



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E51

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Contents

- 1. Parrot Who Wouldn't Talk**
- 2. Grandpa Fights an Ostrich**
- 3. The Elephant and the Cassowary Bird**
- 4. Air Pollution**
- 5. Grammar Page.**

1. The Parrot Who Wouldn't Talk

'YOU'RE NO beauty! Can't talk, can't sing, can't dance!'

With these words Aunt Ruby would taunt the unfortunate parakeet who glared morosely at everyone from his ornamental cage at one end of the long veranda of Granny's bungalow in north India.

In those distant days, almost everyone—Indian or European—kept a pet parrot or parakeet, or 'lovebird' as some of the smaller ones were called. Sometimes these birds became great talkers, or rather mimics, and would learn to recite entire mantras (religious chants), or admonitions to the children of the house, such as '*Paro, beta, paro!*' ('Study, child, study!') or, for the benefit of boys like me—'Don't be greedy, don't be greedy.'

These expressions were, of course, picked up by the parrot over a period of time, after many repetitions by whichever member of the household had taken on the task of teaching the bird to talk.

But our parrot refused to talk.

He'd been bought by Aunt Ruby from a bird-catcher who'd visited all the houses on our road, selling caged birds ranging from colourful budgies to chirpy little manias and even common sparrows that had been dabbed with paint and passed off as some exotic species. Neither Granny nor Grandfather were keen on keeping caged birds as pets, but Aunt Ruby threatened to throw a tantrum if she did not get her way—and Aunt Ruby's tantrums were dreadful to behold.

Anyway, she insisted on keeping the parrot and teaching him to talk. But the bird took an instant dislike to my aunt and resisted all her blandishments.

'Kiss, kiss,' Aunt Ruby would coo, putting her face close to the bars of the cage. But the parrot would back away, his beady little eyes getting even smaller with anger at the prospect of being kissed by Aunt Ruby. And, on one occasion, he lunged forward without warning and knocked my aunt's spectacles off her nose.

After that, Aunt Ruby gave up her endearments and became quite hostile towards the poor bird, making faces at him and calling out, 'Can't talk, can't sing, can't dance!' and other nasty comments.

It fell upon me, then ten years old, to feed the parrot, and he seemed quite happy to receive green chillies and ripe tomatoes from my hands, these delicacies being supplemented by slices of mango, for it was then the mango season. It also gave me an opportunity to consume a couple of mangoes while feeding the parrot.

One afternoon, while everyone was indoors enjoying a siesta, I gave the parrot his lunch and then deliberately left the cage door open. Seconds later, the bird was

winging his way to the freedom of the mango orchard.

At the same time Grandfather came on to the veranda, and remarked, 'I see your aunt's parrot has escaped.'

'The door was quite loose,' I said with a shrug. 'Well, I don't suppose we'll see it again.'

Aunt Ruby was upset at first, and threatened to buy another bird. We put her off by promising to buy her a bowl of goldfish.

'But goldfish don't talk,' she protested.

'Well, neither did your bird,' said Grandfather. 'So we'll get you a gramophone.

You can listen to Clara Cluck all day. They say she sings like a nightingale.'

I thought we'd never see the parrot again, but he probably missed his green chillies, because a few days later, I found the bird sitting on the veranda railing, looking expectantly at me with his head cocked to one side. Unselfishly, I gave the parrot half of my mango.

While the bird was enjoying the mango, Aunt Ruby emerged from her room and, with a cry of surprise, called out, 'Look, my parrot's come back! He must have missed me!'

With a loud squawk, the parrot flew out of her reach and, perching on the nearest rose bush, glared at Aunt Ruby and shrieked at her in my aunt's familiar tones, 'You're no beauty! Can't talk, can't sing, can't dance!'

Aunt Ruby went ruby red and dashed indoors. But that wasn't the end of the affair. The parrot became a frequent visitor to the garden and veranda and whenever he saw Aunt Ruby he would call out, 'You're no beauty, you're no beauty! Can't sing, can't dance!'

The parrot had learnt to talk after all.

2. Grandpa Fights an Ostrich

BEFORE MY grandfather joined the Indian Railways, he worked for a few years on the East African Railways, and it was during that period that he had his now famous encounter with the ostrich. My childhood was frequently enlivened by this often-told tale of his, and I give it here in his own words—or as well as I can remember them!

While engaged in the laying of a new railway line, I had a miraculous escape from an awful death. I lived in a small township, but my work lay some twelve miles away, and I had to go to the work site and back on horseback.

One day, my horse had a slight accident, so I decided to do the journey on foot, being a great walker in those days. I also knew of a short cut through the hills that would save me about six miles.

This short cut went through an ostrich farm—or ‘camp’, as it was called. It was the breeding season. I was fairly familiar with the ways of ostriches, and knew that male birds were very aggressive in the breeding season, ready to attack on the slightest provocation, but I also knew that my dog would scare away any bird that might try to attack me. Strange though it may seem, even the biggest ostrich (and some of them grow to a height of nine feet) will run faster than a racehorse at the sight of even a small dog. So, I felt quite safe in the company of my dog, a mongrel who had adopted me some two months previously.

On arrival at the ‘camp’, I climbed through the wire fencing and, keeping a good look out, dodged across the open spaces between the thorn bushes. Now and then I caught a glimpse of the birds feeding some distance away.

I had gone about half a mile from the fencing when up started a hare. In an instant my dog gave chase. I tried calling him back, even though I knew it was hopeless. Chasing hares was that dog’s passion.

I don’t know whether it was the dog’s bark or my own shouting, but what I was most anxious to avoid immediately happened. The ostriches were startled and began darting to and fro. Suddenly, I saw a big male bird emerge from a thicket about a hundred yards away. He stood still and stared at me for a few moments. I stared back. Then, expanding his short wings and with his tail erect, he came bounding towards me.

As I had nothing, not even a stick, with which to defend myself, I turned and ran towards the fence. But it was an unequal race. What were my steps of two or three feet against the creature’s great strides of sixteen to twenty feet? There was only one hope: to get behind a large bush and try to elude the bird until help came. A dodging game was my only chance.

And so, I rushed for the nearest clump of thorn bushes and waited for my pursuer.

The great bird wasted no time—he was immediately upon me.

Then the strangest encounter took place. I dodged this way and that, taking great care not to get directly in front of the ostrich's deadly kick. Ostriches kick forward, and with such terrific force that if you were struck, their huge chisel-like nails would cause you much damage.

I was breathless, and really quite helpless, calling wildly for help as I circled the thorn bush. My strength was ebbing. How much longer could I keep going? I was ready to drop from exhaustion.

As if aware of my condition, the infuriated bird suddenly doubled back on his course and charged straight at me. With a desperate effort I managed to step to one side. I don't know how, but I found myself holding on to one of the creature's wings, quite close to its body.

It was now the ostrich's turn to be frightened. He began to turn, or rather waltz, moving round and round so quickly that my feet were soon swinging out from his body, almost horizontally! All the while the ostrich kept opening and shutting his beak with loud snaps.

Imagine my situation as I clung desperately to the wing of the enraged bird. He was whirling me round and round as though he were a discus-thrower—and I the discus! My arms soon began to ache with the strain, and the swift and continuous circling was making me dizzy. But I knew that if I relaxed my hold, even for a second, a terrible fate awaited me.

Round and round we went in a great circle. It seemed as if that spiteful bird would never tire. And, I knew I could not hold on much longer. Suddenly, the ostrich went into reverse! This unexpected move made me lose my hold and sent me sprawling to the ground. I landed in a heap near the thorn bush and in an instant, before I even had time to realize what had happened, the big bird was upon me. I thought the end had come. Instinctively, I raised my hands to protect my face. But the ostrich did not strike.

I moved my hands from my face and there stood the creature with one foot raised, ready to deliver a deadly kick! I couldn't move. Was the bird going to play cat-and-mouse with me and prolong the agony?

As I watched, frightened and fascinated, the ostrich turned his head sharply to the left. A second later, he jumped back, turned, and made off as fast as he could go. Dazed, I wondered what had happened to make him beat so unexpected a retreat.

I soon found out. To my great joy, I heard the bark of my truant dog, and the next moment he was jumping around me, licking my face and hands. Needless to say, I returned his caresses most affectionately! And I took good care to see that he did not leave my side until we were well clear of that ostrich 'camp'.

3. The Elephant and the Cassowary Bird

THE BABY elephant wasn't out of place in our home in north India because India is where elephants belong, and in any case, our house was full of pets brought home by Grandfather, who was in the Forest Service. But the cassowary bird was different. No one had ever seen such a bird before—not in India. Grandfather had picked it up on a voyage to Singapore, where he'd been given the bird by a rubber planter who'd got it from a Dutch trader who'd got it from a man in Indonesia.

Anyway, it ended up at our home in Dehra, and seemed to do quite well in the subtropical climate. It looked like a cross between a turkey and an ostrich, but bigger than the former and smaller than the latter—about five feet in height. It was not a beautiful bird, nor even a friendly one, but it had come to stay, and everyone was curious about it, especially the baby elephant.

Right from the start, the baby elephant took a great interest in the cassowary, a bird unlike any found in the Indian jungles. He would circle round the odd creature, and diffidently examine with his trunk the texture of its stumpy wings. Of course he suspected no evil, and his childlike curiosity encouraged him to take liberties which resulted in an unpleasant experience.

Noticing the baby elephant's attempts to make friends with the rather morose cassowary, we felt a bit apprehensive. Self-contained and sullen, the big bird responded only by slowly and slyly raising one of its powerful legs, in the meantime gazing into space with an innocent air. We knew what the gesture meant; we had seen that treacherous leg raised on many an occasion, and suddenly shooting out with a force that would have done credit to a vicious camel. In fact, camel and cassowary kicks are delivered on the same plan, except that the camel kicks backward like a horse and the bird forward.

We wished to spare our baby elephant a painful experience, and led him away from the bird. But he persisted in his friendly overtures, and one morning, he received an ugly reward. Rapid as lightning, the cassowary hit straight from the hip and knee joints, and the elephant ran squealing to Grandfather.

For several days he avoided the cassowary, and we thought he had learnt his lesson. He crossed and recrossed the compound and the garden, swinging his trunk, thinking furiously. Then, a week later, he appeared on the veranda at breakfast time in his usual cheery, childlike fashion, sidling up to the cassowary as if nothing had happened.

We were struck with amazement at this and so, it seemed, was the bird. Had the painful lesson already been forgotten, and by a member of the elephant tribe noted for its ability to never forget? Another dose of the same medicine would serve the booby right.

The cassowary once more began to draw up its fighting leg with sinister determination. It was nearing the true position for the master kick, kung fu style, when all of a sudden the baby elephant seized with his trunk the cassowary's other leg and pulled it down. There was a clumsy flapping of wings, a tremendous swelling of the bird's wattle, and an undignified getting up, as if it were a floored boxer doing his best to beat the count of ten. The bird then marched off with an attempt to look stately and unconcerned, while we at the breakfast table were convulsed with laughter.

After this, the cassowary bird gave the baby elephant as wide a berth as possible. But they were not forced to coexist for very long. The baby elephant, getting bulky and cumbersome, was sold and now lives in a zoo where he is a favourite with young visitors who love to take rides on his back.

As for the cassowary, he continued to grace our veranda for many years, gaped at but not made much of, while entering on a rather friendless old age.

4. Air Pollution

Last summer I boarded a flight from the IGI airport. The aeroplane waited at the runway in a queue to take off for an hour, with the engines running. A lot of aviation fuel was wasted. Carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxide and water vapour were released into the atmosphere.

With the entry of many players in the aviation industry, pollution has reached the skies as well. With the number of airline flights worldwide growing and expected to skyrocket over the coming decades, the problem of delayed arrival and departure will obviously intensify.

The inefficiencies in the air and on the ground caused by the system also mean wastage of fuel and excessive of CO₂. No doubt, the air travel industry is coming under scrutiny for its role in climate change. Though aviation industry contributes only 2% of the total C-emissions. But with the rapid economic growth and ever increasing affordability of air travel, this industry will only expand at a much faster pace than ever before, thus increasing the rate of carbon emissions.

Aircraft emission pollutes the air and threatens to become one of the largest contributors of global warming by 2050. At present, pollution from the aircrafts is less than 3% of the environmental pollution, but it is believed that aircraft emissions are currently one of the fastest growing contributors to global warming.

Available and a sustainable solution comes from the next generation jet bio fuels made from algae or coconuts. Another sustainable alternative would be to put an analog traffic-control system, which is installed in a few airports around the world.

Next Gen is the FAA's (Federal Aviation Administration) long term plan to replace the current U.S. radar based air – traffic control system with one that operates using satellites and a global positioning system. Instead of a radar system, that updates the position of planes only as often as its dish rotates every 12 sec. or so, next Gen will use satellite data to locate planes in real time. Instead of relying on time consuming voice communication with a control tower, pilots will instantly know the location, speed and direction of the planes around them. Every minute saved from a flight plan means fuel saved and carbon emissions averted. And with jet fuel costing about \$ 1.75 per gallon that save the airlines millions.

4. Grammar Page

Adverbs of Time

Some adverbs and adverb phrases answer the question “when?” They are called **adverbs of time**.

- I’m going to my new school **tomorrow**.
- The train has **already** left.
- We moved into our new house **last week**.
- My big brother goes to college **in the autumn**.
- Our favorite TV program starts **at 6 o’clock**.
- It rained heavily **last night**.
- We’re going on a trip **in a few days’ time**.
- We’ll leave **as soon as possible**.
- My shoes will be too small for me **next year**.
- I haven’t seen Mom **this morning**. Is she working **today**?

Adverbs of Place

Some adverbs and adverb phrases answer the question “where?” They are called **adverbs of place**.

- It’s very sunny but cold **outside**.
- The boys are playing **upstairs**.
- That’s our ball **there**.
- I couldn’t find my book **anywhere**.
- They live in a house **nearby**.
- The dog is **in the garden**.
- Flowers like these grow **in the park**.
- We’re going **to New York City** on our school trip.
- My brother is studying **at an English university**.
- They live **on the northern side of the island**.

