



# Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E48

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# 1. Harold: Our Hornbill

By Ruskin Bond



Hornbill

HAROLD'S MOTHER, like all good hornbills, was the most careful of wives. His father was the most easy-going of husbands. In January, long before the flame tree flowered, Harold's father took his wife into a great hole high in the tree trunk, where his father and his father's father had taken their brides at the same time every year.



Flame Tree

In this weather-beaten hollow, generation upon generation of hornbills had been raised. Harold's mother, like those before her, was enclosed within the hole by a sturdy wall of earth, sticks and dung.

Harold's father left a small hole in the centre of this wall to enable him to communicate with his wife whenever he felt like a chat. Walled up in her uncomfortable room, Harold's mother was a prisoner for over two months. During this period an egg was laid, and Harold was born.

In his naked boyhood Harold was no beauty. His most promising feature was his flaming red bill, matching the blossoms of the flame tree which was now ablaze, heralding the summer. He had a stomach that could never be filled, despite the best efforts of his parents who brought him pieces of jackfruit and berries from the banyan tree.

As he grew bigger, the room became more cramped, and one day his mother burst through the wall, spread out her wings and sailed over the tree-tops. Her husband was glad to see her about. He played with her, expressing his delight with deep gurgles and throaty chuckles. Then they repaired the wall of the nursery, so that Harold would not fall out.

Harold was quite happy in his cell, and felt no urge for freedom. He was putting on weight and a philosophy of his own. Then something happened to change the course of his life.

One afternoon he was awakened from his siesta by a loud thumping on the wall, a sound quite different from that made by his parents. Soon the wall gave way, and there was something large and yellow and furry staring at him—not his parents' bills, but the hungry eyes of a civet cat.



Civet Cat

Before Harold could be seized, his parents flew at the cat, both roaring lustily and striking out with their great bills. In the ensuing melee, Harold tumbled out of his nest and landed on our garden path.

Before the cat or any predator could get to him, Grandfather picked him up and took him to the sanctuary of the veranda.

Harold had lost some wing feathers and did not look as though he would be able to survive on his own, so we made an enclosure for him on our front veranda. Grandfather and I took over the duties of his parents.

Harold had a simple outlook, and once he had got over some early attacks of nerves, he began to welcome the approach of people. Grandfather and I meant the arrival of food and he greeted us with craning neck, quivering open bill, and a loud, croaking, '*Ka-ka-kaee!*'

Fruit, insect or animal food and green leaves were all welcome. We soon dispensed with the enclosure, but Harold made no effort to go away; he had difficulty flying. In fact, he asserted his tenancy rights, at least as far as the veranda was concerned.

One afternoon a veranda tea party was suddenly and alarmingly convulsed by a flash of black and white and noisy flapping. And behold, the last and only loaf of bread had been seized and carried off to his perch near the ceiling.

Harold was not beautiful by Hollywood standards. He had a small body and a large head. But he was good-natured and friendly, and he remained on good terms with most members of the household during his lifetime of twelve years.

Harold's best friends were those who fed him, and he was willing even to share his food with us, sometimes trying to feed me with his great beak.

While I turned down his offers of beetles and similar delicacies, I did occasionally share a banana with him. Eating was a serious business for Harold, and if there was any delay at mealtimes he would summon me with raucous barks and vigorous bangs of his bill on the woodwork of the kitchen window.

Having no family, profession or religion, Harold gave much time and thought to his personal appearance. He carried a rouge pot on his person and used it very skilfully as an item of his morning toilet.

This rouge pot was a small gland situated above the roots of his tail feathers; it produced a rich yellow fluid. Harold would dip into his rouge pot from time to time and then rub the colour over his feathers and the back of his neck. It would come off on my hands whenever I touched him.

Harold would toy with anything bright or glittering, often swallowing it afterwards.

He loved bananas and dates and balls of boiled rice. I would throw him the rice balls, and he would catch them in his beak, toss them in the air, and let them drop into his open mouth.

He perfected this trick of catching things, and in time I taught him to catch a tennis ball thrown with some force from a distance of fifteen yards. He would have made a great baseball catcher or an excellent slip fielder. On one occasion he seized a rupee coin from me (a week's pocket money in those days) and swallowed it neatly. Only once did he really misbehave. That was when he removed a lighted cigar from the hand of an American cousin who was visiting us. Harold swallowed the cigar. It was a moving experience for Harold, and an unnerving one for our guest.

Although Harold never seemed to drink any water, he loved the rain. We always knew when it was going to rain because Harold would start chuckling to himself about an hour before the first raindrops fell.

This used to irritate Aunt Ruby. She was always being caught in the rain. Harold would be chuckling when she left the house. And when she returned, drenched to the skin, he would be in fits of laughter.

As storm clouds would gather, and gusts of wind would shake the banana trees, Harold would get very excited, and his chuckle would change to an eerie whistle.

'*Wheee...wheee,*' he would scream, and then, as the first drops of rain hit the veranda steps, and the scent of the fresh earth passed through the house, he would start roaring with pleasure.

The wind would carry the rain into the veranda, and Harold would spread out his wings and dance, tumbling about like a circus clown. My grandparents and I would come out on the veranda and share his happiness.

Many years later, I still miss Harold's raucous bark and the banging of his great bill. If there is a heaven for good hornbills, I sincerely hope he is getting all the summer showers he could wish for, and plenty of tennis balls to catch.

## 2. Henry: A Chameleon



Chameleon

THIS IS the story of Henry, our pet chameleon. Chameleons are in a class by themselves and are no ordinary reptiles. They are easily distinguished from their nearest relatives, the lizards, by certain outstanding features. A chameleon's tongue is as long as its body. Its limbs are long and slender and its fingers and toes resemble a parrot's claws. On its head may be any of several ornaments. Henry had a rigid crest that looked like a fireman's helmet.

Henry's eyes were his most remarkable feature. They were not beautiful, but his left eye was quite independent of his right. He could move one eye without disturbing the other. Each eyeball, bulging out of his head, wobbled up and down, backward and forward. This frenzied movement gave Henry a horrible squint. And one look into Henry's frightful gaze was often enough to scare people into believing that chameleons are dangerous and poisonous reptiles.

One day, Grandfather was visiting a friend, when he came upon a noisy scene at the garden gate. Men were shouting, hurling stones, and brandishing sticks. The cause of the uproar was a chameleon that had been discovered sunning itself on a shrub. Someone claimed that the chameleon could poison people twenty feet away, simply by spitting at them. The residents of the area had risen up in arms. Grandfather was just in time to save the chameleon from certain death—he brought the little reptile home.

That chameleon was Henry, and that was how he came to live with us.

When I first visited Henry, he would treat me with great caution, sitting perfectly still on his perch with his back to me. The eye nearer to me would move around like the beam of a searchlight until it had me well in focus. Then it would stop and the other eye would begin an independent survey of its own. For a long time Henry trusted no one and responded to my friendliest gestures with grave suspicion.

Tiring of his wary attitude, I would tickle him gently in the ribs with my finger. This always threw him into a great rage. He would blow himself up to an enormous size as his lungs filled up with air, while his colour changed from green to red. He would sit up on his hind legs, swaying from side to side, hoping to overawe me. Opening his mouth very wide, he would let out an angry hiss. But his threatening display went no further. He did not bite.

Henry was a harmless fellow. If I put my finger in his mouth, even during his wildest moments, he would simply wait for me to take it out again. I suppose he could bite. His rigid jaws carried a number of finely pointed teeth. But Henry seemed convinced that his teeth were there for the sole purpose of chewing food, not fingers.

Henry was sometimes willing to take food from my hands. This he did very swiftly. His tongue performed like a boomerang and always came back to him with the food, usually an insect, attached to it.

Although Henry didn't cause any trouble in our house, he did create somewhat of a riot in the nursery down the road. It started out quite innocently.

When the papayas in our orchard were ripe, Grandmother sent a basketful to her friend Mrs Ghosh, who was the principal of the nursery school. While the basket sat waiting, Henry went searching for beetles and slipped in among the papayas, unnoticed. The gardener dutifully carried the basket to the school and left it in Mrs Ghosh's office. When Mrs Ghosh returned after making her rounds, she began examining and admiring the papayas. And out popped Henry.

Mrs Ghosh screamed. Henry squinted up at her, both eyes revolving furiously. Mrs Ghosh screamed again. Henry's colour changed from green to yellow to red. His mouth opened as though he, too, would like to scream. An assistant teacher rushed in, took one look at the chameleon, and joined in the shrieking.

Henry was terrified. He fled from the office, running down the corridor and into one of the classrooms. There he climbed up on a desk while children ran in all directions—some to get away from Henry, some to catch him. Henry finally made his exit through a window and disappeared in the garden.

Grandmother heard about the incident from Mrs Ghosh but didn't mention that the chameleon was ours. It might have spoiled their friendship.



Grandfather and I didn't think Henry would find his way back to us, because the school was three blocks away. But a few days later, I found him sunning himself on the garden wall. Although he looked none the worse for his adventure, he never went abroad again. Henry spent the rest of his days in the garden, where he kept the insect population well within bounds.

## 2. Grammar Page

### ought to

You use **ought to** to make strong suggestions and talk about someone's duty.

You look tired. **You ought to** go to bed early tonight.

**I ought to** get more physical exercise.

**We ought to** lock the door when we leave home.

**You ought to** turn off the computer when you're not using it.

**You ought to** know how to spell your own name.

**The teacher ought to** make his classes more interesting.

### must

Use **must** to talk about things that you have to do.

**I must** mail this letter today.

**You must** speak louder. I can't hear you.

**Children must not** play with matches.

Go to bed now. Oh, **must I**?

Why **must I** do my homework tonight?

#### Notes

- **Must** keeps the same form in the past tense.
- The contraction of **must not** is **mustn't**.  
She **mustn't** let the dog sleep on her bed.

### may and might

Use **may** to ask if you are allowed to do something and to tell someone that they are allowed to do something.

"**May I** go out to play now?" "Yes, **you may**."

**May I** borrow your pen?

Please **may I** see your ticket?

**John may** leave now, but **Sally may not**.

**May Kenny** come with us to the movies?

Use **may** and **might** to talk about things that are possible or likely.

Take an umbrella. **It might** rain.

**I may not** have time to go swimming tonight.

**We might** go to the party later.

If you're not careful, **you may** hurt yourself.

"Are you going to the concert?" "I don't know. **I might** or **I might not**."