



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E34

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1. Dead Man's Painting

By Sudha Murty

Raghupati was a rich landlord who had a son called Sahadeva. The boy's mother died when he was very young, so Sahadeva was brought up by his father. He turned out to be a spoilt and mean child. When Sahadeva was about ten years old, his father married a second time. His new wife, Arundhati, was a sweet, good natured woman.

Sahadeva was furious when his father got a new wife home and refused to behave well with his stepmother. After some time, when Arundhati gave birth to a boy, Sahadeva started hating her even more. He wanted nothing to do with his stepbrother. Raghupati tried his best to make him see reason, but he refused to listen. Then came a day when Raghupati fell very sick. Though he was treated by the best doctors in the kingdom, he soon realized his end was near. He decided to make a will and write down how his vast property should be divided after his death.

When he finished writing his will, he called his wife and told her, 'When you first read this, it may seem to you that I have done you a great injustice. But have faith. I only want to protect you and our son Janardan from Sahadeva's wrath.' Then he gave her a beautifully framed painting of his own face, done by one of the best artists of the kingdom, and told her, 'When our son Janardan is eighteen years old, take this to the king's minister, Krishnakant. He will see that justice is done to you.'

Arundhati was puzzled. 'Do you know Krishnakant?' she asked.

'No,' replied her husband. 'But I have heard a lot about his wisdom. He will know how to help you.'

A few days after this conversation, Raghupati died. Sahadeva could not wait for the rituals to be over so he could read the will. The day came when the will was finally opened and read out. In it Raghupati had left his large mansion and the surrounding fertile fields to Sahadeva. To Arundhati and Janardan he had left only a ramshackle outhouse and some dry scrubland surrounding it.

Sahadeva was thrilled when he heard this. At least his father had seen sense on his deathbed! Happily he moved into the big house and poor Arundhati and her young son went to live in the broken-down little hut. But she remembered

what her husband had told her and kept the painting safe with her, waiting for the day when Janardan would turn eighteen.

Thus years passed, and on the day of Janardan's eighteenth birthday, Arundhati made her way to Krishnakant's house, the painting tucked under her arm. When she met him, she told him her entire story. Krishnakant was surprised. How was he to help her? After all, he had never seen, let alone known, Raghupati. But Arundhati was insistent. 'You must help,' she pleaded. 'My husband had great faith in your wisdom.' She left the painting with him and went back home.

After she had gone, Krishnakant laid the painting on the floor and looked at it carefully. He wondered what secret was hidden in it. Then he noticed the painting was crooked and pulled at a corner. To his surprise, the painting came out. And hidden behind it was a sheet of paper. A letter! 'Sir,' said the letter. 'You must be reading this many years after my death. In my life I heard many stories about you and how you helped people who were in trouble. I am sure my wife and son are in misery now. You have to help them somehow. The painting you are holding is my portrait. I can also tell you that the house where my wife now lives has ten golden bricks. It is up to you to extract those bricks and see she gets them without being harassed by my first son Sahadeva.' It was signed: Raghupati.

Krishnakant stood quietly for a while after reading this, deep in thought. Then he smiled. He had a plan!

The next day, Krishnakant called Sahadeva and a few wise men to Arundhati's house. He got chairs laid out for everyone in the open field outside. To their surprise, he kept one chair separate and would not let anyone sit in it. When everyone was seated, he turned to the unoccupied chair and spoke to it. 'I will see that things are carried out according to your will. The wisest men of this village are my witness. You will at last go to heaven in peace.'

Then he turned around to the astonished group of people and said, 'I was visited yesterday by the ghost of Raghupati. Was he not a fair, tall man with a long nose and a mark on his forehead?' The people nodded in fear. Krishnakant had never met Raghupati when he was alive, so how did he know what he looked like? Surely, his ghost could not be around still?

Krishnakant now nodded and sighed sadly. 'So it was his ghost that came to me yesterday and said his wishes according to his will had not been carried out.'

And I promised to look into the matter.' He asked Sahadeva, 'Did your father leave you the big house and all the fields?' Sahadeva nodded. 'And he left the small outhouse and the land around it to your stepmother and stepbrother?' Sahadeva nodded again. 'And you are sure you have no claim to whatever there is in that house and on that land?' Sahadeva nodded again, vigorously.

Krishnakant now turned to Arundhati and said, 'Your husband's ghost wanted me to tell you that he wishes the house to be destroyed. Now that Sahadeva has said he has no interest in the house and whatever lies in it, I am ordering your house to be demolished right now.'

Arundhati, almost in tears, did not know what to say. She could only look on in horror as Krishnakant's men went up to her little hut with hammers and crowbars and started breaking it down. Sahadeva looked on happily till, imagine his dismay, the men came back to the group, holding ten golden bricks in their hands!

Krishnakant turned to Arundhati. 'Your husband left these bricks in the house. Since everything there belongs to you, and Sahadeva has said in front of everyone he has no claim on anything from there, you are now their rightful owner.' Taking a quick look at the empty chair he said, 'Raghupati is happy now. He will go to heaven at last, his soul in peace.'

With a twirl of his moustache, Krishnakant marched off, leaving behind an amazed Arundhati, now rich beyond her dreams, and a furious Sahadeva, who had been outwitted at last—all thanks to the painting of a dead man.

2. The White Crow

Umasundari was a very talkative woman. She loved to sit and gossip the whole day: what the neighbours did, what they ate, what the village carpenter said to his mother-in-law — she enjoyed talking about all this. Her husband, Shivasundara, was a mild-mannered man and often told her to stop discussing other people's affairs. But she would never listen to him.

One day, Shivasundara was sitting outside his house, when he suddenly looked up and said, 'Umasundari! Look, what a beautiful crow is sitting on the white roof of our outhouse . . . but don't tell anyone about it.'

Umasundari looked up and saw an ordinary black crow sitting on the roof. Why then had Shivasundara been so excited, and why had he asked her not to tell anyone about the crow?

Umasundari felt as though her stomach would burst with this news, so she went to her neighbour and said, 'Did you see our house today? Early in the morning a huge black crow was sitting on the white roof of our outhouse, you know I have never seen such a huge crow before in my life. My husband saw it too and he behaved like it was a big secret. He told me not to tell anyone. But I had to tell you because I've faith in you. You will not tell anyone else, will you?' saying this much, Umasundari ran back home.

Her neighbour, whose name was Satyabhama, was having lunch. She got up midway and ran to her friend Vimalavati's house.

Vimalavati had finished her lunch and was cleaning her gold bangles. Satyabhama told her in a low voice, 'Have you heard the latest news? A massive crow was sitting on the roof of Umasundari's outhouse today. It was as big as an eagle and would not budge even though they tried to shoo it away. Maybe they have some hidden treasure and the crow knows about it...

But, please don't tell anyone about this.' So saying she ran back home.

Vimalavati was very jealous. Her grandmother had told her long ago that unusual things always pointed to hidden treasure in a place. The presence of a huge crow must mean Umasundari had some treasure in her house. She was angry now. Here she was with a pair of worn-out old bangles, and Umasundari had discovered treasure! She ran to her husband Kamlesh.

Kamlesh was a writer and was trying to think of an idea for a story. Vimalavati told him, 'Stop writing imaginary stories. Look at Umasundari! They will soon have sacks of gold and diamonds without lifting a finger.'

Kamlesh too was upset to hear this. How could his neighbours get rich so quickly? He asked his wife how she had found out about the treasure. 'It seems there was a white crow sitting on the roof of Umasundari's outhouse. And that means there is a lot of treasure beneath it.'

Kamlesh had never liked Shivasundara; here was a good way to get back at him. He got up from his writing desk and went straight to the village headman. 'I have just got to know there is hidden treasure under Shivasundara's house,' he reported.

In their kingdom, the rule was that any treasure found below the earth belonged to the king, and not to the owner of the land. The headman rushed to Shivasundara's house with a few soldiers. 'We have to break down your outhouse,' they said. 'It is the king's order.'

Shivasundara tried to say something but no one listened. They started breaking down the house and digging away right then. After a lot of searching, they found nothing.

The angry headman now summoned Kamlesh and asked, 'Who told you about the treasure?'

Kamlesh pointed to his wife Vimalavati, who in turn pointed to Satyabhama, who pointed out Umasundari. She had to appear before the headman and confess she had exaggerated in the first place.

After that day, no one believed a word of what she said and nobody would sit down to chat with her. And Shivasundara would smile secretly to himself and say, 'I used Umasundari's loud mouth to break down the old outhouse. How much it would have cost me to do it myself! Now I will make a nice garden there, and the two of us will sit there and talk only to each other in peace!'

2. Grammar Page

The Past Progressive Tense

Use the past progressive tense to talk about **things that were happening** in the past and had not stopped happening. They were continuing.

To make the past progressive tense, use **was** or **were** and a verb that ends in **ing**.

I **was watching** television.

Ben **was finishing** his homework.

She **was putting** her books into her schoolbag.

Jenny and I **were tidying** the classroom.

We **were** all **dancing** at the party.

You **weren't listening** to the teacher.

Some boys **were looking** out of the window.

Notes

The **ing** form of a verb is called the **present participle**. You use the present participles with **was** or **were** to make the past progressive tense:

was + **cleaning**
(*present participle*)

were + **listening**
(*present participle*)

You can also use the past progressive tense to say **what was happening when something else happened**.

Sam **was doing** his math homework when the phone rang.

Dad **was cooking** our dinner when I got home.

When I saw Joe, he **was looking** for his dog.

We **were** all **enjoying** the movie when the power went out.

What **were** they **doing** when the bell rang?