Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

How The Alphabet Was Made

Rudyard Kipling

The week after Taffimai Metallumai (we will still call her Taffy, Best Beloved) made that little mistake about her Daddy's spear and the Stranger-man and the picture-letter and all, she went carp-fishing again with her Daddy. Her Mummy wanted her to stay at home and help hang up hides to dry on the big drying-poles outside their Neolithic Cave, but Taffy slipped away down to her Daddy quite early, and they fished. Presently she began to giggle, and her Daddy said, 'Don't be silly, child.'

'But wasn't it inciting!' said Taffy. 'Don't you remember how the Head Chief puffed out his cheeks, and how funny the nice Stranger-man looked with the mud in his hair?'

'Well do I,' said Tegumai. 'I had to pay two deerskins—soft ones with fringes—to the Stranger-man for the things we did to him.'

'We didn't do anything,' said Taffy. 'It was Mummy and the other Neolithic ladies—and the mud.'

'We won't talk about that,' said her Daddy, 'Let's have lunch.'

Taffy took a marrow-bone and sat mousy-quiet for ten whole minutes, while her Daddy scratched on pieces of birch-bark with a shark's tooth. Then she said, 'Daddy, I've thinked of a secret surprise. You make a noise—any sort of noise.'

'Ah!' said Tegumai. 'Will that do to begin with?'

'Yes,' said Taffy. 'You look just like a carp-fish with its mouth open. Say it again, please.'

'Ah! ah! ah!' said her Daddy. 'Don't be rude, my daughter.'

'I'm not meaning rude, really and truly,' said Taffy. 'It's part of my secret-surprise-think. Do say ah, Daddy, and keep your mouth open at the end, and lend me that tooth. I'm going to draw a carp-fish's mouth wide-open.'

'What for?' said her Daddy.

'Don't you see?' said Taffy, scratching away on the bark. 'That will be our little secret s'prise. When I draw a carp-fish with his mouth open in the smoke at the back of our Cave—if Mummy doesn't mind—it will remind you of that ah-noise.

Then we can play that it was me jumped out of the dark and s'prised you with that noise—same as I did in the beaver-swamp last winter.'

'Really?' said her Daddy, in the voice that grown-ups use when they are truly attending. 'Go on, Taffy.'

'Oh bother!' she said. 'I can't draw all of a carp-fish, but I can draw something that means a carp-fish's mouth. Don't you know how they stand on their heads rooting in the mud? Well, here's a pretence carp-fish (we can play that the rest of him is drawn). Here's just his mouth, and that means ah.' And she drew this. (1.)

'That's not bad,' said Tegumai, and scratched on his own piece of bark for himself; but you've forgotten the feeler that hangs across his mouth.'

'But I can't draw, Daddy.'

'You needn't draw anything of him except just the opening of his mouth and the feeler across. Then we'll know he's a carp-fish, 'cause the perches and trouts haven't got feelers. Look here, Taffy.' And he drew this. (2.)

'Now I'll copy it.' said Taffy. 'Will you understand this when you see it?'

'Perfectly,' said her Daddy.

And she drew this. (3.) 'And I'll be quite as s'prised when I see it anywhere, as if you had jumped out from behind a tree and said '"Ah!"'

'Now, make another noise,' said Taffy, very proud.

'Yah!' said her Daddy, very loud.

'H'm,' said Taffy. 'That's a mixy noise. The end part is ah-carp-fish-mouth; but what can we do about the front part? Yer-yer-yer and ah! Ya!'

'It's very like the carp-fish-mouth noise. Let's draw another bit of the carp-fish and join 'em,' said her Daddy. He was quite incited too.

'No. If they're joined, I'll forget. Draw it separate. Draw his tail. If he's standing on his head the tail will come first. 'Sides, I think I can draw tails easiest,' said Taffy.

'A good notion,' said Tegumai. 'Here's a carp-fish tail for the yer-noise.' And he drew this. (4.)

'I'll try now,' said Taffy. ''Member I can't draw like you, Daddy. Will it do if I just draw the split part of the tail, and the sticky-down line for where it joins?' And she drew this. (5.)

Her Daddy nodded, and his eyes were shiny bright with 'citement.

‘That’s beautiful,’ she said. ‘Now make another noise, Daddy.’

‘Oh!’ said her Daddy, very loud.

‘That’s quite easy,’ said Taffy. ‘You make your mouth all around like an egg or a stone. So an egg or a stone will do for that.’

‘You can’t always find eggs or stones. We’ll have to scratch a round something like one.’ And he drew this. (6.)

‘My gracious!’ said Taffy, ‘what a lot of noise-pictures we’ve made,—carp-mouth, carp-tail, and egg! Now, make another noise, Daddy.’

‘Ssh!’ said her Daddy, and frowned to himself, but Taffy was too incited to notice.

‘That’s quite easy,’ she said, scratching on the bark.

‘Eh, what?’ said her Daddy. ‘I meant I was thinking, and didn’t want to be disturbed.’

‘It’s a noise just the same. It’s the noise a snake makes, Daddy, when it is thinking and doesn’t want to be disturbed. Let’s make the ssh-noise a snake. Will this do?’ And she drew this. (7.)

‘There,’ she said. ‘That’s another s’prise-secret. When you draw a hissy-snake by the door of your little back-cave where you mend the spears, I’ll know you’re thinking hard; and I’ll come in most mousy-quiet. And if you draw it on a tree by the river when you are fishing, I’ll know you want me to walk most most mousy-quiet, so as not to shake the banks.’

‘Perfectly true,’ said Tegumai. And there’s more in this game than you think. Taffy, dear, I’ve a notion that your Daddy’s daughter has hit upon the finest thing that there ever was since the Tribe of Tegumai took to using shark’s teeth instead of flints for their spear-heads. I believe we’ve found out the big secret of the world.’

‘Why?’ said Taffy, and her eyes shone too with incitement.

‘I’ll show,’ said her Daddy. ‘What’s water in the Tegumai language?’

‘Ya, of course, and it means river too—like Wagai-ya—the Wagai river.’

‘What is bad water that gives you fever if you drink it—black water—swamp-water?’

‘Yo, of course.’

‘Now look,’ said her Daddy. ‘S’pose you saw this scratched by the side of a pool in the beaver-swamp?’ And he drew this. (8.)

‘Carp-tail and round egg. Two noises mixed! Yo, bad water,’ said Taffy. ‘’Course I wouldn’t drink that water because I’d know you said it was bad.’

‘But I needn’t be near the water at all. I might be miles away, hunting, and still—’

‘And still it would be just the same as if you stood there and said, “G’way, Taffy, or you’ll get fever.” All that in a carp-fish-tail and a round egg! O Daddy, we must tell Mummy, quick!’ and Taffy danced all round him.



‘Not yet,’ said Tegumai; ‘not till we’ve gone a little further. Let’s see. Yo is bad water, but So is food cooked on the fire, isn’t it?’ And he drew this. (9.)

‘Yes. Snake and egg,’ said Taffy ‘So that means dinner’s ready. If you saw that scratched on a tree you’d know it was time to come to the Cave. So’d I.’

‘My Winkie!’ said Tegumai. ‘That’s true too. But wait a minute. I see a difficulty. SO means “come and have dinner,” but sho means the drying-poles where we hang our hides.’

‘Horrid old drying-poles!’ said Taffy. ‘I hate helping to hang heavy, hot, hairy hides on them. If you drew the snake and egg, and I thought it meant dinner, and I came in from the wood and found that it meant I was to help Mummy hang the two hides on the drying-poles, what would I do?’

‘You’d be cross. So’d Mummy. We must make a new picture for sho. We must draw a spotty snake that hisses sh-sh, and we’ll play that the plain snake only hisses ssss.’

‘I couldn’t be sure how to put in the spots,’ said Taffy. ‘And p’raps if you were in a hurry you might leave them out, and I’d think it was so when it was sho, and then Mummy would catch me just the same. No! I think we’d better draw a picture of the horrid high drying-poles their very selves, and make quite sure. I’ll put them in just after the hissy-snake. Look!’ And she drew this. (10.)

‘P’raps that’s safest. It’s very like our drying-poles, anyhow,’ said her Daddy, laughing. ‘Now I’ll make a new noise with a snake and drying-pole sound in it. I’ll say shi. That’s Tegumai for spear, Taffy.’ And he laughed.

‘Don’t make fun of me,’ said Taffy, as she thought of her picture-letter and the mud in the Stranger-man’s hair. ‘You draw it, Daddy.’

‘We won’t have beavers or hills this time, eh?’ said her Daddy, ‘I’ll just draw a straight line for my spear.’ and he drew this. (11.)

‘Even Mummy couldn’t mistake that for me being killed.’

‘Please don’t, Daddy. It makes me uncomfy. Do some more noises. We’re getting on beautifully.’

‘Er-hm!’ said Tegumai, looking up. ‘We’ll say shu. That means sky.’

Taffy drew the snake and the drying-pole. Then she stopped. ‘We must make a new picture for that end sound, mustn’t we?’

‘Shu-shu-u-u-u!’ said her Daddy. ‘Why, it’s just like the round-egg-sound made thin.’

‘Then s’pose we draw a thin round egg, and pretend it’s a frog that hasn’t eaten anything for years.’

‘N-no,’ said her Daddy. ‘If we drew that in a hurry we might mistake it for the round egg itself. Shu-shu-shu! ‘I tell you what we’ll do. We’ll open a little hole at the end of the round egg to show how the O-noise runs out all thin, ooo-oo-oo. Like this.’ And he drew this. (12.)

‘Oh, that’s lovely! Much better than a thin frog. Go on,’ said Taffy, using her shark’s tooth. Her Daddy went on drawing, and his hand shook with incitement. He went on till he had drawn this. (13.)

‘Don’t look up, Taffy,’ he said. ‘Try if you can make out what that means in the Tegumai language. If you can, we’ve found the Secret.’

‘Snake—pole—broken—egg—carp—tail and carp-mouth,’ said Taffy. ‘Shu-ya. Sky-water (rain).’ Just then a drop fell on her hand, for the day had clouded over. ‘Why, Daddy, it’s raining. Was that what you meant to tell me?’

‘Of course,’ said her Daddy. ‘And I told it you without saying a word, didn’t I?’

‘Well, I think I would have known it in a minute, but that raindrop made me quite sure. I’ll always remember now. Shu-ya means rain, or “it is going to rain.” Why, Daddy!’ She got up and danced round him. ‘S’pose you went out before I was awake, and drawed shu-ya in the smoke on the wall, I’d know it was going to rain and I’d take my beaver-skin hood. Wouldn’t Mummy be surprised?’

Tegumai got up and danced. (Daddies didn’t mind doing those things in those days.) ‘More than that! More than that!’ he said. ‘S’pose I wanted to tell you it wasn’t going to rain much and you must come down to the river, what would we draw? Say the words in Tegumai-talk first.’

‘Shu-ya-las, ya maru. (Sky-water ending. River come to.) what a lot of new sounds! I don’t see how we can draw them.’

‘But I do—but I do!’ said Tegumai. ‘Just attend a minute, Taffy, and we won’t do

any more to-day. We've got shu-ya all right, haven't we? But this las is a teaser. La-la-la' and he waved his shark-tooth.

'There's the hissy-snake at the end and the carp-mouth before the snake—as-as-as. We only want la-la,' said Taffy.

'I know it, but we have to make la-la. And we're the first people in all the world who've ever tried to do it, Taffimai!'

'Well,' said Taffy, yawning, for she was rather tired. 'Las means breaking or finishing as well as ending, doesn't it?'

'So it does,' said Tegumai. 'To-las means that there's no water in the tank for Mummy to cook with—just when I'm going hunting, too.'

'And shi-las means that your spear is broken. If I'd only thought of that instead of drawing silly beaver pictures for the Stranger!'

'La! La! La!' said Tegumai, waiving his stick and frowning. 'Oh bother!'

'I could have drawn shi quite easily,' Taffy went on. 'Then I'd have drawn your spear all broken—this way!' And she drew. (14.)

'The very thing,' said Tegumai. 'That's la all over. It isn't like any of the other marks either.' And he drew this. (15.)

'Now for ya. Oh, we've done that before. Now for maru. Mum-mum-mum. Mum shuts one's mouth up, doesn't it? We'll draw a shut mouth like this.' And he drew. (16.)

'Then the carp-mouth open. That makes Ma-ma-ma! But what about this rrrrr-thing, Taffy?'

'It sounds all rough and edgy, like your shark-tooth saw when you're cutting out a plank for the canoe,' said Taffy.

'You mean all sharp at the edges, like this?' said Tegumai. And he drew. (17.)

''Xactly,' said Taffy. 'But we don't want all those teeth: only put two.'

'I'll only put in one,' said Tegumai. 'If this game of ours is going to be what I think it will, the easier we make our sound-pictures the better for everybody.' And he drew. (18.)

'Now, we've got it,' said Tegumai, standing on one leg. 'I'll draw 'em all in a string like fish.'

'Hadn't we better put a little bit of stick or something between each word, so's they won't rub up against each other and jostle, same as if they were carps?'

'Oh, I'll leave a space for that,' said her Daddy. And very incitedly he drew them

all without stopping, on a big new bit of birch-bark. (19.)

‘Shu-ya-las ya-maru,’ said Taffy, reading it out sound by sound.

‘That’s enough for to-day,’ said Tegumai. ‘Besides, you’re getting tired, Taffy. Never mind, dear. We’ll finish it all to-morrow, and then we’ll be remembered for years and years after the biggest trees you can see are all chopped up for firewood.’

So they went home, and all that evening Tegumai sat on one side of the fire and Taffy on the other, drawing ya’s and yo’s and shu’s and shi’s in the smoke on the wall and giggling together till her Mummy said, ‘Really, Tegumai, you’re worse than my Taffy.’

‘Please don’t mind,’ said Taffy. ‘It’s only our secret-s’prise, Mummy dear, and we’ll tell you all about it the very minute it’s done; but please don’t ask me what it is now, or else I’ll have to tell.’

So her Mummy most carefully didn’t; and bright and early next morning Tegumai went down to the river to think about new sound pictures, and when Taffy got up she saw Ya-las (water is ending or running out) chalked on the side of the big stone water-tank, outside the Cave.

‘Um,’ said Taffy. ‘These picture-sounds are rather a bother! Daddy’s just as good as come here himself and told me to get more water for Mummy to cook with.’ She went to the spring at the back of the house and filled the tank from a bark bucket, and then she ran down to the river and pulled her Daddy’s left ear—the one that belonged to her to pull when she was good.

‘Now come along and we’ll draw all the left-over sound-pictures,’ said her Daddy, and they had a most inciting day of it, and a beautiful lunch in the middle, and two games of romps. When they came to T, Taffy said that as her name, and her Daddy’s, and her Mummy’s all began with that sound, they should draw a sort of family group of themselves holding hands. That was all very well to draw once or twice; but when it came to drawing it six or seven times, Taffy and Tegumai drew it scratchier and scratchier, till at last the T-sound was only a thin long Tegumai with his arms out to hold Taffy and Teshumai. You can see from these three pictures partly how it happened. (20, 21, 22.)

Many of the other pictures were much too beautiful to begin with, especially before lunch, but as they were drawn over and over again on birch-bark, they became plainer and easier, till at last even Tegumai said he could find no fault with them. They turned the hissy-snake the other way round for the Z-sound, to show it was hissing backwards in a soft and gentle way (23); and they just made a twiddle for E, because it came into the pictures so often (24); and they drew pictures of the sacred Beaver of the Tegumais for the B-sound (25, 26, 27, 28);

and because it was a nasty, nosy noise, they just drew noses for the N-sound, till they were tired (29); and they drew a picture of the big lake-pike’s mouth for the greedy Ga-sound (30); and they drew the pike’s mouth again with a spear behind it for the scratchy, hurty Ka-sound (31); and they drew pictures of a little bit of the winding Wagai river for the nice windy-windy Wa-sound (32, 33); and so on and so forth and so following till they had done and drawn all the sound-pictures that they wanted, and there was the Alphabet, all complete.

And after thousands and thousands and thousands of years, and after Hieroglyphics and Demotics, and Nilotics, and Cryptics, and Cufics, and Runics, and Dorics, and Ionics, and all sorts of other ricks and tricks (because the Woons, and the Neguses, and the Akhoonds, and the Repositories of Tradition would never leave a good thing alone when they saw it), the fine old easy, understandable Alphabet—A, B, C, D, E, and the rest of ‘em—got back into its proper shape again for all Best Beloveds to learn when they are old enough.

But I remember Tegumai Bopsulai, and Taffimai Metallumai and Teshumai Tewindrow, her dear Mummy, and all the days gone by. And it was so—just so—a little time ago—on the banks of the big Wagai!

Of all the Tribe of Tegumai Who cut that figure, none remain,— On Merrow Down the cuckoos cry The silence and the sun remain. But as the faithful years return And hearts unwounded sing again, Comes Taffy dancing through the fern To lead the Surrey spring again. Her brows are bound with bracken-fronds, And golden elf-locks fly above; Her eyes are bright as diamonds And bluer than the skies above. In mocassins and deer-skin cloak, Unfearing, free and fair she flits, And lights her little damp-wood smoke To show her Daddy where she flits. For far—oh, very far behind, So far she cannot call to him, Comes Tegumai alone to find The daughter that was all to him.

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why ririro.com offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share ririro.com and spread the joy of reading.
Instagram: @ririro_reading · Pinterest: pinterest.com/ririrocom