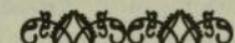


wife and children: you and your wife and children. Let us not cut each other's throats. It doesn't matter who cuts whose: it's all the same to me. But we must not, we must not. We must not. I'll tell my uncle that I fell down the office staircase and hurt myself. He'll never know. He must not press the button."

But the button did get pressed. The incident of that alley became known within a couple of hours all over the city. And his uncle and other uncles did press the button, with results that need not be described here. Had he been able to speak again, our friend would have spoken a lie and saved the city; but unfortunately that saving lie was not uttered. His body was found by the police late next afternoon in a ditch in that wretched alley, and identified through the kerosene ration coupon in his breast pocket.

## *Like the Sun*



Truth, Sekhar reflected, is like the sun. I suppose no human being can ever look it straight in the face without blinking or being dazed. He realized that, morning till night, the essence of human relationships consisted in tempering truth so that it might not shock. This day he set apart as a unique day—at least one day in the year we must give and take absolute Truth whatever may happen. Otherwise life is not worth living. The day ahead seemed to him full of possibilities. He told no one of his experiment. It was a quiet resolve, a secret pact between him and eternity.

The very first test came while his wife served him his morning meal. He showed hesitation over a titbit, which she had thought was her culinary masterpiece. She asked, "Why, isn't it good?" At other times he would have said, considering her feelings in the matter, "I feel full-up, that's all." But today he said, "It isn't good. I'm unable to swallow it." He saw her wince and said to himself, Can't be helped. Truth is like the sun.

His next trial was in the common room when one of his colleagues came up and said, "Did you hear of the death of so and so? Don't you think it a pity?" "No," Sekhar answered. "He was such a fine man—" the other began. But Sekhar cut him short with: "Far from it. He always struck me as a mean and selfish brute."

During the last period when he was teaching geography for Third Form A, Sekhar received a note from the headmaster: "Please see me before you go home." Sekhar said to himself: It

must be about these horrible test papers. A hundred papers in the boys' scrawls; he had shirked this work for weeks, feeling all the time as if a sword were hanging over his head.

The bell rang and the boys burst out of the class.

Sekhar paused for a moment outside the headmaster's room to button up his coat; that was another subject the headmaster always sermonized about.

He stepped in with a very polite "Good evening, sir."

The headmaster looked up at him in a very friendly manner and asked, "Are you free this evening?"

Sekhar replied, "Just some outing which I have promised the children at home—"

"Well, you can take them out another day. Come home with me now."

"Oh . . . yes, sir, certainly . . ." And then he added timidly, "Anything special, sir?"

"Yes," replied the headmaster, smiling to himself . . . "You didn't know my weakness for music?"

"Oh, yes, sir . . ."

"I've been learning and practising secretly, and now I want you to hear me this evening. I've engaged a drummer and a violinist to accompany me—this is the first time I'm doing it full-dress and I want your opinion. I know it will be valuable."

Sekhar's taste in music was well known. He was one of the most dreaded music critics in the town. But he never anticipated his musical inclinations would lead him to this trial. . . . "Rather a surprise for you, isn't it?" asked the headmaster. "I've spent a fortune on it behind closed doors. . . ." They started for the headmaster's house. "God hasn't given me a child, but at least let him not deny me the consolation of music," the headmaster said, pathetically, as they walked. He incessantly chattered about music: how he began one day out of sheer boredom; how his teacher at first laughed at him, and then gave him hope; how his ambition in life was to forget himself in music.

At home the headmaster proved very ingratiating. He sat Sekhar on a red silk carpet, set before him several dishes of delicacies, and fussed over him as if he were a son-in-law of the house. He even said, "Well, you must listen with a free mind. Don't worry

about these test papers." He added half humorously, "I will give you a week's time."

"Make it ten days, sir," Sekhar pleaded.

"All right, granted," the headmaster said generously. Sekhar felt really relieved now—he would attack them at the rate of ten a day and get rid of the nuisance.

The headmaster lighted incense sticks. "Just to create the right atmosphere," he explained. A drummer and a violinist, already seated on a Rangoon mat, were waiting for him. The headmaster sat down between them like a professional at a concert, cleared his throat, and began an alapana, and paused to ask, "Isn't it good Kalyani?" Sekhar pretended not to have heard the question. The headmaster went on to sing a full song composed by Thyagaraja and followed it with two more. All the time the headmaster was singing, Sekhar went on commenting within himself, He croaks like a dozen frogs. He is bellowing like a buffalo. Now he sounds like loose window shutters in a storm.

The incense sticks burnt low. Sekhar's head throbbed with the medley of sounds that had assailed his ear-drums for a couple of hours now. He felt half stupefied. The headmaster had gone nearly hoarse, when he paused to ask, "Shall I go on?" Sekhar replied, "Please don't, sir, I think this will do. . . ." The headmaster looked stunned. His face was beaded with perspiration. Sekhar felt the greatest pity for him. But he felt he could not help it. No judge delivering a sentence felt more pained and helpless. Sekhar noticed that the headmaster's wife peeped in from the kitchen, with eager curiosity. The drummer and the violinist put away their burdens with an air of relief. The headmaster removed his spectacles, mopped his brow, and asked, "Now, come out with your opinion."

"Can't I give it tomorrow, sir?" Sekhar asked tentatively.

"No. I want it immediately—your frank opinion. Was it good?"

"No, sir . . ." Sekhar replied.

"Oh! . . . Is there any use continuing my lessons?"

"Absolutely none, sir . . ." Sekhar said with his voice trembling. He felt very unhappy that he could not speak more soothingly. Truth, he reflected, required as much strength to give as to receive.

All the way home he felt worried. He felt that his official life was not going to be smooth sailing hereafter. There were questions of increment and confirmation and so on, all depending upon the headmaster's goodwill. All kinds of worries seemed to be in store for him. . . . Did not Harischandra lose his throne, wife, child, because he would speak nothing less than the absolute Truth whatever happened?

At home his wife served him with a sullen face. He knew she was still angry with him for his remark of the morning. Two casualties for today, Sekhar said to himself. If I practise it for a week, I don't think I shall have a single friend left.

He received a call from the headmaster in his classroom next day. He went up apprehensively.

"Your suggestion was useful. I have paid off the music master. No one would tell me the truth about my music all these days. Why such antics at my age! Thank you. By the way, what about those test papers?"

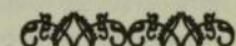
"You gave me ten days, sir, for correcting them."

"Oh, I've reconsidered it. I must positively have them here tomorrow. . . ." A hundred papers in a day! That meant all night's sitting up! "Give me a couple of days, sir . . ."

"No. I must have them tomorrow morning. And remember, every paper must be thoroughly scrutinized."

"Yes, sir," Sekhar said, feeling that sitting up all night with a hundred test papers was a small price to pay for the luxury of practising Truth.

## *Chippy*



I cannot give a very clear account of Chippy's early life. All that I am in a position to say is that he was born in London, spent several months of his puppyhood in Scotland, and then came out to India with a Major and spent a very happy summer in a hill station. He might well have stayed with the Major, seen something of Peshawar, Quetta, and Delhi, and returned home with that good man, but for a silly little Pekingese. It was the pet of the Major's wife, and Chippy did not like him. One day when no one was about, Chippy forced the puny fellow to realize what he thought of him for living on a lady's lap and eating special biscuits; but the little fellow lost his life in the process. Honestly, Chippy did not intend to kill him; he only wanted to give him a good shake—a thing that could not have killed a mouse. No one was more surprised than Chippy when the little fellow fell down and did not move. The Major's wife became hysterical, and the Major, a devoted husband, easily concluded that Chippy had rabies. He decided to shoot him through the brain next morning. At this stage an Indian friend of the Major, who did not believe in rabies, offered to take away Chippy. Chippy stayed with this gentleman for some time and then drifted on to Mysore, with the Major's friend's brother, Swami. And no dog could have wished for a better master.

Swami and Chippy shared the same room in the house. Swami and Chippy always went out together. Chippy was almost a member of the Champion Tennis Club. Every evening he went there with his master, waited till his master settled down to a good set, and then quietly slipped out and explored all the lanes nearby.

There were gangs of brown dogs and black dogs of uncertain colours, lounging in every square and crossing, challenging all newcomers. Chippy bit and was bitten, tore and was torn, before he could establish his right to wander where he liked. There was nothing very special to attract him to that part of the town; all that he wanted was a place to wander about while his master was playing. The game was, perhaps, dull to watch. One was not allowed even to chase the ball and retrieve it. And why should these street-loafers question a decent dog's movements? Chippy had to shed several mouthfuls of blood and fur before he could gain citizenship in those lanes.

After tennis Swami usually attended some lecture or debate in the College. Chippy never missed a single meeting. He climbed the gallery in the lecture hall, took a seat beside Swami, and never stirred till the vote of thanks was proposed. After the meeting, Chippy went home, had his plateful of bone and rice, and then went out for an hour or two to meet his old friends and sweethearts. He returned at night, slept under his master's cot, and woke him up early in the morning by applying his cold nose to the sleeper's cheek.

On the whole Chippy led a very happy and contented life till one day Swami brought into the house another dog. Chippy would not have objected to another dog as such, but what he objected to was that this dog was short.

It could not be said that Chippy was of an ungenerous disposition, but he hated short dogs. One might notice a hint of this prejudice very early in him in the Pekingese affair. It was Chippy's habit, whenever he was out, to knock down and scratch and bite all the short dogs that he met on the way. And now he was to have a fellow standing on the height of a two-month-old puppy, pitch dark in colour, and with a long loose tail, as a companion at home! Entering the hall one afternoon, Chippy saw the newcomer standing between his master's legs, and dashed forward with a growl. The newcomer would have gone the way of the Pekingese but for a timely kick from Swami, which sent Chippy rolling in the opposite direction. Chippy picked himself up and went out. He lapped a little water from under the garden tap, dug up his

bone from the jasmine bed, went to the shady spot behind the garage, and lay down. Rolling the bone between his jaws, he reflected on the latest developments at home. One was evidently not permitted to scare off the newcomer. At this point, his master's voice reached him, calling, "Chippy! Chippy!" Chippy rose and went bounding towards him. He slackened his pace when he saw the short cur standing beside Master, held by a chain.

"Come on, Chippy, come here," cajoled Swami. Chippy went forward to him, meekly expressing as best he could that he realized that he ought not to have gone at a dog standing between his master's legs, as if it were a street meeting. Master accepted the apology, stroked his coat, and held him close to the newcomer, which was squirming at the end of the chain. What a dreadful position! Master was insistent and went on saying, "Now be friends, come on, you are a good boy," and so on and so forth; and Chippy actually had to wag his tail and give a nod.

In a short time the newcomer made himself quite at home. He invaded every favourite place of Chippy's in the house—he came and lounged under the sofa in the hall, sat at Master's feet in the room, stuck to Chippy's side during the mealtime, and even slept under Master's cot at night. There was no getting away from him. Chippy bore his company for some time and then gradually ceased to go into the house. He spent his time, when he was at home, in the shady spot behind the garage. Let the short cur gambol and strut in the house as much as he liked, but he was not going to have Chippy's company.

The only consoling feature in the whole business was that Chippy still retained the honour of going out with the master, because the other was too puny to trot beside Master's bicycle.

The puny fellow had the impudence one day to sidle up to Chippy, more or less hinting a run round the house. Since no one was about, Chippy frowned and bit him a little. That ought to make the dwarf understand that he was presumptuous. This no doubt taught the little fellow his place, but he had the meanness, when Master was there, to behave as if Chippy and he were the thickest of friends in the world. In such a situation, Chippy could not very well bare his teeth and growl. So that when the short fel-

low played with his ears or teased his tail, Chippy merely turned away his head and tried to think of other things; or if its attentions became too insistent, Chippy rose and left the place.

Almost a fortnight after the arrival of the newcomer, one afternoon, Chippy lay chewing his bone in the shady spot behind the garage, when he was startled out of his wits to see the newcomer standing before him. The newcomer had not discovered the place till now, and now even this was invaded. Chippy stood up in mingled anger and despair. He would have had a fine excuse for choking the other if only he had tried to sidle up and make friends. But the newcomer, exhibiting a profound sense of time and place, looked at Chippy only for a moment, went past him in a business-like manner, lay down a few yards from him, and closed his eyes. Chippy was baffled! He could not chastise the other for just coming there. His last refuge was now gone.

Chippy rose and trotted away from the house. He stopped just for a moment for a plunge in the stagnant water before the police station.

He wandered about the town, without any aim or plan till nightfall, and then went in search of a place where he could get some food and shelter. He went to the market to try his luck there. But urchins flung stones at him, and there were the old dogs of the place who followed him, growling and grumbling, wherever he went. It was all most annoying. He left the market by the western gate, and strayed into the crazy lane behind it. This lane is a nest of tea and liquor shops, from which gramophones shriek into the night; the clatter of mincing meat on iron frying pans keeps the air lively. The lane has no electric lights, but gets a chequered illumination from the blinding petrol lamps hung inside the shops, with their patrons seated on iron chairs and packing cases. This part of the town is unknown to the average citizen of Mysore, but Chippy was drawn there by the smell of chops sizzling on stoves.

He stopped at the first shop. Somebody threw him a delicious bit of curry puff—and more came. The feast went on all night. People were generous to a fault here. There were of course dozens of other dogs, but there was no trouble since the territory did not belong to any gang in particular.

Chippy found everything so satisfactory that he decided to

spend the rest of his life here—far away from the short cur. In about a week he had become the favourite of the place.

The glamour, however, lasted only for a week. Before the end of another week he had lost his appetite. He never touched the chops thrown at him. He really preferred to go without food. He hungered now for his master's company.

One morning Swami was solving a tough problem in mathematics when he felt a cold touch on his feet. He looked under the table and shrieked. "Rascal, where have you been all these days?" Chippy curved his hind half, tucked in his tail, and stood before him with bowed head. He had lost his white colour; his coat had acquired the colour of road dust, with patches of tea stains here and there. Someone had removed his thick leather collar: he was looking perfectly nude without it.

Swami dragged him out and turned the garden tap on him. Rubbing a piece of soap on his back, Swami informed him: "I am sure you will be miserable to hear this: your little friend is gone. It seems he had been stolen and sold to us. His original owners traced him here and took him away yesterday. . . . Do not worry: I'll get you another companion soon."