

The Old Man's Guests

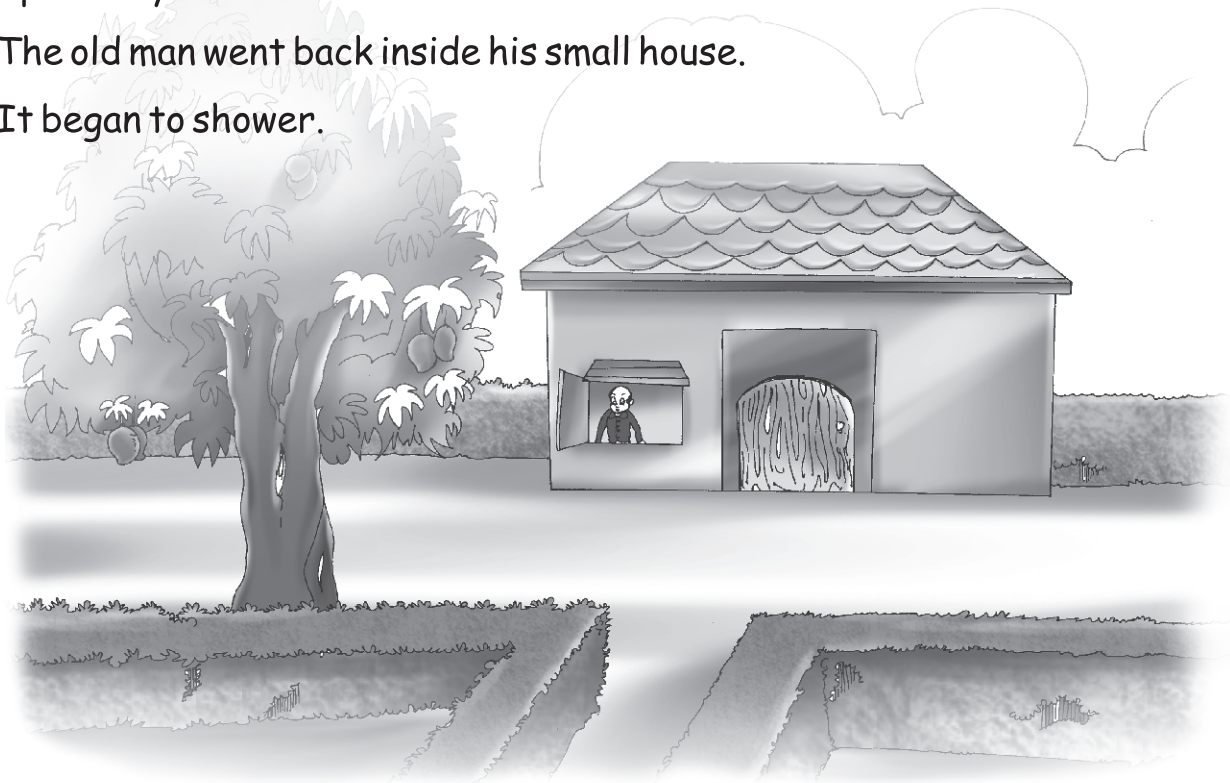
-Inspired by Farideh Farjam-

Once upon a time, there lived an old man in a small village near the forest. His little house had a yard, a mango tree and lots of small bushes surrounding the house like a hedge. The old man lived alone and was quite aloof from his neighbours. He, however, allowed the children to play in his small yard.

One evening, just as the sun disappeared on the horizon and dusk entered the house, the old man lighted his lamp and put it on the window sill. He covered himself with a thin blanket, which barely saved him from the chill breeze outside. While he sat on his easy chair outside and gazed at the colours in the sky, he felt a small rain drop on his cheek. The pleasant smell of mud walls dampened by the rain scented the air.

The old man went back inside his small house.

It began to shower.



The old man felt cold. He quickly ate his supper and decided to spread his bed on the floor. As he sat on his bed, there was a knock on the door. Knock, knock, knock!

The old man said to himself, "Good Lord! Who could it be at this time?" He covered himself with the thin blanket and called from behind the door, "Who's knocking at the door?"



"It's me, Mr. Parrot. I live on the mango tree. I'm getting wet in the rain. Please open the door and let me in."

The old man opened the door and said, "Come in."

Rain drops rolled off the parrot's beak---drip, drip, drip.

He flapped his wings---flap, flap, flap.

The old man led the parrot to the room and put a cloth over his wet wings.

The parrot was scratching his wings with his beak when again they heard a knock at the door. Knock, knock, knock!

The old man ran out again and asked, "Who's knocking at the door?"

"It's me, short-legged Hen. I'm getting wet in the rain. Open the door, please."

The old man opened the door and allowed the Hen to come in.

The hen's feathers were stuck together; her tired eyes expressionless. The old man put a cloth over the hen's back. The hen moved to one side of the room and shook herself to get dry.

The old man had hardly crept into his bed when, again, he heard someone knocking at the door. Knock, knock, knock!

The old man without hesitation ran to the door and asked, "Who's knocking at the door?"

This time a cat entered. When the parrot and the hen saw her coming, they huddled together and began to shiver from fear.

The cat smiled and said, "Don't be frightened, we're all guests here and we have to make the best of it."

So, they all relaxed and began to doze off.

The old man put a cloth on the cat's back. The cat stretched out in the corner, closed her eyes and began to wipe her face and paws.

The old man went to sit down when again--- knock, knock, knock!

The old man knew what to do. He put on his blanket, went to the door and asked, "Who's knocking at the door?"

"It's me, Watch Dog. I'm getting wet in the rain. Open the door and allow me in, please."

The old man opened the door and said, "You can come in, too."

The dog's teeth were chattering---click, click, click.

The old man showed him into the room. He tied a scarf around his neck and led him aside to lie down.

At this moment, the knocking at the door was louder than before. KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK!

The old man went to the door and asked, "Who's knocking at the door?"

"It's us, the Sheep and the Horse. We are getting wet in the rain. Open the door, please."

The horse neighed, lowered his head to enter through the door and squeezed himself into the room. The sheep slipped in slowly behind the horse.

When the others saw the horse, they moved around to make room for him.

The parrot giggled at all. The old man brought his blanket and covered the horse. He gave a small piece of cloth to the sheep to sit on. It had enough wool on itself to keep warm. Then he faced his guests and said, "Very well, you can all sleep comfortable tonight, but tomorrow morning go back to your homes."

The parrot and the hen jumped on the window sill and went to sleep. The cat, the dog and the sheep slept on the floor while the horse stood in one corner and closed his eyes bending his hind legs a little.

The old man was tired too. He pulled another blanket over himself and went to sleep.

The next morning the old man woke up later than usual, but when he opened his eyes, he saw that everyone was busy. The parrot lit the stove and the cat and sheep came with the saucepan to make tea. The dog was sweeping the yard. The horse was smoothing the wet roof with a stone roller and the hen was helping him.



The old man was happy to see all the activities in his little house. He then invited all his guests to have some breakfast with tea. While they drank their last cup of tea, the horse said, "Last night we all had no place to go and you welcomed us in your home, but now we must excuse ourselves and leave."

"You have been very kind. The thought of leaving is making us all sad" said the dog.

The old man said, "If you want to know what's in my heart, I wish you all could stay here. I feel very lonely here, but my house is too small and I don't have enough room."

The horse sat thinking, and then said, "I can pull your cart and carry you to the market daily so that you don't have to walk such a long distance everyday. Do you want me to leave?" The old man, realising that he had hurt the horse's feeling, said, "Although there is little room, stay here with me."

The hen said, "I can cluck and lay big eggs for you. Do you want me to leave?"

The old man said, "You can stay too."

The dog said, "I can bark and chase away thieves for you. Do you want me to leave?"

The old man smiled and said, "You can stay, too."

The cat curled her tail around herself and said, "I can meow and catch mice for you. Do you want me to leave?"

The old man said, "Dear Pussy Cat. Don't worry, you can stay too."

The sheep quickly added, "You can use my wool to keep yourself warm in this cool breeze. Do you want me to leave?"

The old man felt touched by this kind gesture and said, "You too can stay."

Not wanting to be left behind, the parrot quickly asked, "Am I the only one you would ask to leave? I can keep a watch on all of them for you and tell you about the day's events. Now do you want me to leave?"

The old man said, "It doesn't matter, you may also stay." Then he gave each of his guests a warm glance and said, "Now that all of you want to stay with me, you have to help each other to build a shelter for yourself so that we can all live comfortably."

With these happy tidings, they all cleaned the dishes and went to work. From then onwards, they lived happily together. Year after year, they welcomed any unexpected guest that came to their little house to seek shelter and the old man watched his happy family grow.

