

Short story

The Snare

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THE KING Kangshaketu was pacing restlessly in his private room, his face convulsed with throes of anxiety, in hand a letter addressed to the prince by Arindam Samanta, the acknowledged rebel leader who was killed by his followers at the instigation of Somenath Dhar who was aspiring for leadership of the rebel group. He had somehow managed to get hold of the letter, when the prince was not home. His spies reported to him on the circumstances leading to the killing of Arindam and the involvement of Somenath in the killing. What had dismayed Kangshaketu was the involvement of the prince, his only son, his only child. He must quash the rebellion and retrieve his son, the prince. In doing so, he must play on the ambition of Somenath. He had sent for Somenath through a messenger. He was anxiously waiting for him. Beside him was the chief minister.

To end his anxious waiting the messenger strode in with Somenath and, saluting the king, strode out.

“Welcome, Somenath, the newly-made leader of the rebel group,” Kangshaketu said, his face writhing into a semblance of a derisive smile.

Somenath stood silent, but did not bother to salute the king.

“When one enters Maharaj’s room,” the minister cut in, “one must salute the king. Don’t you know this etiquette?”

“I know this etiquette very well, Matri Mahashay,” Somenath retorted.

“Then why didn’t you salute me?” Kangshaketu demanded.

“You are an enemy to your subjects,” Somenath said, keeping his voice haughty. “By saluting you I can’t lower the dignity of your subjects.”

Kangshaketu flew into an intense rage and felt an urge to send this haughty youth into prison where he would await death. But he snowballed the effusing of his anger, thinking that he would make Somenath his stooge.

“Don’t you know what punishment would accrue out of this audacity,” he said, keeping his voice as taciturn as possible.

“I know, Maharaj,” Somenath said in a firm voice. “Death sentence. But I assure you that you won’t get this opportunity. Perhaps you know your subject once obedient to you have flocked to our banner.”

Kangshaketu’s face took on a queer smile. “Because my subjects have flocked to your banner,” he said, “you had them murder their most beloved leader Arindam Samanta, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t have them murder him,” Somenath said. His voice quavered a bit, though he had tried to control it. “The rebels themselves murdered him on the proven charge of his having betrayed them.”

“They did murder him at your instigation,” Kangshaketu said, staring full into his face. “You aspired for leadership of the rebel group. But Arindam was their acknowledged leader. Had he

been alive, it would not have been possible for you to get your ambition fulfilled. You adopted such cunning tactics to have him thrown off your path.'

'It's false to be sure,' Somenath twanged,

Kangshaketu sensed his voice winnowed of the defiance, but said calmly, 'I've heard that one or two youths in your group are, like you, aspiring for the leadership of the group.' He paused, savouring the expression of fright that had loomed large on Somenath's face. 'And there's a clandestine conspiracy to murder you. Listen, Somenath, as you know, I have a bureau of spies roaming throughout the length and breadth of my kingdom to collect for me every kind information. They told me of the conspiracy against you.' He paused for another while, luxuriating in the expression of fright on Somenath's face. 'People are a queer thing,' he went on. 'Today they will adore you as their beloved leader and tomorrow they will fling you under their feet. They have no consistency whatsoever in anything. History testifies to it. What happened to Arindam will happen to you in the near future.'

'You mean to say I shall betray my friends?' Somenath said, his voice wobbling.

'I don't want you to betray your friends. Kangshaketu said, his voice firm and calm. 'I want you to charm your friends off the path..

'I can't do that!' Somenath blurted out.

Kangshaketu burst out into a peal of laughter. 'If you decline to accept my proposal, your death stick is on my hand,' he said.

'My death-stick?' Somenath asked, surprised

'The letter on the plea of which you had made Arindam out as a traitor and got him murdered is your death-stick. The letter was addressed by Arindam to Kumar. You know Arindam's close friend Subrata was going to deliver the letter to Kumar. You know because you yourself, the letter tells, had beguiled Arindam into writing the letter. You caught up on Subrata on his way to the palace and managed to read the letter to make sure whether Arindam had written the letter to your dictation. You'll surely ask me how I got to know all of this. I suspected Kumar's involvement in the rebellion. I have engaged a few men to spy on Kumar's movements. One of them eavesdropped on the conversation between Somenath and Subrata in which Subrata told Kumar of his encounter with you on the way and of your having read the letter.. He reported it to me. You have no way out of it.' He paused. Seeing the intense expression of fright on Somenath's face, he knew he had taken the mickey out of him, and continued, 'Imagine, Somenath, what your position would be if I had the letter passed on to the group!'

Somenath felt the quagmire of his own blunder starting sucking him in. Before being completely sucked in, he went down on his knees before Kanshaketu. 'They would tear me to pieces, if they got hold of the letter,' he balbutiated. 'Please do not get the letter passed on to the group.'

'I shall not get the letter passed on to the group if you perform a simple task for me,' Kangshaketu said, 'and if you succeed in performing the task to a nicety. I shall give you a grand reward such as I have never before given anybody else.'

A smile appeared in Somenath's face. 'Tell me what I shall have to perform, Maharaj,' he said.

'You shall have to betray your friends!' Kangshaketu said, his voice normal. 'If you dare betray me you know its consequences. My spies will dog you around.'

Somenath felt the quagmire had completely sucked him in. 'I know it,' he dawdled. 'But I have got in a fix?'

‘What fix?’ Kangshaketu asked.

‘It will be difficult to gain the upper hand over a youth called Phatik, Arindam’s buddy. He’s muddling along over the murder of Arindam.’

‘I’ve got to know already of it,’ Kangshaketu said. ‘Don’t bother about him. He, too, shall be thrown off the path.’

‘How?’ Somenath asked.

‘Mantri will tell you how,’ Kangshaketu said. ‘Wait outside for him!’

‘Somenath made obeisance to Kangshaketu and waddled out.

Kangshaketu turned to the chief minister and said, ‘I am giving you an important task, Mantri. Go over to our neighbouring kingdom. The king of that kingdom is a relation of mine, as you know. I’m sending along a letter with you to him. Deliver the letter into his hand and request him on my behalf to attack this kingdom at once,’

‘You’ll request him to attack our kingdom!’ the chief minister croaked in utter bewilderment. ‘Why not attack ourselves that kingdom?’

Kangshaketu permitted himself a smile. ‘Under the plea of being attacked I shall be able to send out to the war youths, particularly those who have risen in revolt against me, by conscripting them in the army. I hope I could make myself clearly understood.’

The chief minister nodded,

‘Somenath is waiting for you outside,’ Kangshaketu continued and paused and whispered something into his ear. ‘Tell him accordingly what to do,’ he added.

Somenath was anxiously waiting for Phatik. He had sent a missive to Phatik, requesting him to come over to the club at this time. In the missive he told Phatik that he wanted to sort out the mix-up centring on the murder of Arindam Samanta and that the group were keen on ironing out the misunderstanding between him and the group. Phatik told the messenger he would come.

Somenath heaved a deep sigh of relief when he saw Phatik coming. Phatik entered in a while. He looked immensely disappointed at witnessing the wonted scene of the youth rebels indulging in gambling, accompanied by brouhaha, ‘What a fine planning for the rebellion!’ Phatik blurted out to Somenath. ‘I see everybody absorbed in gambling. But you wrote to say that you are keen on ironing out our misunderstanding!’

‘The rebellion is not flying out, Phatik,’ Somenath said in a stentorian voice. He looked out of the door. ‘Won’t we indulge in merry-making now that we’ve planned on the rebellion?’

‘By indulging in merry-making you mean shackling them to gambling, Somenath?’ Phatik said. ‘But in the name of the rebellion you got Arindam murdered!’

‘Not in the name of the rebellion, but for the interest of the rebellion,’ Somenath said and looked impatiently out of the door.

‘Not for the interest of the rebellion, but for your own interest,’ Phatik shrilled. ‘If Arindam had been alive, you would not have become the leader of the group. So you cunningly manoeuvred him out of your path forever.’

‘Phatik!’ Somenath cried out and looked impatiently out of the door. His face brightened. He walked over to Phatik and placed his right hand on his shoulder. ‘Phatik,’ he went on, mellowing his voice, ‘you’ve misunderstand me. Believe me, we’re determined to rise up against Kangshaketu. And...’

“At that moment the chief minister entered the room. Somenath’s hand placed on Phatik’s shoulder showed him who Phatik was. ‘Hello Phatikbabu,’ he said. ‘Maharaj has sent me down here to you and said that according to your necessity...’

He stopped short, as if seeing Somenath. ‘I mean...I mean...I’m sorry ...I think I would rather go to your house...I’m going,’ he stammered out and scuffled out.

‘Why did Mantri Mashay come down to you? Somenath demanded, a clear expression of suspicion solidified on the faces of other rebel youths.

‘I can’t make head or tail of it,’ Somenath said, Phatik mumbled.

Somenath twisted his face into a derisive smile. ‘Now I’ve come to understand why you are so devoted to Arindam and why you’re muddling along over the murder of Arindam who, you know, had betrayed the rebels.’ Without giving Phatika an opportunity he turned to the other rebel youths and said, ‘Should we believe him who has betrayed the group, brothers?’

The pent-up silence that had been forced upon the youths exploded into a unisonant demand Phatik be taught a good lesson and they stormed upon Phatik,

Kumar, the, prince, kept staring at the portrait of his mother hanging on the wall opposite. He heaved a deep sigh. Enthralled by her paramount beauty, his father had married her from a very poor peasant family His fascination being broken in the course of time, he threw her overboard like one does a prostitute. Humiliated and abased, she had withered little by little and died a frustrated woman. On her death-bed she made Kumar vow revenge on her score on his father. Just in order to effectuate the vow he tried to ally himself with the rebellion. He could win over Arindam, but could not persuade other rebel youths to believe him, because of his being the son of the king; Somenath did not make them believe him. Besides, Arindam’s free mixing with him gave Somenath the opportunity he had sought to throw Arindam out of his way to becoming leader of the group. He had beguiled Arindam into writing the letter to him and capitalized on the sending of the letter to him to get Arindam murdered. On the strength of the letter he got hold of, his father had Somenath over a barrel and dragooned him into demoralizing the rebel youths by enslaving them to gambling and wine.. Kumar got to know that his father had connived with the neighbouring kingdom at attacking this kingdom and planned to use the conscription law in sending out particularly rebel youths to the war. Just a few days ago he had gone over to the club to alert the rebel youths to the imminent danger of their being sent out to the war. They were too absorbed in gambling and wine to listen to him and Somenath sort of turning him out. He returned frustrated to the palace.

Kumar heaved a deep sigh, looking at the portrait. ‘I’ve not owned up to my failure, Maa,’ he said. ‘I must avenge your death, Maa. I shall avenge it very soon.’

‘You’ve perfectly performed your task devolved upon you, Somenath,’ Kangshaketu said and turned to the Chief Minister. ‘I’m now relieved of the burden of anxiety. Who did this, Mantri?’

‘Your slave Somenath did this, Maharaj,’ the chief minister said, making sheep’s eyes at Somenath.

‘Arrange a festivity, Mantri, immediately!’ Kangshaketu said, ‘I shall give Somenath the grand reward I’ve promised him.’

Thank you very much, Maharaj,’ Somenath said, his face lit up with happiness. ‘It’s my pride to have performed the task to your satisfaction. It is also my pride to be rewarded by you.’ What is your grand reward, Maharaj?’

‘Death is my grand reward.’ Kangshaketu said firmly.

‘Death is your grand reward!’ Somenath exclaimed. ‘But...’

Kangshaketu cut him short. ‘I know what you would say, Somenath,’ he said, his voice grave. ‘In order to become an insignificant leader of the rebel group, you had your bosom friend Arindam murdered and for an insignificant reward you betrayed your rebel-friends. If another opportunity arises you will betray me to be sure.’

‘Believe me, Maharaj...’ Somenath just began but was rudely stopped short.

‘No one believes a traitor,’ Kangshaketu said. ‘As there are traitors like you on this earth, kings like me are ruling hereditarily.’

‘Sepoys!’ he shouted. Two sepoy came in. ‘Take him away and behead him!’ he commanded.

The sepoy took Somenath out.

Kumar strode in and pruned Kangshaketu. ‘Father, I’m going,’ he said. ‘Going! Where to?’ Kangshaketu asked, sort of surprised.

‘Going to the conscription camp,’ Kumar said, ‘and from thence to the war.’

‘Going to the war!’ Kangshaketu exclaimed, unable to believe his own ears.

‘Yes, Father, I’m going to the war,’ Kumar said, his voice calm and taciturn.

‘Do you know what going to the war means?’ Kangshaketu said, bewildered.

‘I know, Father,’ Kumar said, his voice as tranquil and calm, ‘Death.’

‘Then why are you going to the war?’ Kangshaketu twanged. ‘You are my only son, and only child. and destined to sit on the throne on my death.’

‘I have no desire to sit on the throne,’ Kumar said, his voice firm. ‘The throne you’re now sitting on has not inspired you to love your wife and look after the needs of your subjects. I’m going, Father.’

‘Don’t go, Kumar!’ Kangshaketu twanged, his voice winnowed of the strength. ‘You’re my only son, only child. How can I live on, if you get killed in the war?’

Kumar’s face broke into a parody of a smile. ‘If I get killed in the war,’ he said, ‘you’ll live on like the fathers of the sons who have been killed in the war and are going to be killed.’

You know I’ve myself connived at the war myself,’ Kangshaketu said. ‘I’ll stop it!’

‘I know it,’ Kumar said. ‘But you have no control over the war; you’ve trickled the greed of your relative king.’

Saying this Kumar, the prince, strode out.

Kangshaketu stared helplessly at his only son, his only child going out; he had himself trodden into his own snare.

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