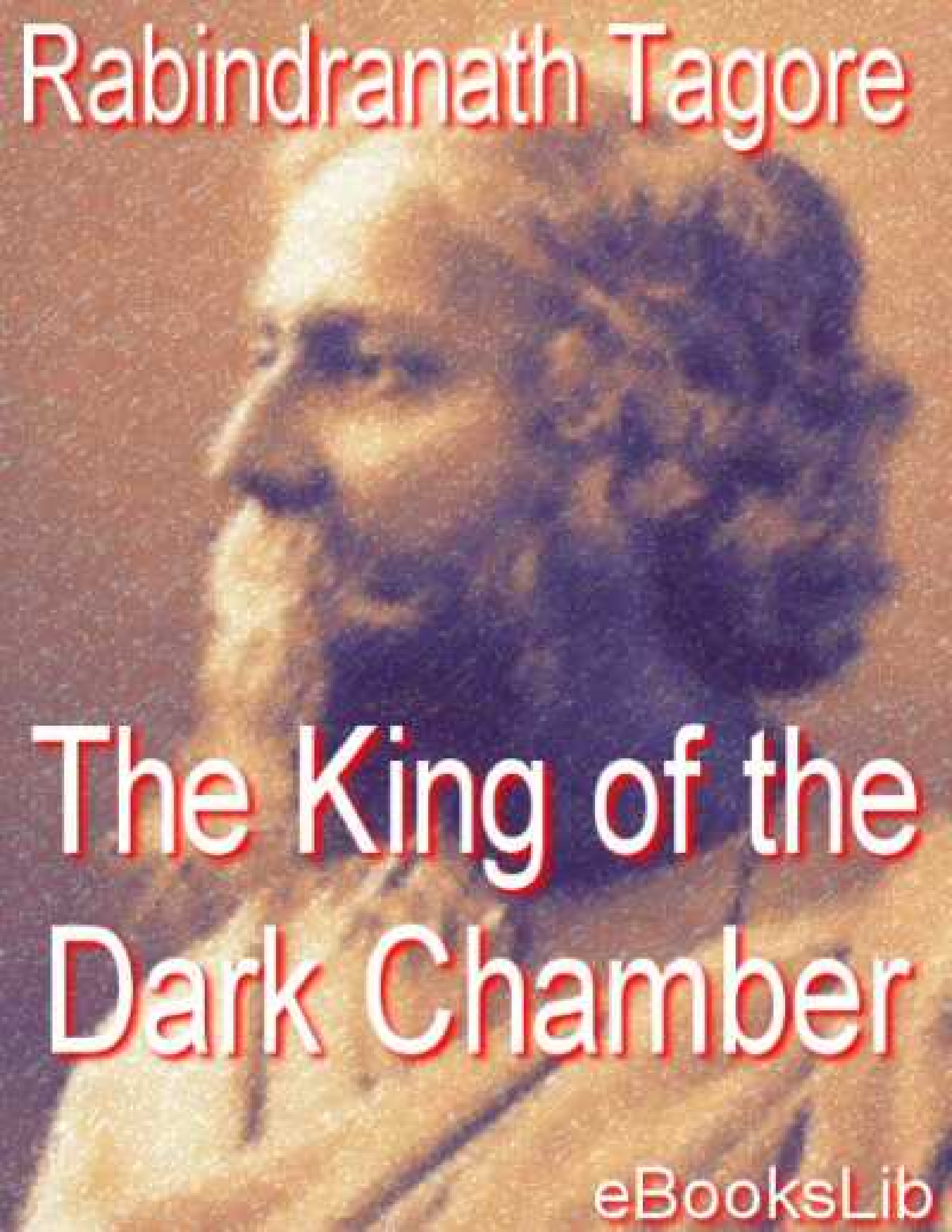




Rabindranath Tagore

The King of the Dark Chamber

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I

[A street. A few wayfarers, and a CITY GUARD]

FIRST MAN. Ho, Sir!

CITY GUARD. What do you want?

SECOND MAN. Which way should we go? We are strangers here. Please tell us which street we should take.

CITY GUARD. Where do you want to go?

THIRD MAN. To where those big festivities are going to be held, you know. Which way do we go?

CITY GUARD. One street is quite as good as another here. Any street will lead you there. Go straight ahead, and you cannot miss the place. [Exit.]

FIRST MAN. Just hear what the fool says: "Any street will lead you there!" Where, then, would be the sense of having so many streets?

SECOND MAN. You needn't be so awfully put out at that, my man. A country is free to arrange its affairs in its own way. As for roads in our country - well, they are as good as non-existent; narrow and crooked lanes, a labyrinth of ruts and tracks. Our King does not believe in open thoroughfares; he thinks that streets are just so many openings for his subjects to fly away from his kingdom. It is quite the contrary here; nobody stands in your way, nobody objects to your going elsewhere if you like to; and yet the people are far from deserting this kingdom. With such streets our country would certainly have been depopulated in no time.

FIRST MAN. My dear Janardan, I have always noticed that this is a great fault in your character.

JANARDAN. What is?

FIRST MAN. That you are always having a fling at your country. How can you think that open highways may be good for a country? Look here, Kaundilya; here is a man who actually believes that open highways are the salvation of a country.

KAUNDILYA. There is no need, Bhavadatta, of my pointing out afresh that Janardan is blessed with an intelligence which is remarkably crooked, which is sure to land him in danger some day. If the King comes to hear of our worthy friend, he will make it a pretty hard job for him to find any one to do him his funeral rites when he is dead.

BHAVADATTA. One can't help feeling that life becomes a burden in this country; one misses the joys of privacy in these streets - this jostling and brushing shoulders with strange people day and night makes one long for a bath. And nobody can tell exactly what kind of people you are meeting with in these public roads - ugh!

KAUNDILYA. And it is Janardan who persuaded us to come to this precious country! We never had any second person like him in our family. You knew my father, of course; he was a great man, a pious man if ever there was one. He spent his whole life within a circle of a radius of 49 cubits drawn with a rigid adherence to the injunctions of the scriptures, and never for a single day did he cross this circle. After his death a serious difficulty arose - how cremate him within the limits of the 49 cubits and yet outside the house? At length the priests decided that though we could not go beyond the scriptural number, the only way out of the difficulty was to reverse the figure and make it 94 cubits; only thus could we cremate him outside the house without violating the sacred books. My word, that was strict observance! Ours is indeed no common country.

BHAVADATTA. And yet, though Janardan comes from the very same soil, he thinks it wise to declare that open highways are best for a country.

[Enter GRANDFATHER with a band of boys]

GRANDFATHER. Boys, we will have to vie with the wild breeze of the south to-day - and we are not going to be beaten. We will sing till we have flooded all streets with our mirth and song.

SONG.

/* The southern gate is unbarred. Come, my spring, come! Thou wilt swing at the swing of my heart, come, my spring, come! Come in the lispings leaves, in the youthful surrender of flowers; Come in the flute songs and the wistful sighs of the woodlands! Let your unfastened robe wildly flap in the drunken wind! Come, my spring, come! */

[Exeunt.]

[Enter a band of CITIZENS]

FIRST CITIZEN. After all, one cannot help wishing that the King had allowed himself to be seen at least this one day. What a great pity, to live in his kingdom and yet not to have seen him for a single day!

SECOND CITIZEN. If you only knew the real meaning of all this mystery! I could tell you if you would keep a secret.

FIRST CITIZEN. My dear fellow, we both live in the same quarter of the town, but have you ever known me letting out any man's secret? Of course, that matter of your brother's finding a hidden fortune while digging for a well - well, you know well enough why I had to give it out. You know all the facts.

SECOND CITIZEN. Of course I know. And it is because I know that I ask, could you keep a secret if I tell you? It may mean ruination to us all, you know, if you once let it out.

THIRD CITIZEN. You are a nice man, after all, Virupaksha! Why are you so anxious to bring down a disaster which as yet only may happen? Who will be responsible for keeping your secret all his life?

VIRUPAKSHA. It is only because the topic came up - well, then, I shall not say anything. I am not the man to say things for nothing. You had yourself brought up the question that the King never showed himself; and I only remarked that it was not for nothing that the King shut himself up from the public gaze.

FIRST CITIZEN. Pray do tell us why, Virupaksha.

VIRUPAKSHA. Of course I don't mind telling you - for we are all good friends, aren't we? There can be no harm. (With a low voice.) The King - is - hideous to look at, so he has made up his mind never to show himself to his subjects.

FIRST CITIZEN. Ha! that's it! It must be so. We have always wondered ... why, the mere sight of a King in all countries makes one's soul quake like an aspen leaf with fear; but why should our King never have been seen by any mortal soul? Even if he at least came out and consigned us all to the gibbet, we might be sure that our King was no hoax. After all, there is much in Virupaksha's explanation that sounds plausible enough.

THIRD CITIZEN. Not a bit - I don't believe in a syllable of it.

VIRUPAKSHA. What, Vishu, do you mean to say that I am a liar?

VISHU. I don't exactly mean that - but I cannot accept your theory. Excuse me, I cannot help if I seem a bit rude or churlish.

VIRUPAKSHA. Small wonder that you can't believe my words - you who think yourself sage enough to reject the opinions of your parents and superiors. How long do you think you could have stayed in this country if the King did not remain in hiding? You are no better than a flagrant heretic.

VISHU. My dear pillar of orthodoxy! Do you think any other King would have hesitated to cut off your tongue and make it food for dogs? And you have the face to say that our King is horrid to look at!

VIRUPAKSHA. Look here, Vishu. will you curb your tongue?

VISHU. It would be superfluous to point out whose tongue needs the curbing.

FIRST CITIZEN. Hush, my dear friends - this looks rather bad.... It seems as if they are resolved to put me in danger as well. I am not going to be a party to all this.[Exit.]

[Enter a number of men, dragging in GRANDFATHER, in boisterous exuberance]

SECOND CITIZEN. Grandpa, something strikes me to-day ...

GRANDFATHER. What is it?

SECOND CITIZEN. This year every country has sent its people to our festival, but every one asks, "Everything is nice and beautiful - but where is your King?" and we do not know what to answer. That is the one big gap which cannot but make itself felt to every one in our country.

GRANDFATHER. "Gap," do you say! Why, the whole country is all filled and crammed and packed with the King: and you call him a "gap"! Why, he has made every one of us a crowned King!

SINGS.

/* We are all Kings in the kingdom of our King. Were it not so, how could we hope in our heart to meet him! We do what we like, yet we do what he likes; We are not bound with the chain of fear at the feet of a slave- owning King. Were it not so, how could we hope in our heart to meet him! Our King honours each one of us, thus honours his own very self. No littleness can keep us shut up in its walls of untruth for aye. Were it not so, how could we have hope in our heart to meet him! We struggle and dig our own path,

thus reach his path at the end. We can never get lost in the abyss of dark night. Were it not so, how could we hope in our heart to meet him! */

THIRD CITIZEN. But, really, I cannot stand the absurd things people say about our King simply because he is not seen in public.

FIRST CITIZEN. Just fancy! Any one libelling me can be punished, while nobody can stop the mouth of any rascal who chooses to slander the King.

GRANDFATHER. The slander cannot touch the King. With a mere breath you can blow out the flame which a lamp inherits from the sun, but if all the world blow upon the sun itself its effulgence remains undimmed and unimpaired as before.

[Enter VISHVAVASU and VIRUPAKSHA]

VISHU. Here's Grandfather! Look here, this man is going about telling everybody that our King does not come out because he is ugly.

GRANDFATHER. But why does that make you angry, Vishu? His King must be ugly, because how else could Virupaksha possess such features in his kingdom? He fashions his King after the image of himself he sees in the mirror.

VIRUPAKSHA. Grandfather, I shall mention no names, but nobody would think of disbelieving the person who gave me the news.

GRANDFATHER. Who could be a higher authority than yourself!

VIRUPAKSHA. But I could give you proofs ...

FIRST CITIZEN. The impudence of this fellow knows no bounds! Not content with spreading a ghastly rumour with an unabashed face, he offers to measure his lies with insolence!

SECOND CITIZEN. Why not make him measure his length on the ground?

GRANDFATHER. Why so much heat, my friends? The poor fellow is going to have his own festive day by singing the ugliness of his King. Go along, Virupaksha, you will find plenty of people ready to believe you: may you be happy in their company.[Exeunt.]

[Re-enter the party of FOREIGNERS]

BHAVADATTA. It strikes me, Kaundilya, that these people haven't got a King at all. They have somehow managed to keep the rumour afloat.

KAUNDILYA. You are right, I think. We all know that the supreme thing that strikes one's eye in any country is the King, who of course loses no opportunity of exhibiting himself.

JANARDAN. But look at the nice order and regularity prevailing all over the place - how do you explain it without a King?

BHAVADATTA. So this is the wisdom you have arrived at by living so long under a ruler! Where would be the necessity of having a King if order and harmony existed already?

JANARDAN. All these people have assembled to rejoice at this festival. Do you think they could come together like this in a country of anarchy?

BHAVADATTA. My dear Janardan, you are evading the real issue, as usual. There can be no question about the order and regularity, and the festive rejoicing too is plain enough: there is no difficulty so far. But where is the King? Have you seen him? Just tell us that.

JANARDAN. What I want to say is this: you know from your experience that there can be chaos and anarchy even if a King be present: but what do we see here?

KAUNDILYA. You are always coming back to your quibbling. Why can you not give a straight answer to Bhavadatta's question - Have you, or have you not, seen the King? Yes or no? [Exeunt.]

[Enter a band of MEN, singing]

SONG.

/* My beloved is ever in my heart That is why I see him everywhere, He is in the pupils of my eyes That is why I see him everywhere. I went far away to hear his own words, But, ah, it was vain! When I came back I heard them In my own songs. Who are you who seek him like a beggar from door to door! Come to my heart and see his face in the tears of my eyes! */

[Enter HERALDS and ADVANCE GUARDS of the KING]

FIRST HERALD. Stand off! Get away from the street, all of you!

FIRST CITIZEN. Eh, man, who do you think you are? You weren't of course born with such lofty strides, my friend? - Why should we stand off, my dear sir? Why should we budge? Are we street dogs, or what?

SECOND HERALD. Our King is coming this way.

SECOND CITIZEN. King? Which King?

FIRST HERALD. Our King, the King of this country.

FIRST CITIZEN. What, is the fellow mad? Whoever heard of our King coming out heralded by these vociferous gentry?

SECOND HERALD. The King will no longer deny himself to his subjects. He is coming to command the festivities himself.

SECOND CITIZEN. Brother, is that so?

SECOND HERALD. Look, his banner is flying over there.

SECOND CITIZEN. Ah, yes, that is a flag indeed.

SECOND HERALD. Do you see the red *Kimshuk* flower painted on it?

SECOND CITIZEN. Yes, yes, it is the *Kimshuk* indeed! - what a bright scarlet flower!