

The Stepmother

by Anne Ranasinghe

(Adapted story. Intermediate level)

Marrying a man who already has children makes you a stepmother, a difficult part to play in a family. And stepmothers in stories are often mean and unkind to their stepchildren.

Lakshman, who is nine, knows this very well. He never wanted a stepmother. Why ever did his father marry her? Maybe if he is horrible to her, she will go away again...

Lakshman ran his hand over the surface of the cupboard and breathed in the pleasant smell of newly cut wood. An almirah, with four doors, two above and two below, and a shiny key in each one - what use was an almirah to a baby! Nobody ever made almirahs with four doors!

Carefully he turned the keys to look inside. In one half, there was a place to hang clothes - small clothes. The other half had narrow shelves. Underneath, there were two long, wide shelves. Somebody - she, he supposed - had already put some toys there, baby things, plastic cups that fit into each other, little wooden bricks, and coloured balls. Angrily he banged the doors shut. What a complete waste!

In his bare feet he walked down the stairs to the back of the house, to the kitchen area. The old Amme was

squatting on the floor, cutting up vegetables for the meal. A row of pots and pans stood on the floor, and Kandy, the Alsatian dog, was sleeping peacefully beside them, his tail occasionally waving away the flies. Both Lakshman and the Amme knew this was against the rules - the rules the new woman had made after she took control of the house. But they understood each other, the old cook and the boy. He squatted down opposite her, watching her. Although he was nine he was small for his age - small, but strong. He wore an old shirt and a too-small pair of washed-out blue trousers.

For some time he watched the Amme in silence. Then, in his rather high little-boy's voice, he asked, 'Where is the bloody woman?'

The Amme did not stop her cutting. She said calmly, 'She's getting dressed to go out. She wants you to change and go with her. To buy new shoes for school.'

The boy sighed. He picked up a piece of sugarcane and began to suck it noisily. That was really too bad! Did she really think he'd go out with her, walk in the street where all his friends would see him? True, his father had said she would help him and look after him. But that did not mean she could give him orders, or that he had to do what she wanted. Why, he wouldn't go with her for anything - not even if she offered him a bicycle.

Lakshman had been saving for a bicycle for some time. His weekly money from his father, gifts from aunts and uncles and grandparents, all this was carefully saved.

In fact Lakshman lived for the day when there would be enough for that bicycle. But dislike of his stepmother was so great that he could not even imagine himself accepting a bicycle from her. He bit off a piece of sugarcane and said crossly, 'I am not going out with her to buy a pair of shoes.'

It was hot in the kitchen. The Amme lifted a corner of the cotton cloth she was wearing wrapped round her like a skirt, and wiped the sweat from her face and neck.

At that moment Lakshman's stepmother appeared in the doorway. Her eyes took in the scene and narrowed angrily. She raised her voice and said, 'Amme, I have told you again and again not to cut vegetables on the floor,' and then to Lakshman, 'Lakshman, go and change your clothes. I want to take you out to buy a pair of shoes.'

Neither Amme nor the child moved. The Amme began to cut vegetables again, with great concentration. Lakshman looked quickly at his stepmother. The she-devil. Whatever had made his father marry her?

He said, 'Amme doesn't understand English. And I don't want to go out. You buy the shoes for me.'

The woman straightened her back and looked down at him. 'If Amme doesn't understand English, why don't you tell her in Singhalese? And you say you won't come out with me... Well, I can't buy a pair of shoes unless you try them on. So please get ready. Quickly now.'

He turned to the Amme and said in Singhalese, 'That bloody woman says not to cut vegetables on the floor.'

Very slowly and heavily the Amme got up from where she was squatting. She picked up the vegetables and threw them on the kitchen table. Then she said to the child, 'Tell her I can't work for her. Also I am not well. I have to go home.' Lakshman repeated in English exactly what the old cook

had said. The tall one looked from the child to the old woman a little helplessly, then shrugged her shoulders.

'If she is not feeling well, she must go home and get better. Meanwhile, you get ready. I am waiting.'

He stepped right in front of his stepmother; he had to bend his head far back in order to see her face. He collected the spit in his mouth, then walked slowly and deliberately to the corner of the kitchen where there was a space for washing vegetables, and spat. Spitting was the best way to drive away evil things. Then he said:

'But I told you. I am not coming.'

She took a deep breath. 'All right. If you are not coming, I am not buying the shoes.' She turned and walked towards the front door.

Lakshman ran after her and shouted so that it echoed down the road, 'If you don't buy those shoes, I'll - I'll tell all the neighbours and relations what a mean, hateful, horrible stepmother you are...'

She didn't even turn her head. All she said was, 'You tell them whatever you like, Lakshman. But if you want a

pair of shoes, you've got to come and try them on. Or else, no shoes.'

He watched her drive off. He was very angry, not because he needed the shoes so badly, but because he felt she had won this particular argument. He could hear the men servants talking and laughing loudly in the kitchen with the Amme, who was packing her things. They were talking about his stepmother. And suddenly a cold fury rose in him.

Why had she come here and upset things, when everything was running so smoothly before! And now the Amme was leaving...

Upstairs the baby began to cry. That was another thing - her baby. All that fuss and bother about him... you would think nobody had ever had a baby before. And all that nonsense about keeping him clean and not touching him with dirty fingers! And almirahs! Almirahs were bought for brides when they got married, to take to their new husband's house, to keep their saris and jewellery safe.

And then he had an idea.

Thoughtfully he climbed back up the stairs. There stood the almirah, with its smell of new wood. Without hesitating he opened the two bottom doors, which he could easily reach because they were at his height. He took hold of one door and forced it back further and further until the wood broke and the door fell to the ground with a loud crash. The second door soon followed the first. To reach the upper two doors, he got a chair and climbed on it. It

was more difficult this time, but he pushed as hard as he could, until the third door landed on the ground with an even bigger crash.

He waited for a moment to see whether anyone would come to investigate, but he wasn't really worried. They - the servants - couldn't stop him. Wasn't he the young master? Anyway, they wouldn't want to stop him. Not at all. They'd be delighted with the trouble he was causing the new woman. He smiled nastily. Wouldn't she be wild! He imagined her return. This time she'd really get mad. She'd hit him and scream at him, and then his father would get rid of her, once and for all.

With this happy thought he turned back to the almirah, and finally managed to break the fourth door off. Carefully he replaced the chair, and left the broken doors where they had fallen. Then he decided to play a game in his room. There would be enough time to hide when he heard the car.

She was coming up the stairs. Lakshman was lying flat on the floor of his room, looking through the narrow space under his door. He could hear the changing sound of her footsteps as she came higher and higher, and he held his breath when she finally stopped.

She stopped for quite some time. Then she called - not him, but the servant.

She asked, 'Who has done this, Somapala?'

Somapala, who had not seen the broken almirah before, gasped and said, 'I don't know.' There was another

pause, and she said something Lakshman couldn't hear. Then she went into her bedroom.

That was too much for Lakshman. After all his hard work... He jumped up from the floor, ran through the doors, and burst into her room without knocking. She was standing by the mirror examining her face, and his eyes met hers in the mirror.

He screamed, 'You want to know who did it. Well, I did, I did it...' His face was red under the brown skin, and his eyes very black, shining with the light of battle. His arms hung by his sides, his hands tightly closed.

She turned slowly. 'You did it, Lakshman? You?' She looked down at him from her great height. Her fingers were playing with the household keys she was holding. 'That's really too bad, Lakshman. Breaking the baby's cupboard. We had to pay a lot of money for it.'

He almost laughed. The stupid woman! What was the point in breaking something cheap? He waited for her fury to break, preparing himself for the punishment, looking forward to it almost with pleasure.

But it didn't come. She just stood there and looked at him calmly. Then she said, 'That's really too bad, Lakshman, I thought you were a sensible sort of boy.' She sighed. 'So now we have to ask the workman to repair the damage. Quite an unnecessary bother and cost.' She walked towards the baby's room.

Lakshman had a terrible feeling of disappointment, worse than he had ever experienced before. Wildly he ran

after her and asked urgently, 'But aren't you going to punish me?'

'Punish you?' She appeared surprised. 'Punish you? Oh, no. There's no point in that. Because that's what you want, isn't it?' She looked him straight in the eye. 'No, Lakshman. I am not going to punish you. Only...' She hesitated for a moment. 'About the repairs. You are going to pay for them, Lakshman. Out of your bicycle money. That's fair, don't you think?'

She opened the door of the baby's room, walked through, and firmly shut it behind her.

Lakshman stared at the closed door. The sun was shining outside and little gold bits of dust were dancing in the sunlight. The blood had left his face, and he stood there, wide-eyed and silent. Then he walked out of her room, past the four broken almirah doors on the floor, and down the stairs. His head was bent as he went slowly down, his old shirt hanging out over the too-small blue trousers.

He heard the door of the baby's room opening. The woman was looking down at him from the top of the stairs, but he pretended not to see, and continued going down without stopping.

She said, 'Lakshman?' Pause. 'Lakshman - we can come to an arrangement.'

He did not look up. But there was no longer any sharpness in her voice; instead, there was a warm note in it that the child did not fail to notice.

She said, 'You help the workman repair the cupboard, and I'll pay half the cost. Agreed?'

His eyes were hot with tears. 'The bloody woman,' he whispered to himself. 'The bloody, bloody woman...' But he slowed down, and as he reached the bottom of the stairs, she heard him begin to whistle.

'Agreed,' he shouted, and ran quickly out of sight.

- THE END -

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