

The Unforgettable Journey

I jumped into the first coach of the train. My friends, Raman and Shyam, followed me into the compartment. I heaved a sigh of relief, when I saw they were safe. But the relief was short-lived. For, I was shocked to see Mr. Khanna, a Travelling Ticket Examiner, enter the coach from the other end.

"Where the hell is he coming from?" whispered Raman.

"Only he can answer that," replied Shyam, looking at the fast receding platform.

"No use peeping out, Shyam! The train has picked up speed. Let's not try to jump," I said.

"He must have seen us boarding this coach," said Shyam.

"I'm sure, he did. But he was nowhere on the platform. Where has he appeared from?" asked Raman.

"We saved our fare this morning, Raman. But now we may have to shell out that too, as penalty," I said.

"What bad luck!" commented Raman.

In the meantime, the T.T.E. had started ex-

amining the passengers tickets.

"Look! He is coming towards us. Let's make sad faces, and try to win his sympathy," I suggested.

It did not take long for Mr. Khanna to check the other passengers tickets and come to us.

"Show me your tickets, boys," he said.

"Sorry Sir! They fell out of my pocket, while I was boarding the train," I said.

"Yes, Sir, he had my ticket too. See, my pockets are torn." Shyam showed him his torn pockets.

"I too gave him my ticket. I don't have pockets," Raman put in.

"Are you sure, boys, you bought the tickets and lost them?"

"Certainly, Sir, we never tell lies," I answered for all of us.

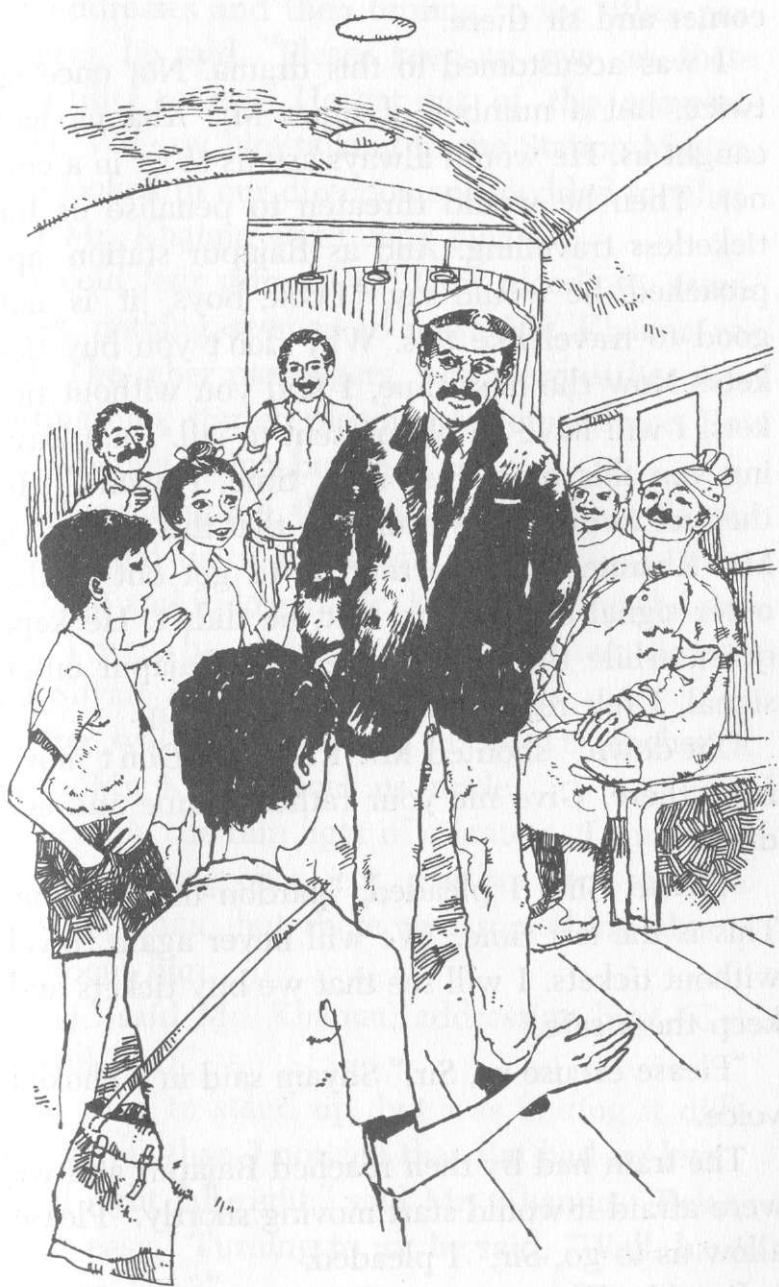
"Except to the T.T.E., particularly when he checks your tickets," added Mr. Khanna.

"No, Sir, we are telling the truth. We are all telling the truth. We have really lost our tickets," I said.

"Whenever I've checked, you haven't shown your tickets. Why?" asked Mr. Khanna in disgust.

"Because, Sir, we are only children. We lose tickets easily," I tried to smile bravely.

"Oh! is that so? I will teach you a lesson. It will help you to keep your tickets safe," Mr. Khanna shouted angrily. "Now all three of you go to that



comer and sit there."

I was accustomed to this drama. Not once or twice, but a number of times Mr. Khanna had caught us. He would always ask us to sit in a corner. Then he would threaten to penalise us for ticketless travelling. And as Rajapur station approached, he would say, "Look, boys, it is not good to travel like this. Why don't you buy tickets? Now the next time, I find you without tickets, I will have all of you sent to jail. I am leaving you this time. But, next time, I won't. He then let us go. I was confident that this time, too, Mr. Khanna would permit us to get out at the outer signal of Rajapur. But, he didn't. He kept quiet, while the train crossed the Rajapur outer signal. I felt restless and tried to get up.

"Sit down!" shouted Mr. Khanna. "Don't move from there. Give me your father's name and address."

"Please, Sir," I pleaded, "pardon us this time. This is the last time. We will never again travel without tickets. I will see that we buy tickets and keep them safe."

"Please excuse us, Sir," Shyam said in a choked voice.

The train had by then reached Rajapur and we were afraid it would start moving shortly. "Please allow us to go, Sir," I pleaded.

But Mr. Khanna was adamant. He took down

our addresses and then turning to the other passengers, he said, "Please keep an eye on these boys till I return." He got out of the compartment. We saw him talking to the Station Master, who looked in our direction and nodded to whatever Mr. Khanna was telling him.

A cold fear gripped us. Our pleading, assurances, nothing seemed to make Mr. Khanna relent. The other passengers, who were earlier supporting him, started pleading for our release. But Mr. Khanna didn't budge.

In the meantime, the train reached Ram Nagar. He ordered us to get down. We got down from the train and followed Mr. Khanna out of the station. I was, by now, very apprehensive. Raman and Shyam were anxious, too.

After walking for a mile or so, we reached a house. Mr. Khamia took us inside.

There, in the dim light of a lantern, I could see someone sitting on a cot. He seemed to be a grown-up man, but there was something abnormal about him.

"Raj," said Mr. Khanna, addressing him, "Get up, will you?"

Raj tried to stand up, but was finding it difficult. It was then I noticed that Raj had no legs.

"All right, all right," said Mr. Khanna. "Relax, take it easy." Turning to us, he said, "Well, have you seen him?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Now, tell me, do you also want to lose your legs like him?" Mr. Khanna asked with a penetrating look.

"No. ..." we all cried in one voice. The very thought of not having legs made me feel sick. My heart sank. Shyam whispered, "Does this demon want to cut our legs?" I was badly shaken but tried to think of some way of escaping from the house.

"Look, boys," Mr. Khanna broke in on my thoughts, "for quite some time, I wanted to bring all of you here to meet Raj, to see for yourselves the hazards of ticketless travelling."

My heart started beating faster. Could what Shyam had whispered be true? Right then, I heard footsteps behind us. I was afraid to turn round to see who was approaching. I wondered if Mr. Khanna was a maniac, and had kept men to cut off people's legs for travelling without tickets.

The person who was coming from behind seemed to have come close to us. I looked at Shyam and Raman. They, too, were sweating with fear.

"Enough." said! a woman's voice behind me. "They are already very shaken. Let me talk to them."

She introduced herself as Mrs. Khanna. She

had a soft voice. "You saw Raj, boys. When he was young, he was just like you. He would travel without a ticket and was very happy about it. But once, when he was boarding a train. . . ."

Raj, suddenly, stopped her. He raised his head and looked straight at us. In a choked voice, he said, "It was great fun to travel without tickets. The money I thus saved was spent on movies and sweets. But then one day, there was a surprise check and I tried to jump off the moving train. I fell between the bogie and the signal post. My legs were caught between the wheels." He couldn't speak further, but pointed towards his legs.

I was jolted back to reality by Mrs. Khanna's soothing voice. "Now sit down, boys. Here's coffee for all of you."

Mr. Khanna added, "Yes, and you will stay with us tonight. I have already sent messages to your parents through the Station Master at Rajapur. They will not worry about you. Tomorrow morning, you can go back. I will buy tickets for your return journey. I wanted you to see for yourselves the consequence of ticketless travelling."

That evening we realised our mistake. We developed a great respect and affection for Mr. Khanna. He had shown us the right path, with rare understanding.