

The Court Cards

Hans Christian Andersen

Oh, so many dainty things can be cut out of pasteboard and pasted together! In this fashion there was cut and pasted a castle so large that it took up a whole table top, and it was painted so that it seemed to be built out of red brick. It had a shining copper roof; it had towers and a drawbridge; the water in the canals looked like plate glass, which is just what it was; and in the topmost tower there stood a watchman cut out of wood. He had a trumpet, but he didn't blow it.

All this belonged to a little boy named William. He raised and then lowered the drawbridge himself, and made his tin soldiers march over it. He opened the castle gate to peep into the spacious reception hall, where all the face cards from a pack - Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs and Spades - hung in frames upon the wall, like portraits in a real reception hall. The Kings each held a scepter and wore a crown. The Queens wore flowing veils over their shoulders, and in their hands each held a flower or a fan. The Knaves had halberds and nodding plumes.

One evening the little boy peered through the open gates of the castle to have a look at the Court Cards in the reception hall. It seemed to him that the Kings saluted him with their scepters, the Queen of Spades waved the golden tulip she held, the Queen of Hearts raised her fan, and all four Queens graciously took notice of him. As he came a little closer to get a better view, his head struck against the castle and shook it. Then the four Knaves, of Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs, and Spades, lifted their halberds to warn him not to try to press his way through.

The little boy understood, and gave them a friendly nod. He nodded again, and then he said: "Say something," but the Court Cards said not a word. However, when he nodded a third time to the Knave of Hearts, the Knave jumped out of his card and placed himself in the middle of the floor.

"What's your name?" he asked the youngster. "You have bright eyes and good teeth, but you don't wash your hands often enough." This was not a very polite way to talk.

"My name is William," said the youngster. "This castle is mine, and you are my Knave of Hearts."

"I'm my King's and my Queen's Knave, not yours," said the Knave of Hearts. "I can get off of the card and out of the frame too. So can my gracious King and Queen, even more easily than I. We can march right out into the wide world, but that's such a tiresome journey, and we have grown weary of it. It's more convenient, and more pleasant for us to be sitting in the cards, just being ourselves."

"Were all of you really human beings once?" asked the youngster.

"Human beings?" the Knave of Hearts said. "Yes, but we were not as good as we should have been. Now please light a little wax candle for me. I'd like a red one best, for red is the color of my King and Queen. Then I shall tell our whole story to the lord of the castle - I believe you said you were lord of the castle, didn't you? But don't interrupt me. If I speak, there must not be the slightest interruption."

"Do you see my King - the King of Hearts? Of these four Kings, he is the oldest, the first-born. He was born with a golden crown and a golden apple, and he began to rule immediately. His Queen was born with a golden fan. She still has it. They had a wonderful time, even in childhood. They did not have to go to school. They could amuse themselves all day long, building up castles and knocking them down, setting up tin soldiers, and playing with dolls. If they asked for a slice of bread and butter, their bread was buttered on

both sides and nicely sprinkled with brown sugar too. This was in the good old days which were called the golden age, but they tired of it all, and so did I. Yes, those were the good old days! - and then the King of Diamonds took over the government."

The Knave didn't say any more. The little boy waited to hear something else, but not a syllable was spoken, so after a while he asked, "What then?"

The Knave of Hearts made him no answer. He stood erect and silent, with his eyes fixed on the burning wax candle. The youngster nodded, and nodded again, but he got not response. He then turned to the Knave of Diamonds, and when he had nodded to him three times the Knave leaped from the card to the center of the floor. He said only two words: "Wax candle!"

Understanding what he wanted, little William at once lighted a red candle and placed it before him. The Knave of Diamonds presented arms with his halberd, and said:

"Then the King of Diamonds came to the throne - a King with a pane of glass in his chest. The Queen also had a pane of glass in her chest, so people could look right inside them, though in all other respects they were shaped as normal human beings. They were so pleasant that a monument was raised in their honor. It stood without falling for seven whole years, but it was built to stand forever." The Knave of Diamonds presented arms and stared at the red wax candle.

Immediately, without any nod of encouragement from little William, the Knave of Clubs stepped down, as serious as the stork that strides with such dignity across the meadow. Like a bird, the black three-leafed clover in the corner of the card flew past the Knave and back again, to fit itself where it had fitted before. Without waiting for his wax candle - as the other knaves had done - the Knave of Clubs said:

"Not everyone gets his bread buttered on both sides and powdered with sugar. My King and Queen had none of that. They were compelled to go to school and learn what they had not learned before. They too had panes of glass in their chests, but nobody looked through the glass except to see if something was wrong with their works inside, and if possible to find out some reason for scolding them. I know it. I have served my King and Queen all my life long. I know all about them, and I obey all their orders. They commanded me to say nothing more tonight, so I keep silence and present arms."

But William lighted a candle for this Knave too - a candle, white as snow. Quickly - even more quickly than the candle was lighted - the Knave of Spades appeared in the center of the hall. He hurried along, yet he limped as if he had a lame leg. It creaked and cracked as if it had once been broken. Yes, he had met with many ups and downs in his life. Now he spoke:

"Yes, you have each got a candle, and I shall get one too. I know that. But if we Knaves are honored so highly, our Kings and Queens should have triple honors. And it is right that My King and Queen should have *four* candles each. Their story and trials are so sad and unhappy that they have good reason to dress in mourning and to wear a grave-digger's spade on their coat of arms. Poor Knave that I am, in one game of cards I have been nicknamed 'Black Peter.' Yes! but I have a name that isn't even fit to mention." So he whispered, "In another game I am nicknamed 'Dirty Mads' - I who was once first cavalier to the King of Spades. Now I am last! The history of my royal master and mistress I will not tell, for they do not wish me to do so. The little lord of the castle may imagine their story for himself if he will, but it is a most melancholy one. They have sunk pretty low, and their fate is not apt to change for the better until we all go riding on the red horse, higher than there are clouds."

And little William proceeded to light three candles apiece for the Kings, and three for the Queens. But for the King and Queen of Spades, he lighted four candles apiece, and the whole reception hall became as dazzlingly bright as the wealthiest emperor's palace. The

four Kings and Queens made each other serene bows and gracious curtsies. The Queen of Hearts fluttered her golden fan, and the Queen of Spades twirled her golden tulip in a wheel of fire. The royal couples came down from their cards and frames to move in a graceful minuet across the floor. They were dancing in and out among the candle flames, and the Knaves were dancing too.

Suddenly the entire reception hall was ablaze. The fire roared up through the windows and the walls, and everything was a curtain of flames that crackled and hissed. The whole castle was wrapped in fire and smoke. William was frightened. He ran shouting to his father and mother, "Fire, fire! My castle's on fire!" It sparkled and blazed, but from the flames it sang:

"Now we are riding the red horse, higher than the clouds. This is the way it behooves Kings and Queens to go. And this is the way it behooves their Knaves to follow."

Yes! That was the end of William's castle, and of the Court Cards. William is still alive, and he washes his hands. It was not his fault that the castle burned.