A WOMAN'S WIT

Illustrated by Shankar
VISHNU Potti was the pujari of a temple in Kerala. He lived with his wife in a small house. He was poor. But he wanted to be charitable. Therefore, everyday he took home some stranger with him to share his food though he could not afford to do so. He thought it was his duty to share with others what he ate.
His wife, Laxmi, did not like this. But she was a loving wife and did not want to do anything against her husband’s wishes. Many a time she had to give her share of the food to the guests. At such times, Laxmi had to go hungry.

Laxmi tried to manage the house as well as she could. Often she had to borrow rice or vegetables from the neighbours. At times, she had even to beg. This cannot go on, she thought. The neighbours were getting angry with her. They did not believe she was poor, for they saw her feeding guests everyday. Laxmi had nobody to help her. She went hungry for days. Life became a burden to her.
At last, Laxmi felt that she could not bear it any longer. She decided to talk things over with her husband.

One night, after dinner, Vishnu Potti was about to go to bed. Laxmi went up to him and said she had something to tell him. He was taken aback. Never before had she talked to him thus. He sat down on the bed.

Laxmi started crying. She could not speak for some time. Her husband became impatient. At last, wiping her eyes with the end of her sari, she said, “We have guests everyday. It is good that we share our food with others. But have you ever cared to find out if we have enough to feed them? We are poor and the food we have is hardly enough for us. Where shall I find food for the guests? They always get my share of the food and I am left to starve. I cannot put up with this any more. Have pity on me, my lord, and help me. Don’t invite any more guests to our home.”

Vishnu Potti was shocked. How dare his wife tell him not to bring guests home! Did she not love him any longer? Perhaps, he thought, she did not know what she was saying. She had said something foolish, and maybe, she would feel sorry for it.
He called her to his side, patted her on the back and said, “Don’t cry. I forgive you your foolishness. We are doing good when we share our food with others. Any sacrifice you make will be for my good. If you die because you gave your food to others, you are sure to reach Heaven before I do. Have faith in God and do your duty to your husband.”
So saying, he lay down on his bed and was soon fast asleep.

Laxmi could not sleep a wink. She wept quietly to herself, wondering what to do. She could see no way out of her misery.

The pujari rose the next morning and went to the temple. He came home for lunch as usual with a couple of strangers. Laxmi saw them from afar, coming down the pathway. She felt miserable. Suddenly she had an idea.

Vishnu Potti and his guests reached home. He asked them to sit down while he went to have a wash. When he was gone, Laxmi took the large wooden pestle which she used to husk paddy and leaned it against the wall. After that, she lit a brass lamp and put flowers on the pestle. Then she sat before it as if in prayer, where the guests could see her. They saw her and were puzzled. It was odd to see a woman worshipping a pestle. They wanted to know why she was doing so.
They came closer to her, and stood watching her for some time. She appeared lost in prayer. Then slowly, she lifted her head and turned to them. She looked frightened.

"Please tell us," they asked, "why do you worship this pestle?"

Tears came to Laxmi's eyes. She told them that she was not free to say anything against her husband. "It concerns you, but you must not know it," she said.

This made the guests all the more anxious to know what it was all about. "We must know if it concerns us," they said.

"Promise me that you will not tell my husband."

"We promise," said the guests.

Laxmi said, "My husband is a kind man. He brings guests home for a meal, but beats them with this pestle after he has fed them. He thinks it is his sacred duty to do so. I serve them food but I don't want anything to do with the beating. I am doing puja before the pestle so that I may be free from the sin."

The guests looked at each other and thought it
wise to leave before their host returned. When Vishnu Potti came back, he asked his wife where his guests were.

She answered sadly, "Forgive me my foolishness. They wanted me to give them this pestle as a gift. You know we have only one in the house, and I told them I could not. They got annoyed and left."

Vishnu Potti was angry and shouted at his wife, "How dare you insult my guests? Give me the pestle."
He snatched the pestle from her hand, and ran after the guests, who were by now far down the path. The guests saw the angry pujari coming after them with the pestle.

"He is coming to beat us!" they screamed and broke into a run. They ran faster and faster. Vishnu Potti could not overtake them and he had to turn back.

The villagers saw Vishnu Potti running after his guests. They thought he was chasing them away. The guests told everybody that the pujari took guests home only to beat them up with the pestle. Soon the story spread far and wide. No one came to eat with Vishnu Potti anymore.

And Laxmi no longer went without food.