



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E47

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>

Contents

- 1. A Crow for All Seasons.**
- 2. Grammar Page.**

1. A Crow for All Seasons

By Ruskin Bond

Early to bed and early to rise makes a crow healthy, wealthy, and wise.

They say it's true for humans too. I'm not so sure about that. But for crows it's a must.

I'm always up at the crack of dawn, often the first crow to break the night's silence with a lusty caw. My friends and relatives, who roost in the same tree, grumble a bit and mutter to themselves, but they are soon cawing just as loudly. Long before the sun is up, we set off on the day's work.

We do not pause even for the morning wash. Later in the day, if it's hot and muggy, I might take a dip in some human's bath water; but early in the morning we like to be up and about before everyone else. This is the time when trash cans and refuse dumps are overflowing with goodies, and we like to sift through them before the dustmen arrive in their disposal trucks.

Not that we are afraid of a famine in refuse. As human beings multiply, so does their rubbish.

Only yesterday I rescued an old typewriter ribbon from the dustbin, just before it was emptied. What a waste that would have been! I had no use for it myself, but I gave it to one of my cousins who got married recently, and she tells me it's just right for her nest, the one she's building on a telegraph pole. It helps her bind the twigs together, she says.

My own preference is for toothbrushes. They're just a hobby really, like stamp-collecting with humans. I have a small but select collection which I keep in a hole in the garden wall. Don't ask me how many I've got—crows don't believe there's any point in counting beyond two—but I know there's more than *one*, that there's a whole lot of them in fact, because there isn't anyone living on this road who hasn't lost a toothbrush to me at some time or another.

We crows living in the jackfruit tree have this stretch of road to ourselves, but so that we don't quarrel or have misunderstandings we've shared the houses out. I picked the bungalow with the orchard at the back. After all, I don't eat rubbish and throwaways all the time. Just occasionally, I like a ripe guava or the soft flesh of a papaya. And sometimes I like the odd beetle as an hors d'oeuvre. Those humans in the bungalow should be grateful to me for keeping down the population of fruit-eating beetles, and even for recycling their

refuse; but no, humans are never grateful. No sooner do I settle in one of their guava trees than stones are whizzing past me. So I return to the dustbin on the back veranda steps. They don't mind my being there.

One of my cousins shares the bungalow with me, but he's a lazy fellow and I have to do most of the foraging. Sometimes I get him to lend me a claw, but most of the time he's preening his feathers and trying to look handsome for a pretty young thing who lives in the banyan tree at the next turning.

When he's in the mood he can be invaluable, as he proved recently when I was having some difficulty getting at the dog's food on the veranda.

This dog, who is fussed over so much by the humans, I've adopted is a great big fellow, a mastiff who pretends to a pedigree going back to the time of Genghis Khan—he likes to pretend one of his ancestors was the great Khan's watchdog. But, as often happens in famous families, animal or human, there is a falling off in quality over a period of time, and this huge fellow—Tiger, they call him—is a case in point. All brawn and no brain. Many's the time I've removed a juicy bone from his plate or helped myself to pickings from under his nose.

But of late he's been growing canny and selfish. He doesn't like to share any more. And the other day I was almost in his jaws when he took a sudden lunge at me. Snap went his great teeth; but all he got was one of my tail feathers. He spat it out in disgust. Who wants crow's meat, anyway?

All the same, I thought, I'd better not be too careless. It's not for nothing that a crow's IQ is way above that of all other birds. And it's higher than a dog's, I bet.

I woke Cousin Slow from his midday siesta and said, 'Hey, Slow, we've got a problem. If you want any of that delicious tripe today, you've got to lend a claw—or a beak. That dog's getting snappier day by day.'

Slow opened one eye and said, 'Well, if you insist. But you know how I hate getting into a scuffle. It's bad for the gloss on my feathers.'

'I don't insist,' I said politely. 'But I'm not foraging for both of us today. It's every crow for himself.'

'Okay, okay, I'm coming,' said Slow, and with barely a flap he dropped down from the tree to the wall.

'What's the strategy?' I asked.

‘Simple. We’ll just give him the old one-two.’

We flew across to the veranda. Tiger had just started his meal. He was a fast, greedy eater who made horrible slurping sounds while he guzzled his food. We had to move fast if we wanted to get something before the meal was over.

I sidled up to Tiger and wished him good afternoon. He kept on gobbling—but quicker now.

Slow came up from behind and gave him a quick peck near the tail—a sensitive spot—and, as Tiger swung round, snarling, I moved in quickly and snatched up several tidbits.

Tiger went for me, and I flew freestyle for the garden wall. The dish was untended, so Slow helped himself to as many scraps as he could stuff in his mouth.

He joined me on the garden wall, and we sat there feasting, while Tiger barked himself hoarse below.

‘Go catch a cat,’ said Slow, who is given to slang. ‘You’re in the wrong league, big boy.’

The great sage Pratyasataka—ever heard of him? I guess not—once said, ‘Nothing can improve a crow.’

Like most human sages he wasn’t very clear in his thinking, so that there has been some misunderstanding about what he meant. Humans like to think that what he really meant was that crows were so bad as to be beyond improvement. But we crows know better. We interpret the saying as meaning that the crow is so perfect that no improvement is possible.

It’s not that we aren’t human—what I mean is, there are times when we fall from our high standards and do rather foolish things. Like at lunchtime the other day.

Sometimes, when the table is laid in the bungalow, and before the family enters the dining room, I nip in through the open window and make a quick foray among the dishes. Sometimes I’m lucky enough to pick up a sausage or a slice of toast, or even a pat of butter, making off before someone enters and throws a bread knife at me. But on this occasion, just as I was reaching for the toast, a thin slouching fellow—Junior Sahib they call him—entered suddenly and shouted at me. I was so startled that I leapt across the table seeking

shelter. Something flew at me, and in an effort to dodge the missile, I put my head through a circular object and then found it wouldn't come off.

It wasn't safe to hang around there, so I flew out the window with this dashed ring still round my neck.

Serviette or napkin rings, that's what they are called. Quite unnecessary objects, but some humans—particularly the well-to-do sort—seem to like having them on their tables, holding bits of cloth in place. The cloth is used for wiping the mouth. Have you ever heard of such nonsense?

Anyway, there I was with a fat napkin ring round my neck, and as I perched on the wall trying to get it off, the entire human family gathered on their veranda to watch me.

There was the Colonel Sahib and his wife, the Memsahib; there was the scrawny Junior Sahib (worst of the lot); there was a mischievous boy (the Colonel Sahib's grandson) known as the Baba; there was the cook (who usually flung orange peels at me) and the gardener (who once tried to decapitate me with a spade), and the dog Tiger who, like most dogs, tries unsuccessfully to be human.

Today they weren't cursing and shaking their fists at me; they were just standing and laughing their heads off. What's so funny about a crow with its head stuck in a napkin ring?

Worse was to follow.

The noise had attracted the other crows in the area, and if there's one thing crows detest, it's a crow who doesn't look like a crow.

They swooped low and dived on me, hammering at the wretched napkin ring, until they had knocked me off the wall and into a flower bed. Then six or seven toughs landed on me with every intention of finishing me off.

'Hey, boys!' I cawed. 'This is me, Speedy! What are you trying to do—kill me?' 'That's right! You don't look like Speedy to us. What have you done with him, eh?'

And they set upon me with even greater vigour.

'You're just like a bunch of lousy humans!' I shouted. 'You're no better than them—this is just the way they carry on amongst themselves!'

That brought them to a halt. They stopped trying to peck me to pieces, and stood back, looking puzzled. The napkin ring had been shattered in the onslaught and had fallen to the ground.

‘Why, it’s Speedy!’ said one of the gang.

‘None other!’

‘Good old Speedy—what are you doing here? And where’s the guy we were hammering just now?’

There was no point in trying to explain things to them. Crows are like that. They’re all good pals—until one of them tries to look different. Then he could be just another bird.

‘He took off for Tibet,’ I said. ‘It was getting unhealthy for him around here.’

Summertime is here again. And although I’m a crow for all seasons, I must admit to a preference for the summer months.

Humans grow lazy and don’t pursue me with so much vigour. Garbage cans overflow. Food goes bad and is constantly being thrown away. Overripe fruit gets tastier by the minute. If fellows like me weren’t around to mop up all these unappreciated riches, how would humans manage?

There’s one character in the bungalow, Junior Sahib, who will never appreciate our services, it seems. He simply hates crows. The small boy may throw stones at us occasionally, but then, he’s the sort who throws stones at almost anything. There’s nothing personal about it. He just throws stones on principle.

The Memsahib is probably the best of the lot. She often throws me scraps from the kitchen—onion skins, potato peels, crusts, and leftovers—and even when I nip in and make off with something not meant for me (like a jam tart or a cheese pakora) she is quite sporting about it. The Junior Sahib looks outraged, but the lady of the house says, ‘Well, we’ve all got to make a living somehow, and that’s how crows make theirs. It’s high time you thought of earning a living.’ Junior Sahib’s her nephew— that’s his occupation. He has never been known to work.

The Colonel Sahib has a sense of humour but it’s often directed at me. He thinks I’m a comedian.

He discovered I'd been making off with the occasional egg from the egg basket on the veranda, and one day, without my knowledge, he made a substitution.

Right on top of the pile I found a smooth round egg, and before anyone could shout, 'Crow!' I'd made off with it. It was abnormally light. I put it down on the lawn and set about cracking it with my strong beak, but it would keep slipping away or bounding off into the bushes. Finally, I got it between my feet and gave it a good hard whack. It burst open, and to my utter astonishment, there was nothing inside!

I looked up and saw the old man standing on the veranda, doubled up with laughter.

'What are you laughing at?' asked the Memsahib, coming out to see what it was all about.

'It's that ridiculous crow!' guffawed the Colonel, pointing at me. 'You know he's been stealing our eggs. Well, I placed a ping pong ball on top of the pile, and he fell for it! He's been struggling with that ball for twenty minutes! That will teach him a lesson.'

It did. But I had my revenge later, when I pinched a brand new toothbrush from the Colonel's bathroom.

The Junior Sahib has no sense of humour at all. He idles about the house and grounds all day, whistling or singing to himself.

'Even that crow sings better than Uncle,' said the boy.

A truthful boy; but all he got for his honesty was a whack on the head from his uncle.

Anyway, as a gesture of appreciation, I perched on the garden wall and gave the family a rendering of my favourite crow song, which is my own composition. Here it is, translated for your benefit:

Oh, for the life of a crow!

A bird who's in the know.

Although we are cursed,

We are never dispersed—

We're always on the go!

*I know I'm a bit of a rogue
(And my voice wouldn't pass for a brogue),
But there's no one as sleek
Or as neat with his beak—
So they're putting my picture in Vogue!
Oh, for the life of a crow!
I reap what I never sow,
They call me a thief,
Pray I'll soon come to grief—
But there's no getting rid of a crow!*

I gave it everything I had, and the humans—all of them on the lawn to enjoy the evening breeze, listened to me in silence, struck with wonder at my performance. When I had finished, I bowed and preened myself, waiting for the applause.

They stared at each other for a few seconds. Then the Junior Sahib stooped, picked up a bottle opener, and flung it at me.

Well, I ask you!

What can one say about humans? I do my best to defend them from all kinds of criticism, and this is what I get for my pains.

Anyway, I picked up the bottle opener and added it to my collection of odds and ends.

It was getting dark, and soon everyone was stumbling around, looking for another bottle opener. Junior Sahib's popularity was even lower than mine.

One day, Junior Sahib came home carrying a heavy shotgun. He pointed it at me a few times and I dived for cover. But he didn't fire. Probably I was out of range.

'He's only threatening you,' said Slow from the safety of the jamun tree, where he sat in the shadows. 'He probably doesn't know how to fire the thing.'

But I wasn't taking any chances. I'd seen a sly look on Junior Sahib's face, and I decided that he was trying to make me careless. So I stayed well out of range.

Then one evening, I received a visit from my cousin, Charm. He'd come to me for a loan. He wanted some new bottle tops for his collection and had brought me a mouldy old toothbrush to offer in exchange.

Charm landed on the garden wall, toothbrush in his beak, and was waiting for me to join him there, when there was a flash and a tremendous bang. Charm was sent several feet into the air, and landed limp and dead in a flower bed.

'I've got him, I've got him!' shouted Junior Sahib. 'I've shot that blasted crow!' Throwing away the gun, Junior Sahib ran out into the garden, overcome with joy.

He picked up my fallen relative, and began running around the bungalow with his trophy.

The rest of the family had collected on the veranda. 'Drop that thing at once!' called the Memsahib. 'Uncle is doing a war dance,' observed the boy.

'It's unlucky to shoot a crow,' said the Colonel.

I thought it was time to take a hand in the proceedings and let everyone know that the *right* crow—the one and only Speedy—was alive and kicking. So I swooped down the jackfruit tree, dived through Junior Sahib's window, and emerged with one of his socks.

Triumphantly flaunting his dead crow, Junior Sahib came dancing up the garden path, then stopped dead when he saw me perched on the window sill, a sock in my beak. His jaw fell, his eyes bulged; he looked like the owl in the banyan tree.

'You shot the wrong crow!' shouted the Colonel, and everyone roared with laughter.

Before Junior Sahib could recover from the shock, I took off in a leisurely fashion and joined Slow on the wall.

Junior Sahib came rushing out with the gun, but by now it was too dark to see anything, and I heard the Memsahib telling the Colonel, 'You'd better take that gun away before he does himself a mischief.' So the Colonel took Junior Sahib indoors and gave him a brandy.

I composed a new song for Junior Sahib's benefit, and sang it to him outside his window early next morning:

I understand you want a crow

To poison, shoot or smother;

My fond salaams, but by your leave

I'll substitute another;

Allow me then, to introduce

My most respected brother.

Although I was quite understanding about the whole tragic mix-up—I was, after all, the family's very own house crow—my fellow crows were outraged at what had happened to Charm, and swore vengeance on Junior Sahib.

'*Corvus splendens!*' they shouted with great spirit, forgetting that this title had been bestowed on us by a human. In times of war, we forget how much we owe to our enemies.

Junior Sahib had only to step into the garden, and several crows would swoop down on him, screeching and swearing and aiming lusty blows at his head and hands. He took to coming out wearing a sola topi, and even then they knocked it off and drove him indoors. Once he tried lighting a cigarette on the veranda steps, when Slow swooped low across the porch and snatched it from his lips.

Junior Sahib shut himself up in his room, and smoked countless cigarettes—a sure sign that his nerves were going to pieces.

Every now and then, the Memsahib would come out and shoo us off; and because she wasn't an enemy, we obliged by retreating to the garden wall. After all, Slow and I depended on her for much of our board if not for our lodging. But Junior Sahib had only to show his face outside the house, and all the crows in the area would be after him like avenging furies.

'It doesn't look as though they are going to forgive you,' said the Memsahib. 'Elephants never forget, and crows never forgive,' said the Colonel.

'Would you like to borrow my catapult, Uncle?' asked the boy. 'Just for self-protection, you know.'

‘Shut up,’ said Junior Sahib and went to bed.

One day, he sneaked out of the back door and dashed across to the garage. A little later the family’s old car, seldom used, came out of the garage with Junior Sahib at the wheel. He’d decided that if he couldn’t take a walk in safety he’d go for a drive. All the windows were up.

No sooner had the car turned into the driveway than about a dozen crows dived down on it, crowding the bonnet and flapping in front of the windscreen. Junior Sahib couldn’t see a thing. He swung the steering wheel left, right and centre, and the car went off the driveway, ripped through a hedge, crushed a bed of sweet-peas and came to a stop against the trunk of a mango tree.

Junior Sahib just sat there, afraid to open the door. The family had to come out of the house and rescue him.

‘Are you all right?’ asked the Colonel. ‘I’ve bruised my knees,’ said Junior Sahib.

‘Never mind your knees,’ said the Memsahib, gazing around at the ruin of her garden. ‘What about my sweet-peas?’

‘I think your uncle is going to have a nervous breakdown,’ I heard the Colonel saying to the boy.

‘What’s that?’ asked the boy. ‘Is it the same as a car having a breakdown?’

‘Well, not exactly... But you could call it a mind breaking down.’

Junior Sahib had been refusing to leave his room or take his meals. The family was worried about him. I was worried, too. Believe it or not, we crows are among the very few birds who sincerely desire the preservation of the human species.

‘He needs a change,’ said the Memsahib.

‘A rest cure,’ said the Colonel sarcastically. ‘A rest from doing nothing.’ ‘Send him to Switzerland,’ suggested the boy.

‘We can’t afford that. But we can take him up to a hill station.’

The nearest hill station was some fifty miles as the human drives (only ten as the crow flies). Many people went up there during the summer months. It wasn’t fancied much by crows. For one thing, it was a tidy sort of place, and people lived in houses that were set fairly far apart. Opportunities for scavenging were limited. Also it was rather cold and the trees were

inconvenient and uncomfortable. A friend of mine, who had spent a night in a pine tree, said he hadn't been able to sleep because of the prickly pine needles and the wind howling through the branches.

'Let's all go up for a holiday,' said the Memsahib. 'We can spend a week in a boarding house. All of us need a change.'

A few days later the house was locked up, and the family piled into the old car and drove off to the hills.

I had the grounds to myself.

The dog had gone too, and the gardener spent all day dozing in his hammock.

There was no one around to trouble me.

'We've got the whole place to ourselves,' I told Slow.

'Yes, but what good is that? With everyone gone, there are no throwaways, giveaways and takeaways!'

'We'll have to try the house next door.'

'And be driven off by the other crows? That's not our territory, you know. We can go across to help them, or to ask for their help, but we're not supposed to take their pickings. It just isn't cricket, old boy.'

We could have tried the bazaar or the railway station, where there is always a lot of rubbish to be found, but there is also a lot of competition in those places. The station crows are gangsters. The bazaar crows are bullies. Slow and I had grown soft. We'd have been no match for the bad boys.

'I've just realized how much we depend on humans,' I said. 'We could go back to living in the jungle,' said Slow.

'No, that would be too much like hard work. We'd be living on wild fruit most of the time. Besides, the jungle crows won't have anything to do with us now. Ever since we took up with humans, we became the outcasts of the bird world.'

'That means we're almost human.'

'You might say we have all their vices and none of their virtues.' 'Just a different set of values, old boy.'

‘Like eating hens’ eggs instead of crows’ eggs. That’s something in their favour. And while you’re hanging around here waiting for the mangoes to fall, I’m off to locate our humans.’

Slow’s beak fell open. He looked like—well, a hungry crow.

‘Don’t tell me you’re going to follow them up to the hill station? You don’t even know where they are staying.’

‘I’ll soon find out,’ I said, and took off for the hills.

You’d be surprised at how simple it is to be a good detective, if only you put your mind to it. Of course, if Ellery Queen had been able to fly, he wouldn’t have required fifteen chapters and his father’s assistance to crack a case.

Swooping low over the hill station, it wasn’t long before I spotted my humans’ old car. It was parked outside a boarding house called Climber’s Rest. I hadn’t seen anyone climbing, but dozing in an armchair in the garden was my favourite human.

I perched on top of a colourful umbrella and waited for Junior Sahib to wake up. I decided it would be rather inconsiderate of me to disturb his sleep, so I waited patiently on the broom, looking at him with one eye and keeping one eye on the house. He stirred uneasily, as though he’d suddenly had a bad dream; then he opened his eyes. I must have been the first thing he saw.

‘Good morning,’ I cawed in a friendly tone—always ready to forgive and forget, that’s Speedy!

He leapt out of the armchair and ran into the house, hollering at the top of his voice.

I supposed he hadn’t been able to contain his delight at seeing me again. Humans can be funny that way. They’ll hate you one day and love you the next.

Well, Junior Sahib ran all over the boarding house screaming: ‘It’s that crow, it’s that crow! He’s following me everywhere!’

Various people, including the family, ran outside to see what the commotion was about, and I thought it would be better to make myself scarce. So I flew to the top of a spruce tree and stayed very still and quiet.

‘Crow! What crow?’ said the Colonel.

‘Our crow!’ cried Junior Sahib. ‘The one that persecutes me. I was dreaming of it just now, and when I opened my eyes, there it was, on the garden umbrella!’

‘There’s nothing there now,’ said the Memsahib. ‘You probably hadn’t woken up completely.’

‘He is having illusions again,’ said the boy.

‘Delusions,’ corrected the Colonel.

‘Now look here,’ said the Memsahib, ‘you’ll have to pull yourself together. You’ll take leave of your senses if you don’t.’

‘I tell you, it’s here!’ sobbed Junior Sahib. ‘It’s following me everywhere.’

‘It’s grown fond of Uncle,’ said the boy. ‘And it seems Uncle can’t live without crows.’

Junior Sahib looked up with a wild glint in his eye.

‘That’s it!’ he cried. ‘I can’t live without them. That’s the answer to my problem.’

‘I don’t hate crows—I love them!’

Everyone just stood around goggling at Junior Sahib.

‘I’m feeling fine now,’ he carried on. ‘What a difference it makes if you can just do the opposite of what you’ve been doing before! I thought I hated crows. But all the time I really loved them!’ And flapping his arms, and trying to caw like a crow, he went prancing about the garden.

‘Now he thinks he’s a crow,’ said the boy. ‘Is he still having delusions?’

‘That’s right,’ said the Memsahib. ‘Delusions of grandeur.’

After that, the family decided that there was no point in staying on in the hill station any longer. Junior Sahib had completed his rest cure. And even if he was the only one who believed himself cured, that was all right, because after all he was the one who mattered... If you’re feeling fine, can there be anything wrong with you?

No sooner was everyone back in the bungalow than Junior Sahib took to hopping barefoot on the grass early every morning, all the time scattering food about for the crows. Bread, chapattis, cooked rice, curried eggplants, the Memsahib’s homemade toffee—you name it, we got it!

Slow and I were the first to help ourselves to these dawn offerings, and soon the other crows had joined us on the lawn. We didn't mind. Junior Sahib brought enough for everyone.

'We ought to honour him in some way,' said Slow.

'Yes, why not?' said I. 'There was someone else, hundreds of years ago, who fed the birds. They followed him wherever he went.'

'That's right. They made him a saint. But as far as I know, he didn't feed any crows. At least, you don't see any crows in the pictures—just sparrows and robins and wagtails.'

'Small fry. *Our* human is dedicated exclusively to crows. Do you realize that, Slow?'

'Sure. We ought to make him the patron saint of crows. What do you say, fellows?'

'*Caw, caw, caw!*' All the crows were in agreement.

'St Corvus!' said Slow as Junior Sahib emerged from the house, laden with good things to eat.

'*Corvus, corvus, corvus!*' we cried.

And what a pretty picture he made—a crow eating from his hand, another perched on his shoulder, and about a dozen of us on the grass, forming a respectful ring around him.

From persecutor to protector; from beastliness to saintliness. And sometimes it can be the other way round: you never know with humans!

2. Grammar Page

Auxiliary Verbs: will *and* would; shall *and* should

Can and **could** are also used for **asking for information or help**, for **offering something**, and for **suggesting something**.

Can you tell me if this train goes to Topeka?

Could you show me where the accident happened?

Could you open that window, please?

You can borrow my pen, if you like.

Your sister could come with us, if she wanted to.

I could lend you my football.

We can go to the library instead.

You could ask your dad to help us.

John can borrow his brother's skates.

will *and* would

Use **will** and **would** when you are **asking someone to do something**.

Will you please stop making that noise?

Would you pass me that book, please?

Please, **will you** close the door?

You can also use **will** and **would** to **offer something** or to **suggest something**.

Will I hold this end of the rope?

Will I carry the bag for you?

Would you like another drink?

Which cake **would you** like?

Notes

The contraction of **will not** is **won't** and the contraction of **would not** is **wouldn't**:

Won't you stay and eat with us?

Wouldn't it be better to wait?

shall *and* should

You can use **shall** and **should** to **ask for advice**, **offer something** and **suggest something**.

Should I bring waterproof clothes?

Should I phone the police?

Shall we go home now?

Shall I go by car, or will it be better to walk?

Shall I help you with that heavy bag?

You should try that new French restaurant.