

## **11th Standard -English**

### **Hornbill-The Portrait of a Lady Summary**

In 'The Portrait of a Lady', Khushwant Singh has given an account of his grandmother. He draws a life-like portrait. She was very old. Her face was wrinkled. Her hair was white. It was hard to believe that once she had been young and pretty. His grandfather's picture hung above the mantelpiece in the drawing room. He wore a big turban. His clothes were loose. He looked at least a hundred years old. It was hard to believe that he had once a wife or children.

Khushwant Singh's grandmother was a short lady. She was fat and slightly bent. She couldn't walk straight. She hobbled about the house. She had to keep one hand on her waist. It was to balance her stoop. In the other she held a rosary. She was always telling the beads. Her lips constantly moved in prayer. She put on white clothes. Her silver locks scattered over her pale face. She looked like snowy mountains in winter. She was a picture of peace and contentment. She was very old. Perhaps she could not have looked older. She looked the same for the last twenty years.

Khushwant Singh and his grandmother were good friends. His parents went to city. They left him with her in the village. She took good care of him. She used to wake him up in the morning. She got him ready for the school. She said her morning prayer in sing-song manner. She hoped that he would learn it by heart. He liked her voice but never bothered to learn it. Then she would fetch his wooden slate. She had already washed it and plastered it with yellow chalk. She would take an earthen inkpot and a reed-pen. She would tie them in

a bundle and hand it to him. She would give him a thick stale chapatti with little butter and sugar spread on it. It was his breakfast. She carried several stale chapattis with her for the village dogs.

His grandmother always went to school with him. The school was attached to the temple. The priest taught children the alphabet and the morning prayer. The children sat in two rows in the verandah. They would sing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus. The grandmother sat inside the temple. She would read holy books. Then they would walk home together. The village dogs would gather at the temple door. They threw chapattis to them. The dogs would growl and fight with each other.

The narrator's parents sent for them in the city. It was a turning-point in their friendship. They shared the same room. But grandmother no longer went to school with him. The narrator used to go to an English school in a motor bus. There were no dogs in the streets. So grandmother took to feeding the sparrows.

Years rolled by. They saw less of each other. Sometimes she would ask him what the teacher had taught him. She did not believe in the things they taught at the English school. She was unhappy. She did not like English or Science. She felt sad that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures at school. The narrator one day told her that they were being given music lessons. She was disturbed. She thought music quite indecent. For her it was good only for prostitutes and beggars. It was not meant for gentle folk.

The narrator went to university. He was given a room of his own. The common link of friendship was broken. The grandmother accepted her loneliness quietly. She was always busy with her spinning wheel and reciting prayers. She rarely talked to anyone. In the afternoon, she relaxed for a while. Then she would feed the sparrows. She sat in the verandah. She broke the bread into little bits. Then she would throw them to sparrows. Hundreds of sparrows came there. They created a hell of noise. Some came and sat on her legs. Others would sit on her shoulders. Some would sit even on her head. She smiled but never frightened them away. Feeding the sparrows was the happiest half-hour of the day for her.

The narrator decided to go abroad for higher studies. He was to remain away for five years. The grandmother was very old. She could die any moment. The narrator was worried. But the grandmother was not upset. She showed no emotion. She came to the railway station to see him off. Her lips moved in prayer. Her mind was lost in prayer. Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary. She kissed his forehead silently. The narrator thought that it was the last sign of physical contact between them.

The narrator returned home after five years. His grandmother met him at the station. She did not look a day older. She did not speak anything. She held him in her arms. She went on reciting her prayers. In the afternoon she fed the sparrows as usual. In the evening a change came over her. She didn't pray. She collected the women of the neighbourhood. She got an old drum. She continued thumping the old drum for several hours. She started singing. She sang of the home-coming of warriors. They had to persuade her to stop.

She might overstrain herself. It was for the first time that she had forgotten to pray.

The next morning she fell ill. She had a mild fever. She told them that her end was near. She realised that she had forgotten to pray. She didn't want to talk. It would be waste of time. She ignored their requests. She lay peacefully in bed. She was praying and telling beads. Then her lips stopped moving. The rosary fell down from her lifeless fingers. Her face looked pale but peaceful. She was dead. She was laid on the ground. She was covered with a red shawl. Arrangements for her funeral were being made.

It was evening. The sun was setting. They brought a wooden stretcher. They stopped half-way in the courtyard. Thousands of sparrows sat near her dead body. They did not chirrup. Everyone felt sorry for the birds. The narrator's mother brought some bread. She broke it into little crumbs. She threw these crumbs to the sparrows. The birds took no notice of them. Then they carried her dead body outside. The sparrows flew away quietly. The crumbs of bread still remained lying there in the courtyard. Evidently, the sparrows had come to mourn the death of the grandmother.