

## Fairy Godmother or Wicked Stepmother

by Sue Hitchcock

My mother was a clever child. Her teacher wanted her to go to high school, but as the seventh child of a family, whose father had been blinded when burning straw went in his eye while working as a farm labourer, it was out of the question. Even the school uniform would have been unaffordable.

From the age of six, when it had happened, she had read to her father, though it would probably have been only from the Bible. Her mother had been taken under the wing of the local Brethren fellowship, and the charity of the local community was essential. The alternative at that time was still the workhouse. They were rehoused in what had been a library, a three roomed building with a corrugated iron roof. The older sisters brought home left-over food from their employment in service at local big houses. My mother's feet were ruined by second-hand shoes.

Grandmother became a devout adherent of the Brethren and my mother knew nothing else, though her older sisters were more open-minded. At thirteen she was employed in service to a Quaker family and she went on holiday to St. Ives in Cornwall leading her to admire rich people all her life, with no sense of the unfairness of her own childhood.

Is it a coincidence that the fairy tales mothers tell their daughters, often feature step mothers? How can a mother explain their own feelings to her girls? She is torn between jealousy of the child's youth, beauty and all the opportunities ahead and her own loving urge to protect her from the dangers too.

As a daughter, I have blamed my mother for many of my mistakes. Her disapproval, with no forgiveness as far as I could tell, justified me in my resentment. How long can I justify

my feelings? I was a child of my time and the education I received. There was a hypocrisy in the post-war mores. People lived for the moment during the war, but returning soldiers needed to find the ideals for which they had been fighting. It was a time of respectable conventionality. Before my adolescence my mother and I loved each other, but she was not able to accept the sexual revolution taking place, with Elvis Presley, Brigitte Bardot and Marilyn Monroe.

I could have used the wise advice of loving parents, but they pulled the rug out when they forbade me from seeing my future husband, on finding we were sleeping together. It was three years before we resumed our relationship and married.

The birth of our daughters was greeted with joy, but was all forgiven? On family visits I would find my mother on her knees beside her bed, praying for the salvation of my daughters. Her conversations with them and her gifts were always with one purpose, to save their souls. It was only when she became old and forgetful that she was glad to see me. For me forgiveness was not so easy. Can I now distance myself enough to take responsibility for my own mistakes?

It is difficult to admit that one is wrong, particularly when one has been wrong for a very long time.