

Short Story

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A Game of Chess

- KBS Krishna

"Pretty queer", remarked our postman, Manikyam, almost to himself, as he sat that evening, sipping tea, at my dhaba.

Queer things seemed to happen to Manikyam all the time; and whenever they happened, he was sure to turn up at my 'dhaba' and narrate everything in graphic detail (more probably for the pot of tea and snacks that I gave him on such occasions, than any desire on his part to share his experiences with me.) I was interested in anything that was a bit out of the ordinary -- always been -- as my own 'dhaba' was a veritable haven, where nothing extraordinary ever happened.

Therefore, I could not help evincing interest, at this beginning.

"Well, anything special?" I asked, leaning forward.

"Oh, nothing probably, but ...," he paused, frowning.

"But...?"

"Oh, but you never know, do you? I mean one can never really believe all that one sees, can one?"

"Well ... no ... really ...," I mumbled, feeling totally confused.

"You see," he began again, obviously not hearing me", I'm not really sure what to think of it. All pretty queer, I say!"

I felt irritated at this. "Don't be queer!" I burst out, "What's it? Tell me."

"Oh, well ..." he said, as if rousing himself, and then asked, "You know that old house near the ruined Kali temple, don't you?"

"You mean that lonely, dilapidated one, that's recently bought by that amnesic young man?"

"Yes, yes, that's what I mean. You see, I was going that way, today. Not to that house, of course. That young man never gets any letters. Wonder why?" he paused for a second, and then added, "Well, as I was saying, I was going that way; as this is the short-cut to that invalid judge's house, where I had to deliver some letters; my brother -- I mean, the younger one, not the elder one ... You know him, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Well, as you know, he works in the electricity department, and today he was told to go to that house to remind that young man he hadn't paid his electricity bill, and if he didn't pay by the end of this week, they'd remove the connection you see, they couldn't get him on the phone, and ...

"Well, 'tis a long way off -- this house is --, and my brother asked me to go to that house, as I was anyhow going that way, and give the message.

"I agreed. After all, one can't refuse one's own brother, you know; and, it wasn't such a difficult chore either. So ...," he shrugged, and sipped from

his cup of tea, as I waited patiently.

"As I was saying, I agreed to go there," he continued. "Well, that house is now more dilapidated. The young man must have been crazy to buy it. It is completely in ruins, you know. The garden, the driveway, the walls, all ..." he shook his head, frowning, as if feeling sorry for that house.

I cursed him silently, and waited for him to resume.

"Well, where was I?" he asked suddenly, after a long pause.

I prompted.

"Ah, yes! That house ... Well, I went and knocked, and knocked. But to no avail. It seemed as if it was empty, and I was about to turn away, when my hand accidentally touched the door knob, and found it unlocked. 'Surprising', I thought, and entered the house.

"You won't believe it, Rana, but I tell you, even in broad daylight, all the windows and doors were barred, and lamps, and all -- were switched on. The room was covered with a thick layer of dust, and it was bare ... threadbare! There was nothing in the room ... not a chair, not a table...

"I remember thinking to myself, on seeing all this, that something's wrong; and went into the next room. That, too, presented the same scenario, except that there was a table in it, and a big book -- this big." (He parted his hands a foot wide) -- "was sitting on it. It was bound in red leather, and ... Well, I couldn't keep myself from opening it. I know, I shouldn't have ... but ... you understand, don't you?"

I must say that I did, very much to my disgust, as he had just a week ago tore open a parcel that was addressed to me, attracted by its sheer bulk; and then, feeling ashamed at what he had done, didn't deliver it, thus, resulting in my making many tiresome enquiries, and ...

I had given him a piece of my mind, and told him in no uncertain terms that I would never give him anything free at my dhaba -- as I had been doing for the last ten years or more.

But then, such resolutions can hardly be kept, can they? I was generally bored to death by mid noon, and he was such a gifted story teller that before a couple of days had passed by I welcomed him with a cup of tea when he passed by.

"You understand, don't you?"

There was a hint of anxiety in his voice. I guess he was still ashamed of what he had done last week. I shook myself up, and nodded in agreement.

He coughed dryly and continued, "There was a pen sticking out of the book, somewhere in the middle of it, and I opened it at that page. The book turned out to be a diary, and the page that I opened was a couple of months' earlier entry.

"Well, I read it," he said, looking away. "You remember that torrential storm we had, don't you? I mean the one we had that night when many electrical poles got uprooted, and it took three whole days to mend them all."

I nodded again.

“Well, the entry was of that night, and it was the last one. It said, that evening he was playing chess on his computer, feeling bored, while waiting for some Ratan – probably a friend of his -- when he got a message from an unknown ID, proposing a game of chess. He agreed. The game was becoming really exciting, when he got a phone call, and he left the computer. It was his friend, Ratan; who said that he would not come that day, as there was heavy downpour, and the whole town was in darkness.

“Apparently, our young man said that he was playing with someone on the computer, because he noted in his diary that Ratan asked him when he had got an alternate power supply as there was no electricity for miles around; and learning that he hadn't, was surprised.

“The young man had forgotten to press the clock button after moving the pieces, and as he put down the receiver, feeling bewildered at what he had just heard, the monitor went blank for a moment, and then a message flashed, saying that his opponent had won on time. As he walked towards the computer, he got a message – from the same source as the earlier one, it seems – and he had noted it word for word in his diary. I remember it, as it is. It read: “When it rains, and the power goes; and you're alone, and need a clone; I'll come to play, Even if you say 'nay!'” ...

“Well ... Spooky, ain't it?”

We both remained silent for a long time, as he tucked in heartily, I thought over what he had told me.

Finally, he stood up, shaking off the crumbs that had fallen on his dress, and belched loudly. Then, as if suddenly remembering, he said, “And there was another thing: beneath all this was a short entry that was typewritten, that said, 'Don't believe it. It is all only his fantasy!'”

“Fantasy?!! I don't think, sir! No! Can a human type on such a book, and that too in the middle, I say.”

I pulled out a pack of Gold Flakes from my pocket, offered him one, and lit one myself. Somehow, I did not feel like it, and after a couple of minutes, threw away the cigarette. “You're right. It is spooky. What do you plan to do? I mean, we can't allow such goings on, can we?”

He convulsed with cough, finally paused and wiping his eyes, asked, somewhat rhetorically, “Checkmate, eh?”

I stared after him, as he rode away on his bicycle – still coughing. It was only much later I realised that he was doubled up with laughter.

