



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E45

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1. Birds of Different Feathers.

By Tithi Tavora



It was summer and the mango tree was heavy with plump, ripe mangoes. The parrots were happy. They cackled noisily as they pecked the delicious fruit. Mrs. Popatlal and Mrs. Totaben were chatting over a particularly sweet one when Mithu, Mrs. Totaben's son said, "Mummy, we have a new neighbour."

"This place is indeed getting too crowded," grumbled Mrs. Totaben. "Very soon there will be more parrots than mangoes."

"The new neighbour is not a parrot," said Mithu.

"Must be a crow then," retorted his mother. "What is the difference? They eat mangoes too."

"It is not a crow either," said Mithu. "It is a funny, brown bird. It stays there," he said pointing to a small hollow close to the trunk.

"Inside the tree? What kind of a bird stays inside a tree?" asked Mrs. Totaben.

"You must be mistaken, Mithu," said Mrs. Popatlal.

Mithu was not mistaken. That night, when all the birds were fast asleep, they were shaken out of their feathers by a deep, low call.

"TOO.. .WHIT.. .TOO... WHOO!"

"That must be the new bird," said Mithu to his mother.

"No, Mithu, a wild animal, probably," said his father, Totabhai. "I will see who it is." He ruffled his feathers self-importantly. He happened to be the Chief Parrot. Totabhai stalked onto the branch and peered into the darkness. He could see nothing. Then, he nearly jumped off the branch in fright.

"TOO...WHIT...TOO...WHOO!" came the call again.

"WH...who is that?" he quavered.

"I am Shri Ullunath, the owl, pleased to make your acquaintance," said a deep voice politely.

"Well, I am certainly not pleased to meet you," retorted Totabhai still trying to focus in the dark. "What kind of a bird are you? Making such a racket at night. Waking all of us up."

By now, many other parrots and a few crows had gathered. "Yes, yes," they agreed, "this will not do. We cannot allow you to stay here. This is our tree."

"I am afraid that is not true," replied the owl quietly. "Trees belong to all birds. To all living things, in fact. This tree is as much mine as yours."

The parrots were taken aback. They had expected the newcomer to cower down but he was standing up to them. "Well, you shall not hoot then," said Totabhai, trying to regain some of his dignity.

"I am sorry for having disturbed all of you," said Ullunath. "I will try not to do so in future." Saying this, he flew off into the night. The birds settled back to sleep.

Next morning, Mithu went up to the hollow. There was no sound from within. He peered in. Ullunath was fast asleep, his head tucked into his feathers snugly. He did not emerge the whole day.

You mean he sleeps all day?" asked Mrs. Popatlal.

"What did you expect?" sniffed Totabhai scornfully. "All that hooting at night must have made him tired."

"Teacher Parakeet said owls are very wise birds," chipped in Mithu.

"Huh!" said his mother, "how can someone who sleeps all day and hoots all night be wise?"

That night, Ullunath did not hoot. But the birds did not sleep anyway because

they wanted to catch a glimpse of him. They were not disappointed when Ullunath emerged. All that was visible in the darkness was his squat form with a triangular head and square shoulders.

It was only three nights later that they got a good glimpse of him. There was full moon and the grove was bathed in moonlight. Mithu had been waiting for this chance. Peeping out of the nest, he saw Ullunath perched on a nearby branch. He had a speckled, tawny brown body with a lighter brown chest. But, his most arresting feature was his eyes. Huge. Round. Amber. Deep. He looked very knowledgeable. Mithu woke Kala up and they both stared at the owl.

Meanwhile, Mithu's mother finding him missing from the nest got up in alarm. She twittered angrily when she spotted him and Kala, but Mithu silenced her and pointed at Ullunath. Mrs. Totabhai stared at the owl for a minute, then hurried back to shake her husband awake.

"Looks like that blighter won't let us have any sleep, one way or the other," grumbled Totabhai, ambling over to see the owl.

Kala too woke his parents up and soon many birds had gathered to see Ullunath. Hearing their muffled twittering, Ullunath turned to look at them. "Oh, hello!" said he. "Glad to meet all of you. Unfortunately, all of you are asleep when I come out of my hollow."

"You bet!" said Totabhai rudely, "we are not crazy to stay awake all night."

"Ah! but I have to," replied Ullunath. "That is the only time I can hunt for food."

"What do you mean?" asked Parakeet, puzzled.

"Well, I prey on rats who scurry about at night," replied Ullunath.

"Ugh!" said Mithu.

"Why don't you eat mangoes instead of rats like the rest of us?" asked Kala.

"I prefer rats," answered Ullunath.

"Prefer rats to mangoes? Now, I am convinced you are crazy," declared Totabhai.

"That is all right," replied Ullunath benignly. "Were you to live in a tree full of owls like me, they would find you pretty odd too."

"We are not odd," bristled Parakeet. "We are far superior birds. Look at your dull feathers and compare them with our lovely, bright ones."

"My friend," explained the owl patiently, "the feathers that you are so proud

of are so coloured to help you merge with the green leaves of branches you live on. I nest, in the hollow of the tree trunk. God coloured us according to our respective habitats so that we may be camouflaged and not easily spotted by our enemies."

It all made a lot of sense to Mithu, but the rest of the clan seemed unimpressed.

"Now," continued Ullunath, "since all of you are already awake, please allow me to hoot a while!" Saying this, he let out his low whistling call of "TOO...WHIT... TOO...WHOO!" and flew off.

The next day, something happened that had everybody so worried that they forgot all about their new neighbour. Polly Parrot was the first to raise the alarm. Many ripe mangoes had fallen to the ground the previous evening. The birds were looking forward to eat them the next day. When Polly went to nibble one for breakfast, she found that each and every mango had been gnawed through. "Oh! My goodness! The Rat Brigade has been here again," she screeched. Hearing her, all the birds started looking around. They surveyed the dozens of mango seeds scattered on the ground. Tiya, the oldest of all parrots, shook his head in dismay.

The birds were inconsolable, to lose so much of the ripe fruit to the rats! The worst was that the remaining mangoes would only ripen after a few days. What would they eat until then? And what if those, too, fell to the ground and the rats finished them before the birds could? Everyone was worried.

It was Kala who came up with a solution. "The other day, Ullunath said he preys on rats. Why not ask him to tackle the rats?"

"Terrific idea!" said Mithu. "Let us find my father and tell him."

Totabhai pooh-poohed the idea. "What can that oddball do for us?"

But Tiya and Parakeet felt otherwise. "The plan is worth a try. We could drop a few ripe mangoes to the ground and then let Ullunath attack the rats when they come."

It was decided that the three elder parents would approach the owl at once for his help.

"Do you really think he will help us?" said Parakeet, uncertainly. "After all, we have hardly been friendly to him."

"No harm in trying," said Tiya.

As expected, Ullunath was asleep. When the three parrots clicked their beaks in unison outside his hollow, he emerged. His feathers were ruffled and he

looked annoyed. "What is it?" he asked gruffly.

"We need your help," said Totabhai meekly.

"What! You need my help?" asked Ullunath sarcastically.

Totabhai squirmed. "Yes, please," he replied humbly.

The parrots then proceeded to explain their plan to the owl. He heard them out patiently. Finally, he said. "I may help you, but on one condition."

"What is it?" they asked apprehensively.

"I should be allowed to hoot every night," replied the wise Ullunath.

The birds heaved a sigh of relief. A little disturbed sleep was a small price to pay for getting rid of the rats.

Over the next few days, as the mangoes ripened, the birds dropped them to the ground. At night, they waited in suspense. After what seemed like ages, they heard the rustle of the rats.

Ullunath was ready. He soared, plunged and came back, looking content.

"There, I think he has eaten one rat," whispered Mithu. Again and again Ullunath swooped and struck till the rats went scurrying off.

The next night the rats did not come. The parrots were overjoyed.

That night, when Ullunath hooted, "TOO...WHOO "TOO...WHIT...!" the parrots did not mind at all.

They chorused happily, "We love you, Ullunath!"

4. Grammar Page

Imperatives are very direct. To be more polite, you can use **please** before the imperative.

Please show me your homework.

Please read the first sentence out loud.

Please come to the front of the class.

To make negative imperatives, use **do not** or **don't** before the base form of the verb.

Do not bring calculators into the exam room.

Please **don't change** anything on my computer.

Gerunds

A **gerund** is the **ing** form of a verb used as a noun. Sometimes a gerund is called a **verbal noun** because it comes from a verb.

Running is a good way to keep fit.

Susan is very good at **drawing**.

He loves **dancing** and **singing**.

Have you ever tried **sailing**?

I don't like **watching television**.

We enjoyed **visiting our grandparents**.

Notes

Sometimes it is difficult to know whether an **ing** word is a **gerund** or a **present participle**. If you can replace the **ing** word or its phrase with the pronoun **it**, then the word is a gerund. Look again at the examples on the left. Try replacing the words in bold with **it**.

Some gerunds can be used **in front of other nouns**, like adjectives.

a **washing** machine = a machine that does washing

a **shopping** bag = a bag for carrying your purchases

walking boots = boots you wear for walking in the countryside

gardening clothes = clothes you wear for gardening