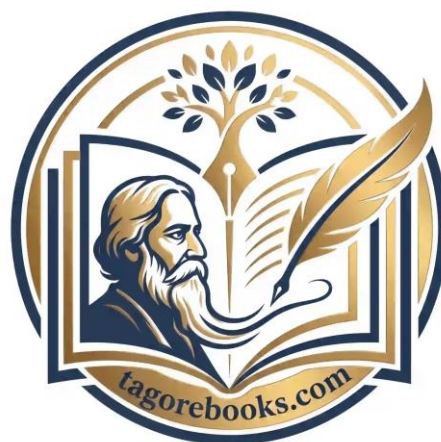


SHORT STORY

AN IDLE TALE

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AN IDLE TALE 1

An island in the middle of a distant ocean. It was inhabited exclusively by playing cards: the Kings, the Queens, the Aces, and the Jacks. There were many other households, ranging from the Twos and Threes to the Nines and Tens, but they were not of noble birth.

The Ace, the King, and the Jack constituted the three primary castes; the Nines and Tens were the untouchables, unworthy of even sitting in the same row as the others.

But what marvelous discipline! The exact value and status of each individual had been fixed long ago; there was no room for even a hair's breadth of deviation. Everyone went about their prescribed duties—generation after generation, simply tracing over the exact lines drawn by their predecessors.

What exactly this work entailed was hard for a foreigner to fathom. At first glance, one might mistake it for a game. Moving only by the rules, coming and going by the rules, rising and falling by the rules. An invisible hand shuffled and maneuvered them, and they simply moved.

There was never any change of expression on their faces. A single, permanent expression was stamped upon them forever. They stared blankly, like painted pictures. From time immemorial, everything from the hats on their heads to the shoes on their feet had remained exactly the same.

No one ever had to think; no one ever had to weigh a decision. They all walked about in a silent, lifeless stupor. When they fell, they fell silently, lying flat on their backs, staring up at the sky with unperturbed faces.

No one possessed any hopes, any desires, or any fears. There was no attempt to tread a new path, no laughter, no tears, no doubt, and no hesitation.

Just as a bird flutters wildly inside a cage, one might look for the restless yearning of a living creature within these painted figures, but there was no such sign. And yet, once upon a time, living beings must have resided within these cages—back then, the cages must have swayed, the fluttering of wings and songs could be heard from within, evoking memories of deep forests and expansive skies. Now, one

could only feel the sheer confinement of the cage and its impeccably arranged iron bars. Whether the bird had flown away, died, or existed in a state of living death—who could say?

An astonishing stillness and peace. Absolute comfort and contentment.

In the streets, in the marketplaces, in the homes, everything was perfectly ordered and regulated—no noise, no conflict, no enthusiasm, no eagerness; only trivial daily chores and trivial rests.

The ocean, with its ceaseless, monotonous roar, struck the shore with thousands of soft, foam-white palms, keeping the entire island wrapped in a slumberous spell. The sky, like the two outstretched blue wings of a mother bird, guarded the peace of the horizons. Far away on the other shore, the vague outline of a foreign land appeared like a dark blue line—the tumultuous noise of passions and conflicts from there could never cross the ocean to reach this place.

AN IDLE TALE 2

On that distant shore, in that foreign land, lived a prince, the son of the neglected queen. He spent his childhood in his own world, living on the seashore with his exiled mother.

Sitting all alone, he wove the net of an immensely vast ambition in his mind. Casting that net across the horizons, he would imaginatively gather the ever-new mysteries of the universe and drag them to his own doorstep. His restless mind constantly wandered beyond the blue mountain ranges that blocked the horizon at the edge of the sky by the sea. He wanted to seek out where the mythical winged horses, the fabled jewels upon the serpent's hood, the celestial *parijata* flowers, and the magical wands of gold and silver were hidden—where, beyond the seven seas and thirteen rivers, in an impenetrable demon's lair, the unearthly beautiful princess of dreams lay sleeping.

The prince went to the village school, where, after lessons, he listened to tales of foreign lands from the merchant's son, and stories of phantoms and ghouls from the city prefect's son.

When the rain poured down heavily and the clouds darkened the sky, the prince would sit by the door with his mother, gaze out at the sea, and say, "Mother, tell

me a story about a very distant land." For a long time, his mother would narrate wondrous tales of a wondrous land she had heard in her own childhood; listening to those stories amidst the patter of the rain, the prince's heart would fill with a wistful longing.

One day, the merchant's son came to the prince and said, "My friend, I have finished my studies. I am now going to set out to travel the world, so I have come to bid you farewell."

The prince replied, "I will go with you."

The prefect's son said, "Will you leave me behind all alone? I am coming with you too."

The prince went to his sorrowful mother and said, "Mother, I am setting out on a journey. This time, I will return with the means to end all your sorrows."

And so, the three friends set forth.

AN IDLE TALE 3

The merchant's twelve ships were ready at sea; the three friends climbed aboard. The sails billowed in the south wind, and the boats raced forward like the prince's own heart's desires.

Arriving at Conch Island, they loaded one ship with conch shells; at Sandalwood Island, one ship with sandalwood; and at Coral Island, one ship with coral.

Over the next four years, just as they had filled four more ships with ivory, musk, cloves, and nutmeg, a disastrous storm suddenly struck.

All the ships sank. Only one boat crashed onto the shores of an island, tossing the three friends onto the land before smashing into pieces.

On this island lived the playing cards: the Aces, the Kings, the Queens, and the Jacks, passing their days strictly according to the rules, while the Tens and Nines spent their days following in their footsteps, strictly according to the rules.

AN IDLE TALE 4

Until now, the Kingdom of Cards had known no disturbances. This was the first time any trouble had brewed.

For the first time, a debate arose: these three people who had suddenly emerged from the sea one evening—what caste should they be placed in?

First of all, what was their rank? Were they Aces, Kings, Jacks, or mere Tens and Nines?

Secondly, what was their suit? Spades, Clubs, Hearts, or Diamonds?

Unless all this was settled, it was difficult to interact with them in any way. Whose food would they eat, who would they live with? Depending on their rights, who among them should sleep with their head facing northwest, who southwest, who northeast, and who should sleep standing up—nothing could be determined.

Never before had there been a cause for such terrible anxiety in this kingdom.

But the three ravenously hungry foreign friends had not the slightest concern for these grave matters. They just wanted to survive by finding some food. When they saw that everyone was hesitating to serve them meals and that the Aces had convened a grand assembly to search for a ruling, they simply started eating whatever food they could find, wherever they found it.

Even the Twos and Threes were astounded by this behavior. A Three said, "Brother Two, these people have no sense of purity or propriety!"

The Two replied, "Brother Three, I see quite clearly that they belong to an even lower caste than us."

Having cooled down after their meal, the three friends noticed that the people here were of a rather novel sort. It was as if they had no roots anywhere in the world. As if someone had grabbed them by their tufts of hair, uprooted them, and now they wandered about swaying in a bewildered daze, entirely devoid of any touch of the real world. Whatever they did, it seemed as if someone else was making them do it. Exactly like the dangling marionettes in a puppet show. That is why no one had any expression or thought on their faces; everyone moved about with extreme solemnity, strictly following the rules. And yet, the whole thing looked terribly bizarre.

Seeing this utterly solemn display of living lifelessness all around, the prince threw his head back and burst into roaring laughter. The loud sound of this genuine amusement sounded incredibly strange on the silent streets of the Kingdom of

Cards. Everything here was so strictly proper, so immaculate, so ancient, and so exceedingly grave, that the mirth, startled by its own sudden, unrestrained outburst, grew pale and extinguished itself—the flow of people all around felt twice as still and solemn as before.

The prefect's son and the merchant's son nervously said to the prince, "Friend, let us not spend another moment in this joyless land. If we stay here two more days, we will have to pinch ourselves every now and then just to check if we are still alive."

The prince replied, "No, brothers, I am intrigued. They look like human beings—I must shake them up a bit to see if there is even a single drop of living substance left inside them."

AN IDLE TALE 5

So some time passed. But these three foreign youths simply refused to be bound by any rules. Whenever they were supposed to stand up, sit down, turn their heads, lie face down, lie face up, nod, or do somersaults, they did none of it; instead, they watched with amusement and laughed. They were not in the least overwhelmed by the colossal solemnity inherent in this endless array of prescribed rituals.

One day, the Ace, the King, and the Jack came to the prince, the prefect's son, and the merchant's son. With voices deep and hollow as echoing cauldrons, and faces of unshakeable gravity, they asked, "Why do you not behave according to the rules?"

The three friends replied, "Because of our Will."

In those same deep, echoing voices, the three commanders of the Kingdom of Cards said, as if in a trance, "Will! Who is that fellow?"

They did not understand what 'Will' was that day, but gradually they began to comprehend. Every day they saw that instead of walking this way, it was possible to walk that way; just as there was one direction, there was also another. Three living examples from a foreign land had arrived to show them that the boundaries of human freedom were not entirely confined within the rules. Thus, they vaguely began to feel the influence of a sovereign power called 'Will'.

The moment they felt it, the entire Kingdom of Cards began to tremble faintly from top to bottom—much like the awakening that slowly ripples through the many coils of a giant python rousing from its slumber.

AN IDLE TALE 6

The impassive Queens had never cast their gaze upon anyone until now; they had merely gone about their duties in silent, unperturbed obedience. But now, one spring afternoon, like a sudden flash, one of them raised her thick, dark eyelashes and cast a spellbound glance at the Prince. Startled, the Prince exclaimed, "Good heavens! I thought they were all mere statues—but no, I see now that she is a woman."

Calling the prefect's son and the merchant's son aside, the Prince said, "Brothers, there is a profound sweetness in this. At the very first glance of her dark eyes, newly awakened with emotion, I felt as though I was witnessing the very first dawn of a newly created world. The patience I have held onto for so long has finally been rewarded today."

The two friends smiled with immense curiosity and said, "Is that truly so, my friend?"

From that day forward, the hapless Queen of Hearts began to forget the rules every single day. Wherever she was mandated to be by law, exceptions began to occur at every moment. For instance, when she was required to stand in line next to the Jack, she would suddenly come and stand next to the Prince. The Jack would say in an unshakeable, solemn voice, "Queen, you have made a mistake." Hearing this, the Queen of Hearts' naturally flushed cheeks would turn an even deeper crimson, and her unblinking, serene gaze would lower to the ground. The Prince would intervene, "She has made no mistake. From today, I am the Jack at her service."

What unprecedented beauty, what unimaginable grace began to radiate from that newly blossomed woman's heart! What sweet restlessness in her steps, what waves of emotion in her glance, what fragrant outpouring of devotion surging from her entire existence!

In paying excessive attention to correcting the errors of this new transgressor, nowadays everyone else started making mistakes. The Ace forgot his eternal

dignity, the boundary between the King and the Jack blurred, and even the Tens and Nines became somewhat peculiar.

The spring cuckoo had sung on this ancient island many times before, but it had never sung the way it did that season. The ocean had forever sung in a monotonous, unbroken roar, eternally proclaiming the inviolable majesty of the ancient law—but today, suddenly stirred by the south wind, it seemed to try and express its fathomless yearning through light and shadow, gesture and language, like the restless, turbulent waves of a universal youth.

AN IDLE TALE 7

Were these the same Aces, the same Kings, the same Jacks? Where had those utterly content, well-fed, perfectly round faces gone? Some now gazed up at the sky, some sat idly by the sea; some lost their sleep at night, others lost their appetite.

On some faces lay jealousy, on others infatuation; some showed anxiety, others doubt. Here there was laughter, there weeping, and elsewhere, music. Everyone's eyes were now fixed upon themselves and upon others. Everyone was comparing themselves with one another.

The Ace thought, 'That young King might not be entirely bad-looking, but he lacks grace. There is a certain majesty in my bearing that cannot fail to attract the gaze of a certain someone.'

The King thought, 'The Ace is always strutting about with a stiff neck; he thinks the Queens are dying of broken hearts just looking at him.' With a wry smile, he would look at his own reflection in the mirror.

All the Queens in the land began to dress up with all their might, looking at each other and remarking, 'Oh, I could just die! What is the need for such ostentatious dressing, my dear? It makes me blush just to see her antics!' Saying this, they would double their own efforts to display their charms and graces.

Elsewhere, two male friends, or two female friends, would sit with their arms around each other in secluded corners, sharing whispered secrets. Sometimes they laughed, sometimes they cried; sometimes they grew angry, sometimes they engaged in lovers' quarrels, and sometimes they tenderly made up.

The young men sat languidly by the roadside in the shade of the forest, leaning against the trunks of trees, their legs stretched out over heaps of dry leaves. Maidens, draped in deep blue garments, would walk along that shaded path, lost in their own thoughts. Upon nearing the men, they would lower their faces and avert their eyes—walking past with an air of having seen no one, of having come to show themselves to no one.

Seeing this, some eccentric youths would gather their courage and rush forward, but failing to find a single suitable word, they would stop in embarrassed silence. The favorable moment would pass, and the woman, like the fleeting moment itself, would gradually fade away into the distance.

The birds continued to sing overhead; the wind blew wildly, tossing the women's veils and loose curls; the tree leaves rustled and murmured, and the ceaseless, surging roar of the ocean made the unspoken desires of the heart tremble with twice their force.

In just one spring, three foreign youths had arrived and whipped up a torrential storm in a stagnant river.

AN IDLE TALE 8

The Prince saw that the entire country was suspended in a heavy silence, caught exactly between the high tide and the ebb. There were no words, only the exchanging of glances; only one step forward, two steps back; only piling up the desires of the heart to build sandcastles, and then breaking them down again. It was as if everyone was sitting in the corner of their rooms, offering themselves as a sacrifice into their own inner fires, growing thinner and more speechless with each passing day. Only their eyes burned, and their lips trembled like leaves in the wind, stirred by the unspoken words trapped within.

The Prince called everyone and proclaimed, "Bring the flutes, sound the trumpets and horns! Let everyone raise a shout of joy; the Queen of Hearts shall choose her husband in a *Swayamvara*!"

Immediately, the Tens and Nines began to blow into their flutes, and the Twos and Threes took up the trumpets and horns. Suddenly, in this tumultuous wave of joy, all the awkward whispering and exchanging of glances shattered.

Men and women mingled together at the festival—so many words, so much laughter, so many jests! Speaking the heart's truth under the guise of riddles, feigning disbelief with playful deceit, engaging in trivial chatter amidst loud laughter. Just as when a strong wind rises in a dense forest, causing branches, leaves, vines, and trees to sway and intertwine in a myriad of ways, so too did they mingle among themselves.

Amidst this clamor and joyful festivity, the flutes began to play the profoundly sweet notes of the *Sahana* raga since the morning. It infused depth into the joy, yearning into the union, beauty into the visible world, and the sweet ache of love into every heart. Those who had not loved deeply before fell in love, and those who had already loved became wistful with joy.

The Queen of Hearts, adorned in red garments, had sat all day in a secret, shaded bower. The distant strains of the *Sahana* raga reached her ears too, and her eyes had gently closed in a trance. Suddenly, at one point, she opened her eyes to see the Prince sitting before her, gazing at her face. Instantly, with a trembling body, she covered her face with both hands and sank to the ground in a swoon of modesty.

Pacing alone by the seashore all day, the Prince quietly reflected upon that startled, doe-like gaze and that bashful surrender.

AN IDLE TALE 9

At night, illuminated by the glow of a hundred thousand lamps, scented by the fragrance of floral wreaths, and serenaded by the melodies of flutes, the grand assembly gathered. Amidst the rows of adorned, elegantly dressed, and smiling youths, a young maiden slowly approached with trembling steps, carrying a wedding garland in her hands. She came and stood before the Prince, her head bowed in deep modesty. She could not raise the garland to the neck she desired, nor could she lift her eyes to the face she longed for.

Seeing this, the Prince bowed his own head, and the garland slipped from her hands, falling gently around his neck. The assembly, which had been as silent and still as a painted canvas, suddenly erupted in a rapturous wave of joy.

With great reverence and affection, the people led the bride and groom to the throne and seated them. Together, they joyously crowned the Prince as the sovereign of the realm.

AN IDLE TALE 10

The sorrowful, neglected queen from across the sea arrived in her son's new kingdom aboard a golden ship.

The troupe of painted figures had suddenly become human. The unbroken peace and unyielding solemnity of the past were no more. The eternal currents of the world—with its joys and sorrows, love and hatred, perils and prosperity—surged in, completely filling the new kingdom of the new king.

Now, some were good, some were bad; some felt joy, others felt sorrow—for now, they were all truly human. No longer harmless, docile puppets bound by an inviolable decree, they were now saints and sinners by their own free will.

(Ashadh, 1299 Bengali Calendar)