

## CHAPTER 37

# Honesty

### What is honesty?

Honesty means many things and affects one's life in many different ways. Honesty expresses both self-respect and respect for others. Dishonesty fully respects neither oneself nor others. Honesty imbues lives with openness, reliability, and candor; it represents a disposition to live in the light. Dishonesty seeks shade, cover, or concealment. It is a disposition to live partly in the dark.

Honesty is seeking to tell yourself and others the truth, even if it is sometimes difficult. Honesty is more than simply not lying; it is a sincere devotion to truthfulness. An honest person seeks the truth with an open mind and tries to clearly communicate the truth. Honesty begins within oneself, is part of one's personal relationships, and finally colors and directs everything that one does. Honest people are trustworthy. They can be relied upon to be who they claim to be, to mean what they say, and to keep their word. The level of honesty one lives with influences everything in one's life, from the smallest of human relationships to one's self-image. Honesty is a personal virtue possessed by many of the great people in history, and is sought by those who are working toward the highest realization of themselves. Why, then, is it so hard to be honest? Why would anyone want to be dishonest?

### Honesty in society

In a world in which dishonesty seems almost commonplace and often is expected as part of "getting ahead," why should a person be honest? Isn't it naive or foolish? Don't people take advantage of an honest person? Like all other virtues, the seeking and upholding of truth enables a person to live a more fully human life.

We live in a world that is so complicated that nobody understands it fully. To function within it we depend on the knowledge and information we gather from many different sources. With accurate information we can make informed decisions. If the information we have is of poor quality, then we have a distorted view of the world and our decisions will not lead to the results we desire. For example, if we want to travel somewhere by train but don't have an up-to-date timetable, or if the trains don't follow the timetable





anyway, we will waste a lot of time. This is why correct information is of vital importance to everyone. Since the information we have comes to us from others, we depend upon their being honest. We have to trust them. We cannot possibly check every piece of information for ourselves. That is why we want people to be trustworthy. We depend on and need the best insights of others, those from the past and the present, to help us understand our world more clearly.

Businesses need good information to develop new products and marketing strategies. Governments, as much as individuals, depend on accurate information so as to develop sensible and appropriate policies. A poorly informed government can lead its country into disastrous crises. A society based on deception and lies cannot function well. If we cannot trust the people around us to tell us the truth, we become paralyzed by the fear that what looks real is only a sham.

The truth isn't always easy to hear. Leaders often surround themselves with people who will tell them what they want to hear and not what they ought to hear. That is why it is important for all of us to learn to evaluate other people's opinions and learn whom we can really trust to tell us the truth. Every social activity, every human enterprise requiring people to act in concert, is impeded when people aren't honest with one another.

### *Honesty with ourselves*

Honest people tend to be honest first of all with themselves. They are skilled at listening to what is really going on inside them — what they are thinking and feeling and why they behave in the way that they do. They recognize what their deeper motivations are. There is little contradiction between what they think, what they feel, and what they say or do. They have a sense of personal integrity and wholeness. They have a clear conscience and high self-esteem.

Sometimes we are ashamed or afraid of our thoughts and feelings. We avoid looking honestly within because to do so would be too painful. It might also mean having to change, and that is painful too. So we pretend to ourselves that everything is okay and that if there are problems, we are not to blame. It is tempting to fill our time with distractions so as never to have to listen to ourselves.

Part of the reason is our immaturity. Often we do or feel things that bring us shame, and we seek to conceal this weak part of our nature. We think that if people saw the whole picture of the truth about us, they would be so shocked that they might reject us. For most people, revealing their true selves is very threatening. We often feel pressured to live up to a certain image. To keep other people's love and respect, we tell a lie or a partial truth. This tendency only makes the situation worse. We now "know" that we do not deserve the love or respect that we are receiving and so cannot accept it. Inside we become empty, and the relationships become strained and no longer free and enriching.

Another way in which we are often dishonest with ourselves is in justifying our actions. If we do something we know is wrong, we often come up with all sorts of reasons why it is not really wrong at all. We think up justifications for our actions so that we can pretend to ourselves that what we are doing is good, or at least not so bad. For example:

- ✗ “It doesn’t matter if I use the change from the food shopping on a new cassette. My mother wouldn’t care if I did, and she’ll never notice.”
- ✗ “I can stay out later than my parents said. I’ll just tell them that the buses were running irregularly and we were stuck in traffic. They always believe me, and anyway, I’m not doing anything wrong.”
- ✗ “I can tell Marina about Larissa’s problem. We’re all friends and it wouldn’t hurt Larissa. Anyhow, Larissa probably already told her herself.”

Rationalizing allows us to do or say something that contradicts our core beliefs, because we are temporarily freed from the accompanying guilt. When we do this, we don’t necessarily hurt other people, but we hurt ourselves because we lose our sense of personal integrity. We know deep down that we are being true neither to ourselves nor to others.

Honesty, then, enables us to live in the real world. Dishonesty, on the other hand, tends to place confusion around everything we do. When people are dishonest with us, we receive a distorted view of reality. We make decisions that are unrealistic. A person who is not living honestly may be deceiving not only others but also himself. Deception of all types creates confusion. After one lives in the realm of deception for a period of time, his world is no longer the world of reality in which honest people live, but is largely the world as he pretends it to be.

One day after school I was with a group of friends. They all began to talk about another friend from our group. At first it was funny to hear what they were saying. Harmless, I thought, but then something struck me — “What if they were talking about me?” I thought I would feel terrible and I would never trust any of them. Then I wondered, “Maybe they do talk about me when I’m not there.”

— a 16-year-old high-school student

### Honesty in personal relationships

By generating trust, honesty forms a basis for wholesome relationships at the personal level as well as the societal level — friendships, marriages, parent-child relationships, and other close bonds.

Gossip, rumor, and slander are sources of hurt known by many high-school students. Such talk can ruin a person’s reputation, destroy friendships and simultaneously devastate a person’s self-esteem. Gossip creates an atmosphere of distrust and insecurity besides causing pain to the person it targets.

All of us understand that gossip and lies are the quickest ways to destroy any close relationship. But sometimes it is just as harmful to a relationship when one side simply hides something from the other.

One high-school student’s mother always asked her where she was going when she went out with her friends on Saturday nights. Finding that her daughter had lied about her whereabouts on several occasions, the mother was shocked and hurt. She asked her daughter, “How would you feel if I lied to you about where I was going every time I left the house?”

“But that’s different!” protested the daughter.

“Why?” the mother replied. “I am a human being too.”

It is important to be aware of the possible repercussions of even small lies. When we tell a lie, sometimes we think it is a way out of a difficult situation. However, there is a saying that “a liar must have a perfect memory,” because one lie leads to others, which must be told to cover up the previous lie. Almost always a person gets caught and is trapped in his web of lies. Even if the deception goes undiscovered, the person will still have to live with anxiety, guilt and fear. Admitting that we do not know



everything and that we can make mistakes is an important part of developing a healthy character.

In our personal relationships honesty is a virtue to be contemplated. Have you ever really thought about the level of truthfulness and trust between you and the people to whom you are closest? Do you feel that your friends and family are basically honest with you? Do you care? If you discovered that someone you love had told you a lie, how would you feel?

In summary, we can say that honesty does the following:

- ✗ It enables people to live in the real world.
- ✗ It keeps human society functioning.
- ✗ It forms a basis for personal relationships.
- ✗ It gives people an inner sense of freedom.
- ✗ It rewards people with a feeling of integrity.

Sometimes in life we face situations that challenge us profoundly. Sometimes it takes a lot of courage to keep our honesty. But a person of integrity refuses to live a lie, whatever the circumstances. He cannot tell a lie or pretend that something is not the way he knows it to be. He refuses to pretend, much less to deny what he knows to be true. He loves the truth and values his personal integrity even at the cost of his life. He cannot but speak out against tyranny and injustice. He refuses to participate in lies and pretenses. In a society based on falsehood and deception, such a person will not be popular, because he is not afraid to say, in the words of the fairy tale, "The emperor has no clothes."

In the not so distant past, there were dissidents in the Soviet Union and other communist countries who took a similar stance. Their refusal to live by lies brought them into confrontation with the authorities. They realized that they had a choice. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn put it, "Either truth or falsehood: Toward spiritual independence, or toward spiritual servitude."

### Total honesty?

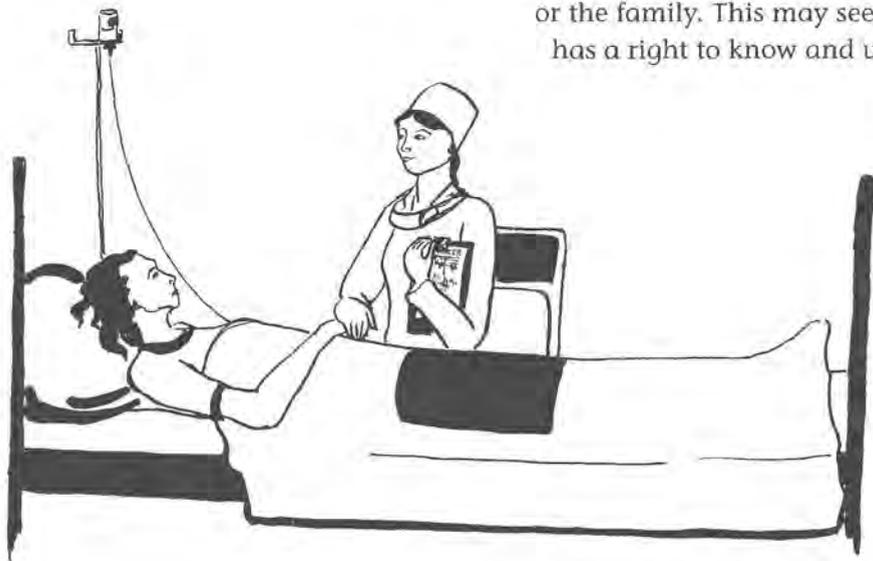
We naturally come to the next important question about honesty: Must we always be honest and tell the truth? Basically, yes. Since honesty is about reality, everyone is entitled to know the truth. It is a fundamental sign of respect to tell a person the truth and not to deceive him.

This does not mean that we have to tell the whole truth at all times. Honesty is one virtue among many and should not itself become an absolute dictum. It has to be kept in balance with other qualities such as politeness, loyalty, privacy, sensitivity and patience. Just because one thinks that another person is a fool doesn't mean one should say so for the sake of "honesty." That would be just rude. There are simple norms of good behavior that "being honest" does not entitle one to violate. If you are in a bad mood, that doesn't mean you have the right to "honestly" express how you feel to everyone you meet. Furthermore, it is quite normal for a parent or teacher to

encourage a child by telling him that a picture he has drawn is “very good,” although from a strictly aesthetic point of view it is not. Things can be left unsaid or only partly said and still be truthful. An irritating visitor can be told, “My mother is busy now. Can she call you later?” instead of “My mother says you stay too long. She doesn’t want to see you.”

Consider whether it is better to withhold certain medical information from a person who is dying in order to avoid frightening or worrying him or the family. This may seem to be a good reason, but the person has a right to know and usually wants to know what is really

happening. This does not mean one should say, “You are dying and probably won’t live for more than another few months!” It is possible to give such information in a way that allows the patient to decide how much he wants to know. A dying woman may be told, “Your condition is very serious, and I am worried about you.” This allows the patient in her own time to ask for further information and allows the doctor to elaborate in a way that is appropriate.



There are other cases in which we have no obligation at all to tell the truth. In fact, we have the duty to withhold information entirely from someone who has no right to it. For example, suppose you know where a person is hiding from a gang of criminals. Are you obliged to tell the truth and reveal his whereabouts? Clearly not. Honesty is not a cover for cowardice or collaboration. Love says that we should risk our own lives for the sake of others. During the Second World War many heroic Dutch and French citizens hid Jews in their homes to prevent them from being taken away by Nazi officials and sent to concentration camps. When questioned, they did not reveal the whereabouts of the Jews. In the same way, a soldier who has been captured by the enemy is not expected to reveal military secrets in the name of honesty. A person who, worse still, willingly reveals his nation’s secrets to an enemy is not “being honest.” He is a traitor.

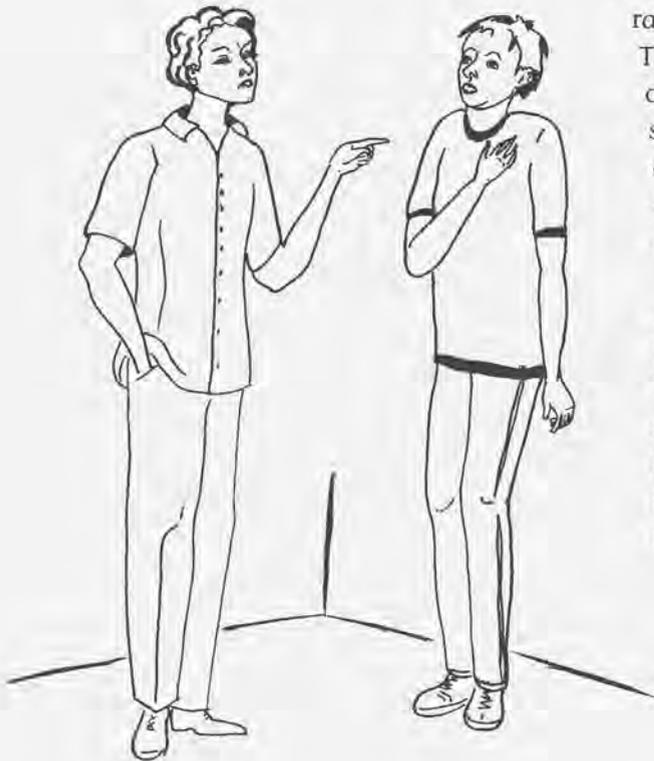
Honesty is not an absolute value. Being honest does not mean that you will always tell the complete truth in every situation. In fact, honesty may depend upon many other variables, and it takes a mature person to know how and when to totally disclose the truth.

### *Honesty and sensitivity*

True honesty is an expression of love and therefore shows respect for the person as well as the relationship. It allows disclosure and prevents secrets and barriers that might hinder the growth of heart. Honesty that is not an expression of love is less than authentic.

A young wife very much in love with her husband wanted to cook him a special meal. She was a wonderful person, but totally unskilled in cooking. Her mother gave her one of her favorite recipes for a meat dish. After working on the meal all day, the young wife served it to her husband. She

asked him if he liked it, and although he hated it and felt as if he could barely swallow it, he responded, "Yes, dear, it's fantastic!" He knew she had worked hard to please him, and he didn't want to hurt her feelings. Believing that he really enjoyed the meal, she made it several times a week, and because there were only two of them they always had leftovers. One evening, when they were having an argument (and after many meals of that horrible dish), he finally told his wife that he hated it, could never eat it again, and thought she was the worst cook in the world. Terribly hurt and shocked, she said, "You lied to me! I'll never trust you again!" Such a small thing, but the seed of deceit was planted.



Although the husband had not been "honest" at first, the sole intent of his "total honesty" was to hurt his wife rather than to communicate his feelings out of love. Their relationship was not open and feelings were not communicated freely. In the course of their relationship the husband had built up a lot of anger about other aspects of their marriage. The meal was not the source of his anger but brought out something much deeper that had led him to frustration.

How could this situation have been avoided? After having been served the meal the first time, the husband might have commented: "Dear, I see how hard you worked to make this meal for me and I really appreciate all that you have done. I could never make a decent supper for myself, but I do not particularly like this dish." Even though the wife might have been a little disappointed, she would have been grateful later on, knowing that their relationship was based on honesty. Now she could be certain that he truly liked her cooking when he complimented her on it.

To say what you think in any given moment without consideration of the person receiving the word gives rise to a kind of raw and brutal honesty. Often the commitment to this singular virtue blinds the speaker to his deeper motivation, which might be one of malice, not love. Expressions of brutal honesty are likely to be insensitive at best and hurtful at worst. Before anything is said, one should carefully think about the best manner to convey the truth about the situation, in order for the words to meet with greater receptivity.

Let's look at a few examples of brutal honesty in comparison to sensitive honesty. Notice that both types of honesty get the same point across, just in very different ways. Try to imagine being on the receiving end. Which expression would you prefer to hear?

## Brutal Honesty

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“You have such a big mouth in the chemistry class. You shouldn’t speak every time the teacher asks a question. Don’t you know that other people know the answers too?”

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“Laura doesn’t want you to know about her family situation because she doesn’t trust you and is afraid you’ll tell all the others about her.”

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“Your speech was terrible. You’ll never be a success as a public speaker.”

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“My mother hates you coming over to our house. She says you’re rude and insensitive.”

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## Sensitive Honesty

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“I think that you are very good at chemistry, but it would be nice to let other students answer the teacher’s questions sometimes.”

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“I think Laura doesn’t want to tell you about her family situation because she is afraid you may say something about it to someone else and it’s a very sensitive matter.”

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“I think that was a difficult topic to speak about, and I have some ideas on how you could do your next presentation. Don’t feel bad. Public speaking takes a lot of practice.”

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“Next time you come over, do you think you could greet my mother nicely and talk to her for a few minutes? It would really make a difference to her.”

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As you can see, it is possible to be both honest and sensitive, and fulfill the ideal that “kindness and truth shall meet.” Honesty is not an excuse for being unkind. Occasionally we must say things that another person does not want to hear. Kindness does not mean keeping our mouth shut in these instances. Rather, it means caring enough about ourselves, the other person, and the integrity of the relationship to express the truth in a respectful way. Speaking the truth does not mean blurting out everything that is on our mind. Discretion, sensitivity, and proper timing are needed.

In fact, when you can be both honest and sensitive, the people to whom you are relating will be able to accept what you are saying much more easily. Just knowing someone very well (such as your mother, father, sister, brother or best friend) does not give you license to be cruel. Friendship requires its own artistry in relating well to others. You may help others to see important things that have been ignored, but the way in which you do this means everything. If you can be sensitive, your friends will probably genuinely appreciate your honesty.

## Questions & Answers:

### What does honesty have to do with my personal relationships?

Honesty is the foundation upon which a good relationship can grow. Without honesty, any relationship will be full of suspicion and insecurity. Once trust is built between people, they feel freer to express themselves and to be honest in return. Small lies are often the beginning of the deterioration of relationships. Once a person has lied to you or deceived you in some way (such as withholding information), there will always be a shadow of doubt in the back of your mind about that person’s sincerity.

### What does it mean to be honest with yourself?

Honesty starts with the individual. The ability to understand your own feelings and thoughts is the beginning of being able to understand and be true to others. Being honest with yourself also means staying in touch with your true motives.

### Why would anyone strive to be honest?

Sometimes it's much easier to lie, or to cover up the truth so others won't find out about your mistakes or shortcomings. However, when you are honest you don't have to worry about covering up your lies, as one lie easily leads to another lie. You will know that your friends like you the way you are. You don't have to make up stories or hide things to impress them.

### How does it feel to be lied to?

Once you discover that your friend has lied to you, even though you don't say anything to her, you will wonder constantly what else she may have lied to you about. There is an invisible wall that appears between the two of you built of distrust.

### How does it feel to lie to other people?

When you lie, feelings of guilt arise from your soul. However, once you start lying to someone, it becomes difficult to stop as lies beget more lies. Once you tell one, you have to tell the more just to cover up that one. So lying becomes a habit. Also, you begin to have a hard time remembering just what you have told someone. Eventually, you will be exposed as it becomes clear that all your stories don't mesh with each other.

### What is a "white lie"?

A white lie is a small untruth that doesn't seem to hurt anyone. White lies may seem to make things run more smoothly. Because they seem to help more than hurt, white lies often seem acceptable.

Examples of white lies:

- ✗ "Yes, I love your new sweater!" (You really think it is ugly.)
- ✗ "Don't worry, I didn't tell anyone." (You told only one of your other friends.)
- ✗ "Tell him I'm not home right now." (You just don't want to talk to the person.)



### What is the problem with white lies?

Like other lies, white lies ultimately destroy trust. They *are not* harmless. Although white lies may seem unimportant to the person telling them, the person being deceived may feel degraded, manipulated and foolish if he finds out the truth. It may be easier to be dishonest sometimes, but in reality white lies cheapen communication. Harmless and seemingly insignificant lies pave the way for bigger and more serious lies.

### What is self-deception?

Self-deception is making oneself believe something that is not true. Usually this type of lying involves lying to others as well. Usually the self-deceiving person is clouding reality to help himself feel less guilty. This commonly takes place through rationalizations.

For example:

- ✗ I won't tell my husband how much I spent on the dress I bought. It would only make him more upset. Besides, I make enough money to afford one nice dress a year.

- ✗ I have so much schoolwork to turn in today. I know I will fail the test if I don't pretend I am sick. I will tell my mother I am sick. In any case, I really don't feel all that well.
- ✗ When my boss asks for the receipt, I will tell him that they didn't give me one. If he finds out I lost it, he'll be very angry. Besides, they usually don't give me sales receipts.
- ✗ Angela asked me to read her story and tell her what I thought. The story was boring, but I know she'll get a good grade on it, so I'll just tell her I thought it was good. Anyway, I could tell she put a lot of time into it.

In each of these situations can you find ways in which the person is not being honest with himself or herself? What is the truth that the person does not admit?

## For Your Journal



Write down something you have told yourself in the past that you now recognize was a rationalization. Explain why you felt the need to fool yourself in this way.

# The Emperor's New Clothes

by Hans Christian Andersen

Many years ago there was an Emperor who was so excessively fond of new clothes that he spent all his money on them. Life was very lively in the great town where he lived; hosts of strangers came to visit it every day, and among them one day were two swindlers. They (told everyone they were) weavers, and said that they knew how to weave the most beautiful stuffs imaginable. Not only were the colors and patterns unusually fine, but the clothes...had the peculiar quality of becoming invisible to every person who was not fit for the office he held, or if he was impossibly stupid.

"Those must be splendid clothes," thought the Emperor. "By wearing them I shall be able to discover which men in my kingdom are unfitted for their posts. I shall distinguish the wise men from the fools."

He paid the two swindlers a lot of money in advance so that they might begin their work at once. "I should like to know how those weavers are getting on with the stuff," thought the Emperor; but he felt a little uneasy when he reflected that anyone who was stupid or unfit for his post would not be able to see it.

"I will send my faithful old minister to the weavers," thought the Emperor. "He will be best to see how the stuff looks, for he is a clever man and no one fulfills his duties better than he does!"

So the good old minister went into the room where the two swindlers sat working at the empty loom. "Heaven preserve us!" thought the old minister, opening his eyes very wide. "Why I can't see a thing!" But he took care not to say so.

Both the swindlers begged him to be good enough to step a little nearer, and asked if he did not think it a good pattern and beautiful coloring. "Oh, it is beautiful! Quite charming!" said the old minister. "I will certainly tell the Emperor that the stuff pleases me very much."

The Emperor soon sent another faithful official to see how the stuff was getting on, and if it would soon be ready. The same thing happened to him as to the minister; he looked and looked, but as there was only the empty loom, he could see nothing at all.

"I know I am not a fool!" thought the man, "so it must be that I am unfit for my good post! However, one must not let it appear!"

"It is absolutely charming!" he said to the Emperor.

Now the Emperor thought he would like to see it while it was still on the loom. So, accompanied by a number of selected courtiers...he went to visit the crafty impostors.

"What!" thought the Emperor; "I see nothing at all! This is terrible! Am I a fool? Am I not fit to be Emperor? Why, nothing worse could happen to me!"

"Oh, it is beautiful!" said the Emperor. The whole suite gazed and gazed, but saw nothing more than all the others. However, they all

exclaimed with his Majesty, "It is very beautiful!" and they advised him to wear a suit made of this wonderful cloth on the occasion of a great procession which was just about to take place. "It is magnificent! Gorgeous! Excellent!"

At last (the swindlers) said: "Now the Emperor's new clothes are ready!" The Emperor, with his grandest courtiers, went to them himself, and both the swindlers raised one arm in the air, as if they were holding something, and said: "See, these are the trousers, this is the coat, here is the robe!" and so on.

"Yes!" said all the courtiers, but they could not see anything, for there was nothing to see. "Will your imperial majesty be graciously pleased to take off your clothes," said the imposters, "so that we may put on the new ones."

The Emperor took off all his clothes, and the imposters pretended to give one article of dress after the other. "How well his majesty looks in the new clothes!" cried all the people round. "They are the most gorgeous robes!"

"The canopy is waiting outside to be carried over your majesty in the procession," said the master of ceremonies. "Well, I am quite ready," said the Emperor. "Don't the clothes fit well?"

Then the Emperor walked along in the procession under the gorgeous canopy, and everybody in the streets and at the windows exclaimed, "How beautiful the Emperor's new clothes are! And they fit to perfection!" Nobody would let it appear that he could see nothing, for then he would not be fit for his post, or else he was a fool.

"But he has nothing on," said a little child.

"Oh, listen to the innocent," said its father; and one person whispered to the other what the child had said. "He has nothing on; a child says he has nothing on!"

"But he has nothing on!" at last cried all the people.

The Emperor squirmed, for he knew it was true.