



The First Step

A. Before you read :

“Education for all” is the slogan of the day. Do you think all the parents are very conscious about sending their girl-children to schools ? Discuss this with your friend.

Now read the story “The First Step” to know the writer's views on girls' education.

B. The Text :

I

“Ammu! Wake up and make tea for me!” a hand roughly shook the ten-year-old girl awake.

Ammu yawned and rubbed off the sleep from her eyes. She rose with a sigh and took the vessel of milk her father held out. Her eyes watered from the smoke that came out as she blew on the flames.

“Come outside, I want to talk to you,” he ordered.

Ammu carried the glass of tea and followed her father. “Yesterday evening, I learnt that the new owner will be coming any day to occupy the house,” he began. “I was asked if a reliable maid would work there and I suggested your name at once.”

Ammu’s father, Chellappa, was the watchman at the big house on the hill. The owner had died a couple of months ago, and they had heard that he had

left the house to his sister's daughter. The people in the neighborhood wondered when the new owner would come to live there.

"The money will be useful," Chellappa said thoughtfully as he sipped his tea.

"Why?" Ammu asked curiously.

"Because I need money to send Chinni to school," her father replied curtly. Chinni is Ammu's little brother.

"What about me? I would like to go to school too!" Ammu said.

"You are only a girl. Of what use will education be to you? You will get married even before you finish the third grade! Chinni will get a good job if he is educated," her father retorted.

Ammu turned away to hide her tears. She wished that her mother was alive. She would not have allowed Chellappa to speak so uncaringly. Her mother would have let Ammu go to school at least to learn the alphabet.

"Ammu, I will be busy all day at the big house. Come there at 9 o'clock to clean the house. I want the new owner to get a good impression. But before that you clean our house," Chellappa said."

Ammu cleaned their home which was a room in the servant's quarters of the big house. She washed all the clothes before having her own bath. She packed her father's lunch and walked to the big house.

Now answer the following :

1. Who are the characters in this part of the story ?
2. Describe Ammu's house and family.

3. Who was Chelleppa? What did he tell Ammu?
4. Did Ammu want to go to school? How did her father react to Ammu's wish to go to school ?
5. Do you think Ammu's father would send her to school?

II

The new owner arrived. She was a slim, grey-haired lady, dressed in a spotless white saree.

“Madam, my daughter, Ammu, will work for you. She has already cleaned your house before your coming”, Chellappa smiled.

“Then I don't need your help today, Ammu. Will you come tomorrow morning?” she asked. Ammu nodded.

“You can go home now. Come at nine in the morning,” the woman said and asked Chellappa to carry in the suitcases.

The new owner's name was Mrs. Mohan, and she was a widow. She had a daughter who was married and lived in Bombay.

The next morning Ammu went to Mrs. Mohan's house. “Good morning, Ammu,” Mrs. Mohan greeted her. “Come and have a glass of tea before beginning work. Since you cleaned the house thoroughly only yesterday, it will be enough if you just dust everything. I will be busy unpacking in the bedroom if you want anything.”

Ammu washed the few vessels she found in the sink. She took up the duster and went to the drawing-room. The bookcase drew her like a magnet.

She fingered the books lovingly and gazed at the pictures in a book. Ammu turned as she heard footsteps approach.

“I will have to sort out all the books. There is quite a vast collection here, and my own books will be coming soon,” said Mrs. Mohan pretending not to have noticed the book in Ammu’s hand. “Now, sit down and tell me about yourself. Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

“I have a younger brother, Chinni. He is five years old,” said Ammu.

“What does he do?”

“Appa is sending Chinni to school from next week,” Ammu’s voice held a tremor.

“Don’t you also want to go to school?” Mrs. Mohan asked gently.

“Appa says it will be of no use to me as I am a girl. If Chinni is educated, it will help him to get a job,” Ammu replied without emotion, “Shall I go and wash the clothes?”

Now answer the following :

1. Who was the new owner of the house ? What was she like ?
2. What did Ammu do at Mrs. Mohan's house the next morning?
3. What drew Ammu like a magnet ? What did she do then ? Why ?
4. Mrs. Mohan asked Ammu if she wanted to go to school. Did she say anything about her brother ?
5. What did Amu say to Mrs. Mohan ?
6. Will Mrs. Mohan help her to go to school ?

III

Mrs. Mohan realized that she had to get through to Ammu somehow. Perhaps she could start a small school for unfortunate girls like Ammu, she mused. Then the big house would resound with children's laughter. Mrs. Mohan went to the kitchen and set aside food for Ammu. She then ate the simple lunch she had cooked.

“Have your lunch first and then do these dishes. Come to the drawing-room after you finish,” she said.

Ammu was taken aback by her employer's kind ways. It had been quite some time since someone had spoken kindly to her.

“Ammu, you must go to school. Ask your father not to worry about money. Girls should also go to school. Tell your father that I shall pay your fees,” Mrs. Mohan said gently.

“No, no!” Ammu began crying. “My father will never agree.”

“He will. I spoke to him yesterday about it.” Mrs. Mohan said wiping Ammu's tears.

“But then who will work for you? Who will cook for my father and brother?” Ammu asked seriously.

“Then I have another plan. I am a retired headmistress. I shall teach you every day. You come here after finishing your chores and I shall teach you as long as you want. How do you like that?” Mrs. Mohan asked.

“Fine.” Ammu's eyes shone. “Well, shall we begin today itself?” she begged.

“Of course” Mrs. Mohan laughed and began with the alphabet.

An hour later, Ammu went home in a happy daze. She had taken the first step towards her goal.

Answer the following questions :

1. What important event took place in the last part of the story ?
2. What did Mrs. Mohan plant to help Ammu ?
3. Why was Ammu not ready to accept Mrs. Mohan's help to begin with ?
4. What was the next plan that Mrs. Mohan had ?
5. What made Ammu happy at the end ?
6. What was Ammu's first step towards her goal ?

Glossary :

yawn	: open the mouth wide and breathe in deeply due to tiredness
maid	: a female servant
curiously	: eagerly (to know something)
retort	: make a sharp or immediate reply
pretend	: make it seem that something is the case when in fact it is not
muse	: to think carefully
curtly	: rudely
chores	: a routine or boring task
daze	: unable to think due to confusion

E. ACTIVITY :

- I. Read the following jumbled sentences and arrange them in proper order to get the story.**

- 1) Mrs Mohan, the new owner knew about Ammu’s desire to study.

- 2) Mrs Mohan realized the cause of Ammu's unhappiness and thought of starting a small school for unfortunate girls.
- 3) Ammu, a ten-year-old motherless girl, lived with her father and little brother, Chini.
- 4) Mrs Mohan told Ammu that she will help Ammu go to school
- 5) In the end Mrs. Mohan taught her the alphabet and Ammu went home happily.
- 6) Ammu was very eager to go to school like her brother.
- 7) Chellappa, her father wanted her to work as a maid in the new owner's house to get money for Chini's study.

II. Arrange the statements in Column A in order as they appear in the story. Next match those with the characters in column B.

A	B
a) I have a younger brother. ^__	a) Chellapa
b) I do not need your help today.	
c) The money will be useful.	
d) My father will never agree.	b) Ammu
e) I shall teach you everyday.	
f) I want to talk to you.	
g) I will be busy all day at the big house.	
h) It will help him to get a job.	c) Mrs. Mohan

III. Read the following main ideas of the story, “The first step” and put them, in the appropriate boxes of the ‘Flow Chart’.

- Chellapa's decision to send Chinnu to school and Ammu to be a maid.
- Mrs Mohan's interest and thought to open a school for unfortunate girls like Ammu.
- Ammu's wish to go to school like his brother, Chinni.
- Mrs Mohan's final decision to teach Ammu and beginning of Amu's ‘Alphabet learning’.
- Mrs Mohan's realisation about Ammu's interest for study.
- A man's help to life the child in the crowd and to make the child happy.

FLOW CHART

Chellap's decision to send Chinni to school and Ammu to be a maid



IV. Column 'A' below names the important characters in the story. And column 'B' lists some words and phrases which describe them. Will you match each character with the words/phrases that describe it. One is done for you.

'A'	'B'
1. Chellappa	poor
	polite
	widow
	motherless girl
2. Ammu	old
	watchman
	owner
	kind
	helping
	uncaring
	maid
3. Mrs Mohan	slim
	love for books
	a young girl
	educated
	illiterate
	servant
	grey haired

D. WRITING :

Answer the following questions in about fifty words each.

- 1) Who was Chellepa ? What did he want Ammu to do ?
- 2) Why was Ammu unhappy? Who made her happy ?
- 3) Collect information about Mrs. Mohan from the story and write a paragraph about her.
- 4) Which character do you like the most ? Why ?
- 5) Write a paragraph on Ammu's future.
- 6) How did the writer indicate the serious social problem and suggest solution to it ?

