him names. He wanted to shout from rooftops, 'Bad, bad, and bad woman and not at all lovely!' but kept it to himself. Whenever they passed that way again, the boy quickened his pace, without looking left or right, and waited patiently for his father to join him at the street corner. Occasionally his father followed his example and passed on without glancing at the house if he noticed, in place of the woman, a hairy-chested man standing at the door, massaging his potbelly.

The boy found that he could play the pipe, handle the snake and feed it also—all in the same manner as his father used to. Also, he could knock off the fangs whenever they started to grow. He earned enough each day, and as the weeks and months passed he grew taller, and the snake became progressively tardy and flabby and hardly stirred its coils. The boy never ceased to sigh for the monkey. The worst blow his father had dealt him was the kidnapping of his monkey.

When a number of days passed without any earnings, he decided to rid himself of the snake, throw away the gourd pipe and do something else for a living. Perhaps catch another monkey and train it. He had watched his father and

knew how to go about this. A monkey on his shoulder would gain him admission anywhere, even into a palace. Later on, he would just keep it as a pet and look for some other profession. Start as a porter at the railway station—so many trains to watch every hour—and maybe get into one someday and out into the wide world. But the first step would be to get rid of Naga. He couldn't afford to find eggs and milk for him.

He carried the snake basket along to a lonely spot down the river course, away from human habitation, where a snake could move about in peace without getting killed at sight. In that lonely part of Nallappa's grove, there were many mounds, crevasses and anthills. 'You could make your home anywhere there, and your cousins will be happy to receive you back into their fold,' he said to the snake. 'You should learn to be happy in your own home. You must forget me. You have become useless, and we must part. I don't know where my father is gone. He'd have kept you until you grew wings and all that, but I don't care.' He opened the lid of the basket, lifted the snake and set it free. It lay inert for a while, then raised its head, looked at the outside world without interest, and started to move along tardily, without any aim. After a few yards of slow motion, it turned about, looking for its basket home. At once the boy snatched up the basket and flung it far out of the snake's range. 'You will not go anywhere else as long as I am nearby.' He turned the snake round, to face an anthill, prodded it on and then began to run at full speed in the opposite direction. He stopped at a distance, hid himself behind a tree and watched. The snake was approaching the slope of the anthill. The boy had no doubt now that Naga would find the hole on its top, slip itself in and vanish from his life forever. The snake crawled halfway up the hill, hesitated and then turned round and came along in his direction again. The boy swore, 'Oh, damned snake! Why don't you go back to your world and stay there? You won't find me again.' He ran through Nallappa's grove and stopped to regain his breath. From where he stood, he saw his Naga glide along majestically across the ground, shining like a silver ribbon under the bright sun. The boy paused to say 'Goodbye' before making his exit. But looking up he noticed a white-necked Brahmany kite sailing in the blue sky. 'Garuda,' he said in awe. As was the custom, he made obeisance to it by touching his eyes with his fingertips. Garuda was the vehicle of God Vishnu and was sacred. He shut his eyes in a brief prayer to the bird. 'You are a god, but I know you eat snakes. Please leave Naga alone.' He opened his eyes and saw the kite skimming along a little nearer, its shadow almost trailing the course of the lethargic snake. 'Oh!' he screamed. 'I know your purpose.' Garuda would make a swoop and dive at the right moment and stab his claws into that foolish Naga, who had refused the shelter of the anthill, and carry him off for his dinner. The boy dashed back to

the snake, retrieving his basket on the way. When he saw the basket, Naga slithered back into it, as if coming home after a strenuous public performance.

Naga was eventually reinstated in his corner at the hut beside the park wall. The boy said to the snake, 'If you don't grow wings soon enough, I hope you will be hit on the head with a bamboo staff, as it normally happens to any cobra. Know this: I will not be guarding you forever. I'll be away at the railway station, and if you come out of the basket and adventure about, it will be your end. No one can blame me afterwards.'

2. Comprehension

Question 1: What is the name of the cobra in the story?

Question 2: What animal does the boy name Rama?

Question 3: Who teaches the boy how to be a snake charmer?

Question 4: What does the boy's father claim to have found in a snake hole?

Question 5: Why does the boy's father feed Naga a sweet?

Question 6: How does the boy try to befriend the monkey at first?

Question 7: What does the boy's father do when he sees the woman in the blue sari?

Question 8: What does the boy find on the snake basket's lid after his father leaves?

Question 9: Why does the boy decide to release Naga in the grove?

Question 10: What makes the boy bring Naga back to the hut?

Answers

Answer 1: The cobra's name is Naga.

Answer 2: Rama is a monkey.

Answer 3: The boy's father teaches him.

Answer 4: He claims to have found a weed that protects against venom.

Answer 5: He feeds Naga a sweet to treat it as part of the family.

Answer 6: He offers the monkey a piece of sweet.

Answer 7: He slows down and tells the boy to keep going.

Answer 8: He finds eighty paise in coins.

Answer 9: He can't afford to feed Naga and wants to be free of it.

Answer 10: He sees a Brahmany kite (Garuda) that might eat Naga.

3. Grammar Page

Adjectives and verbs in the passive voice followed by prepositions

To

acceptable to
adjacent to
comparable to
equal to
favourable to
loyal to
opposed to
prior to
relative to
senior to

accessible to
attached to
dedicated to
equivalent to
foreign to
next to
parallel to
proportional to
relevant to
sensitive to

accustomed to
attributable to
detrimental to
essential to
indifferent to
obedient to
partial to
reconciled to
resigned to
similar to

adapted to
close to
devoted to
exposed to
inferior to
obliged to
peculiar to
reduced to
resistant to
superior to

addicted to
committed to
due to
faithful to
kind to
oblivious to
preferable to
related to
restricted to
tied to

With

acquainted with
compatible with
exasperated with
patient with

affiliated with
confronted with
familiar with
pleased with

associated with
consistent with
finished with
satisfied with

besieged with
covered with
identified with
synonymous with

compared with
cursed with
infatuated with
threatened with

About

anxious about
enthusiastic about
worried about

concerned about
excited about

curious about
happy about

depressed about
pleased about

doubtful about
wrong about

For

blamed for
late for
ready for

eligible for
noted for
responsible for

famous for
praised for
ripe for

fit for
punished for
sorry for

known for
qualified for
suitable for

From

absent from
different from
omitted from

apart from
distinct from
protected from

derived from
exempt from
removed from

descended from
far from
safe from

detached from
isolated from
separated from

Of

accused of
certain of
devoid of
proud of
suspected of

afraid of
composed of
fond of
regardless of
terrified of

ashamed of
conscious of
ignorant of
reminded of
tired of

aware of
convinced of
independent of
sure of
worthy of

capable of
deprived of
jealous of
suspicious of

At

deft at
overjoyed at

alarmed at
shocked at

amazed at
surprised at

By

accompanied by

caused by

manufactured by

written by

In

absorbed in
immersed in

disappointed in
interested in

engaged in
involved in

On

based on

dependent on

intent on