

LIKE THE SUN

by R. K. Narayan

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. This day he set apart as a unique day – at least one day in a 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.

The very first test came while his wife served him his morning meal. He showed hesitation over a tid-bit, 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 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 class, 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. He stepped into the headmaster’s room 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?”

“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 practicing secretly, and now I want you to hear me this evening. 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 trail...

“Rather a surprise for you, isn’t it?” asked the headmaster. “I’ve spent a fortune on it behind 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 how his teacher gave him hope, etc.

At home, the headmaster set 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 humorously, “I will give you a week’s time.”

“Make it ten days, sir,” Sekhar pleaded.

“All right, granted,” the headmaster said generously.

The headmaster now began to sing a full song composed by Thyagaraja and followed 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.*

In the end, the headmaster 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. Everything depends on the headmaster’s will. 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 a sullen face. He knew she was still angry with him for his remark from the morning. Two casualties for today, Sekhar said to himself. If I practice 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. Thank you. By the way, what about those test papers?”

“You gave me ten days, for correcting them.”

“Oh, I’ve reconsidered it. I must positively have them here tomorrow...”

A hundred papers in a day! That meant sitting up all night! “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 practicing truth.

adapted from

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