

## B. THE TONGUE-CUT SPARROW

(A Folk-tale of Japan)

Once upon a time there was an old man who lived with his wife, high up among the mountains of Japan. Not very happily, however, because his wife was older than he, and was very bad-tempered. She always kept shouting at her husband and scolding him. The poor man hadn't a single friend in the world except a tame sparrow, and his wife abused and ill-treated even that little bird.

It happened one day that the old man was off to the fields, and his wife was at her wash-tub. Her temper was always worse on washing days, because the scrubbing and wringing quite strained her back. That day she had made some starch, and put it in a wooden bowl to cool. When she came for it at last, she saw the pet sparrow perched on the rim having a hearty meal. In a rage the woman caught it and cut off the tip of its tongue with a pair of scissors.

"That will teach you to steal!" she screamed. "Now, be off with you — and never again come back!"

And she flung the poor little bird, all bleeding, into the air, where it circled round once or twice, and then flew mournfully away.

When the old man returned he was very sad and angry at what his wife had done. The two of them shouted and quarrelled far into the night, but it was all to no purpose. The sparrow with only half a tongue was gone, and the old man had no chick or child to cheer his sad heart. For company he had only his nagging wife.



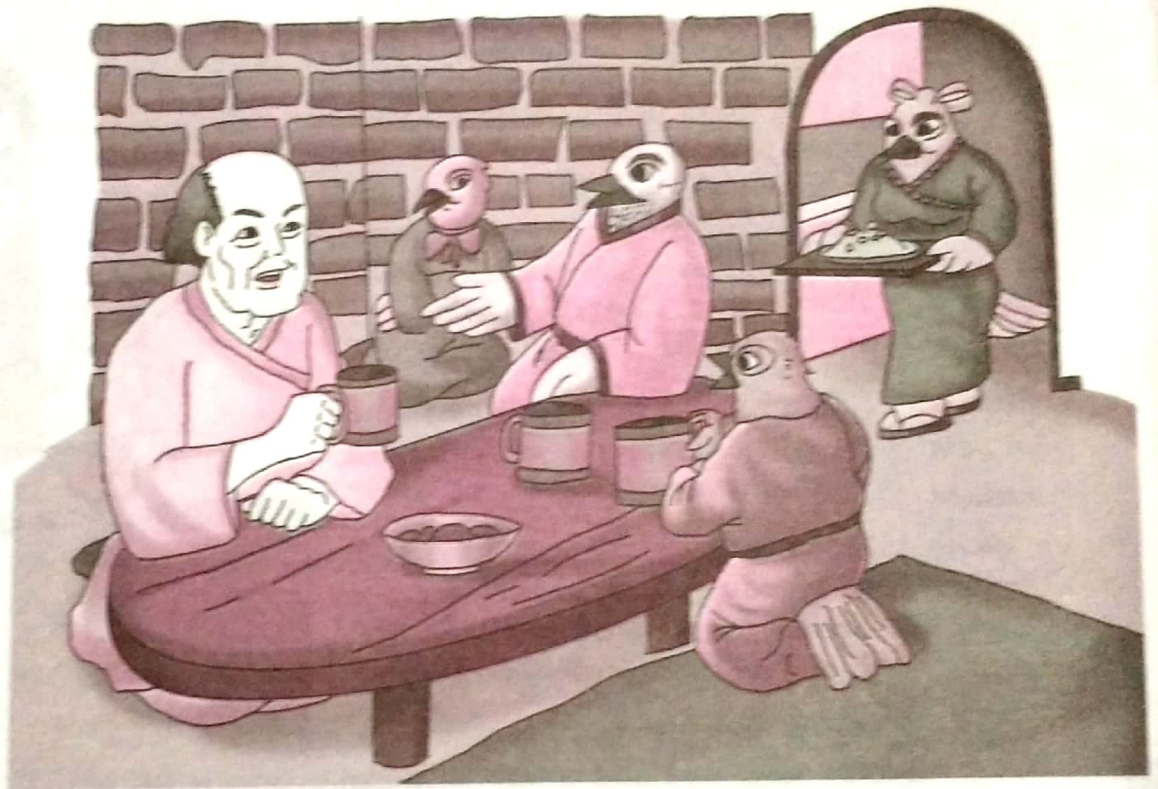
Class-notes :



35 The one day, long months afterwards, the old man was up in the mountains. Suddenly a small voice chirped 'Good morning!' and there he saw his sparrow. But it was a different bird now, for the cutting of its tongue had enabled it to speak as humans do.

The old man and the sparrow bowed and greeted each other in the polite Japanese fashion. Then the sparrow begged him to come and visit his wife and two daughters. (*It was a male sparrow*).

40 It was not very far away. The sparrow and his family lived in a little bamboo house. It was in the middle of an enchanting garden. Mrs. Sparrow did the honours of her house and brought out slices of sweet jelly, rock candy, custard and bowls of cornflour. Afterwards the elder Miss Sparrow prepared the ceremonial tea. She served it most gracefully — Kneeling, as was proper.



50 The old man drank several cups of tea and, when they pressed him hard, consented at last to spend the night with them. But there was so much to see that he extended his visit for nearly a week. Never before had he received so much kindness, and his heart warmed towards his kind little hosts. He was so happy living with them that he forgot all about his cares.

Class-notes :



But on the eighth day he suddenly realised how long he had stayed there, and said he simply must go. Mr. Sparrow seemed very sorry, and he insisted on giving him a parting gift. He brought out two travelling baskets—one heavy, the other light.

"Choose one of these," he said, "as a small memento of your visit."

The old man was not at all greedy. So he chose the lighter one and with many thanks and bows and good-byes, took his leave.

Hardly had he got inside the gate of his house when his wife began scolding him for neglecting her. With great difficulty the old man managed to get her to hold her tongue, and then he recounted his strange adventures. At the end he showed her the basket, and they lifted the lid together.



What a marvellous sight! The basket was crammed with gold and silver and jewels! There was a hat that made one invisible! There was a purse that was always full of money, no matter how much one spent!

"I am also going to get a present from the sparrows," cried the old woman with a greedy grin.

Her husband tried in vain to stop her. He pointed out that they had already quite as much as they wanted. Moreover, he thought it both rude and greedy to ask for more. But she paid no heed to his words and set out immediately. The old man had told her the way, so she had no difficulty in reaching there.

Class-notes :

75 Mr. Sparrow was not pleased to see the cruel woman, but he invited her in for a cup of tea. Mrs. Sparrow and her daughters did not appear. They probably knew what she had come for.

The old woman finished her tea, and as there seemed no sign of any gifts appearing, she herself asked for one. Mr. Sparrow looked down his beak. 80 He said nothing, but went inside and returned with two baskets similar to those he had offered to the old man. The greedy woman at once seized the heavier one and hurried off without saying 'Thank you' or 'Good-bye' or anything.

85 She carried her basket back in triumph. She reached home panting, for the basket was very heavy.

"What a fool you were," she said to her husband, "not to choose the heavy basket! There must be twice as much in it."

And then she tore off the lid.

90 But, goodness me! Instead of a fountain of gold and jewels, a host of demons buzzed out like wasps. A dreadful hairy cobra coiled itself round her, and squeezed her tighter and tighter until she died.



95 No harm was done to the old man, who was now a very wealthy widower. He bought himself a splendid house and adopted a son to comfort him in his old age. To this son he always pointed out the dangers of greed.

**Class-notes :**