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An independent life since early childhood; a prank that cost dearly

I have lived an independent life since early childhood. Such is the rule among us crickets. My mother used to tell her children, “It’s good for you to learn to fly with your own wings. Children who are a burden to their parents develop selfish habits and grow up into ne’er-do-wells.” Following these strict principles, my mother made sure her children would live on their own soon after they were born.

My two brothers and I, for instance, lived with her for only two days. On the third day, my mother took each of us to a hole she had dug in the corner of a rice field. As the youngest of the brood, I was provided with a small reserve of food. But that was all: my mother didn’t turn back once.

Far from bewailing the situation, I rather enjoyed it. After thoroughly exploring my new premises, I stood at the door, looking at the blue sky above the tall blades of grass. Feeling elated, I rubbed my wings together and uttered a few loud and enthusiastic chirps.

From that day on, I started life on my own. My personal happiness would depend on whether I would be wise or stupid. But I didn’t think of that at the time. I merely enjoyed my independence.

All day long, I worked in my hole, enlarging and embellishing it into a nice bed-room. Then I dug additional short-cuts and back-doors for emergencies. When dusk fell, I would stop for a rest. Together with the whole neighbourhood, I would start a joyful concert in honour of the setting sun.

During the whole night, we would hold merry dancing and singing parties, stopping from time to time to drink dew drops or nibble at juicy blades of young grass. Only when the austere-looking sun appeared again in the East did we part to go back home. Such was the joyful routine of my life. Quite a pleasant one, wasn’t it?

As I lived soberly and worked moderately, I grew up rapidly and in no time became a healthy and strong adolescent. My hind legs shone with a dark lustre. The spikes on my legs were spear-pointed. To try their effectiveness, I would sometimes raise my legs and give powerful kicks at the grass whose blades would

then fall down like at the stroke of a scythe. My wings extended to the tip of my tail. When I flapped them, they produced a powerful sound. My head grew bigger and bigger and pugnacious-looking bumps started bulging out on my forehead. My two black mandibles were always moving crosswise, like the blades of a mowing machine. I was particularly proud of my two long and martial-looking antennae, which I continuously caressed with my forelegs. My whole body was of a glossy brown.

I adopted a stately gait. When I walked, I solemnly swayed on my legs, my two antennae shaking in a bellicose manner. I put on daring airs and was quick to pick quarrels with my neighbours. Whenever I started shouting, my neighbours would remain silent; probably not so much because they were afraid to answer back, but because they were of a peaceable disposition. Clearly, I had grown too big for my britches. Young people are often like that: bragging is for them a sign of talent! When I bullied some timid grasshoppers or a water spider who had strayed from his native pond, I believed myself a real hero.

Alas, I didn't know that one would have to pay dearly for such foolish bluster. Unconsciously, I was doing myself a serious disservice. Later, I would many times narrowly escape death. My heart would then be filled with remorse. But remorse was not of much help in setting things right again. This was how the first mishap came about:

Near my place lived a small cricket about my age, whom I named Choat (which means tiny). He was born very weak, so I rather looked down on him. And he was truly afraid of me! Thin and pale like an opium-addict, he had ridiculously short wings that made him look as though a waistcoat was his only clothing. His hind-legs were thick and utterly inelegant. In addition to

all that, he had ludicrous stumps in place of antennae and the dazed look of a hopeless country bumpkin! Because of his poor health, he was not the sort of fellow who could undertake serious projects: his hole was shallow and had no emergency exits like mine.

One day I paid him a visit. After having a look at his shabby home, I reproached him: "What a careless and slovenly way of living! What a home to live in! Suppose an enemy comes, you will have nowhere to escape! Look, every time you move in your hole, your back will show up through the ceiling. Anyone standing nearby can tell where you are. What if a falcon mistakes you for prey? My poor chap, you are no longer a child, yet you lack the wisdom of maturity!"

Choat answered in a sad voice, "Big Brother, I surely want to be like you, but I can't. I am too weak for even the simplest kind of work, so how can I build myself a decent home? I know it is dangerous to live in such a shallow hole, but I don't have the strength to improve it. I have been thinking hard about this but still I don't know what to do, except for one possibility... But, I dare not speak of it to you..."

I said, "Just tell me what is on your mind. You may speak freely."

The mole-cricket answered timidly, "Big Brother, as you have deigned to take pity on me, I think you wouldn't mind helping me dig a gallery linking my hole to yours. I can thus escape to your place in case of danger..."

Baring my teeth I snarled in a condescending way, "What! A gallery linking my place to yours? How could I stand it? You smell as bad as an owl. Now, stop it! It's no use whimpering. It serves you right for being such a lazy fellow."

I went back to my place and paid no more attention to my unfortunate neighbour.

One afternoon a few days later, I stood at my doorstep. It had rained hard several days before, so the local ponds and lakes were all overflowing and stocked with plenty of fish, crabs and shrimps. As a result, cranes, herons, cormorants, teals, coots, wild ducks, pelicans and even parrots from faraway lands had all come to partake of the abundant food. All day long, they quarreled noisily, disputing every tiny shrimp. I could see many skinny egrets, who struggled all day long in the pond but could never get enough to eat. Such is the fate of the weak! I stood watching the setting sun, philosophising seriously over the facts of life.

Just then I noticed a cormorant alighting a few steps from where I stood and a wicked idea came into my mind. I called over to my neighbor Choat: "Would you like to have some fun?"

"How so? I'm having an asthma attack at the moment."

"Just to play a joke on somebody."

"On who?"

"The big cormorant over there."

Choat came to his door to take a look and asked: "You mean that big fat female standing a few steps from our doors?"

"Precisely."

"My god, no! I can't afford that. And I would advise you not to either..."

"Me! Not to? What are you talking about? I fear nobody, Mister Coward." I glared at him.

"Then, do it alone, please. I humbly confess that I'm afraid."

"You weakling! Look, I'm going to play a good joke on her."

I waited for a favourable moment and then started to sing:

The egret, the heron, and the pelican -

All are fat enough, so which one should I pluck, sir?

Pluck the cormorant for me, my boy!

I'll have it cooked, broiled, fried, and eat the whole thing up!

This gave the cormorant a start! Opening her eyes wide and stretching her wings, she strutted in the direction of my song, calling out in an angry voice, "Who is singing this insolent song about me? Who?"

I quickly backed down to the bottom of my hole, saying to myself, "So you're angry, eh? You won't get me, even if you break your silly head knocking it against my door."

The cormorant didn't get me, as a matter of fact. But she caught sight of Choat in his shallow hole. I heard her shout angrily, "What did you just say about me?"

"I said nothing, Big Sister." Choat timidly replied and backed down into his shallow hole as far as he could go.

"How dare you deny it? How dare you?"

A heavy stroke of the cormorant's giant bill accompanied each word of her rebuke. Her bill was like an iron drill that broke through the ground and landed heavily on Choat. The only thing I could hear was Choat's pained whine. I lay very still in the bottom of my hole, too frightened to move. Having relieved her anger, the cormorant flew away to look for fish.

After a while, I carefully crept up to Choat's hole. When he saw me, my poor neighbour cried out bitterly and I asked stupidly, "What? What happened?"

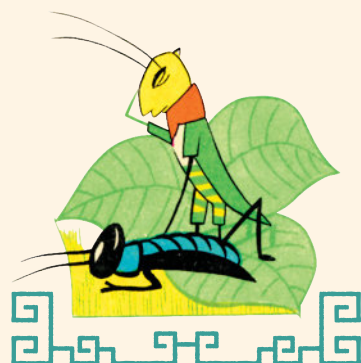
But Choat could no longer stand on his legs. He was lying on the ground, half-dead. I hastily knelt down and took his head in my hands and spoke softly, "How could I know things would

happen this way? Brother, my heart is filled with bitter remorse. My silly bragging is the cause of this tragedy. What can I do now?"

I was surprised by the advice he gave me. "Being in poor health," he murmured, "I would not have lived long anyway. So I am not really sad at having to die now. But before leaving this world, I would like to give you some advice: Don't be such a foolish braggart. Your aggression and arrogance will bring bad luck to you someday."

Choat breathed his last. My heart was filled with pity and remorse. Had it not been for the stupid joke I played on the cormorant, Choat would not have died. And I myself had had a close shave, too. Far from being the smart fellow I thought I was, I had been a fool. My heart was filled with remorse.

I buried Choat on a grassy plot of land, heaping earth on his grave. I stood there silently for a long time, absorbing this first hard lesson of my life.



2

I started on my adventurous journey: Unwittingly became a children's plaything; I got a hard lesson from a Longhorn beetle

After Choat's death, I began to reform my thoughts and deeds, promising myself that I would forthwith renounce all my foolish swaggering. I vowed to pursue a calmer way of life. Although I don't know precisely how long this phase of my life went on, I am sorry to admit that it did not last very long. An unexpected

incident put an end to my best resolutions. This is the story of how it all began:

It was the beginning of summer. One morning, as I was nibbling at some tender blades of grass, I saw two boys carrying sticks and a water can coming from the other side of the field. I dashed back into my hole, but soon, I could hear steps overhead, then the sound of voices:

“Hey!”

“What?”

“Here it is!”

“Ha ha! Sure enough! Look at the earth thrown out of the hole. And those footprints! Be, give me the knife so I can widen the entrance to the hole. Now, go and fetch me a can full of water! Quick!”

I heard the knife boring into the ground and bits of earth soon began to fall on my head. Hardly had I climbed up into an emergency gallery than water began pouring in. But thanks to the many emergency galleries I had dug, the water could flow out and the place I was hiding was not flooded.

However, the two wicked brats did not give up the chase; especially the one named Nhon. He said to his partner, “I bet there is a cricket in this hole. And a big one too. It takes some time to drive a cricket out of its hole. A warrior cricket can stay immersed in water for hours on end. Now let us block up all the side galleries so that the water can’t flow out.”

No sooner said than done. All of a sudden, I found myself plunged in darkness: all the side exits had been obstructed. Only one gallery was left, the main one. That was the one down which the water was being poured. That was also the one by which I would have to creep out if I did not want to

be drowned. The water level kept rising. It reached my back, then my head. Finally even my antennae were submerged. But I held on, hoping that the water would seep out through the porous earth.

However, the children kept pouring in more and more water. All the galleries were flooded.

I was panic-stricken. Soon, I would have to creep out of my hole and be caught. Was I to serve as food for some fighting-cock or nightingale or starling? My tender flesh would be a real treat for one of those voracious devils.

To get some air, I had to creep up through the main gallery.

Little by little I was approaching the entrance. At one moment, I heard a joyful shout, “Here it comes! What a glossy forehead!”

I hastily backed down, but it was too late. More water came in and I heard more shouts. The boys got so excited that they crazily clapped their hands and stamped their feet to scare me out. I was shaking badly as there was less and less air to breathe. All of a sudden, I heard a thunder-like clash right behind my back. A spike of bamboo was driven into the ground behind me and prevented me from going further down. One child worked on the bamboo spikes as a lever to push me out, while the other frantically beat on an empty can which resounded like a tocsin. Finally, unable to resist further, I jumped out. Savage shouts broke out!

“You go boy! What a cricket!”

“Ho, ho! A real warrior-cricket!”

“It’s as big as four cicadas!”

“You bet!”

The boy called Nhon caught hold of me. I gave him a good bite. He uttered a painful cry and I added a powerful kick which