

## The Ghost in the Garden — Rukin Bond.

**B**EHIND the house there was an orchard where guava, lychee and papaya trees mingled with two or three tall mango trees. The guava trees were easy to climb. The lychee trees gave a lot of shade — as well as bunches of delicious lychees in the summer. The mango trees were at their most attractive in the spring, when their blossoms gave out a heady fragrance.

But there was one old mango tree, near the boundary wall, where no one, not even Dhuki, the gardener, ever went.

"It doesn't give any fruit," said Dhuki, when I questioned him. "It's an old tree."

"Then why don't we cut it down".

"We will one day, when your grandmother wishes..."

The weeds grew thick in that corner of the garden. They were safe there from Dhuki's relentless weeding.

"Why doesn't anyone go to that corner of the orchard?" I asked Miss Kellner, our crippled tenant, who had been in Dehra since she was a girl.

But she didn't want to talk about it. Uncle Ken, too, changed the subject whenever I brought it up.

So I wandered about the orchard on my own, cautiously making my way towards that neglected and forbidden corner of the garden until Dhuki called me back.

"Don't go there, *baba*," he cautioned. "It's unlucky."

"Why doesn't anyone go near the old mango tree?" I asked Granny.

She just shook her head and turned away. There was something that no one wanted me to know. So I disobeyed and ignored everyone, and in the still of the afternoon, when most of the household was taking a siesta, I walked over to the old mango tree at the end of the garden.

It was a cool, shady place, and seemed friendly enough. But there were no birds in the tree; no squirrels, either. And this was unusual. I sat down on the grass, with my back against the trunk of the tree, and peered out at the sunlit house and garden. In the shimmering heat-haze I thought I saw someone walking through the tree, but it wasn't Dhuki or anyone I knew.

It had been a hot day, but presently I began to feel cold; and then I found myself shivering, as though a fever had suddenly come on. I looked up into the tree, and the branch above me was moving, swaying slightly, although there was no breeze and all the other leaves and branches were still.

I felt I had to get out of the cold, but I found it difficult to get up. So I crawled across the grass on my hands and knees, until I was in the bright sunlight. The shivering passed and I ran across to the house and did not look back at the mango tree until I had reached the verandah.

I told Miss Kellner about my experience.



"Were you frightened?" she asked.

"Yes , a little," I confessed.

"And did you see anything?"

"Some of the branches moved, I felt very cold , but there was no wind."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Just a soft moaning sound."

"It's an old tree. It groans when it feels its age, just as I do!"

I did not go near the mango tree for some time, and I did not mention the incident to Granny or Uncle Ken. I had by now realised that the subject was taboo with them.

As a boy I was always exploring lonely places — neglected gardens and orchards, unoccupied houses, patches of scrub or wasteland, the fields outside the town, the fringes of the forest.

On one of my rambles behind the bungalow, I pushed my way through a thicket of lantana bushes and stumbled over a thick stone slab, twisting my ankle slightly as I fell. For some time I sat on the grass massaging my foot. When the pain eased, I looked more closely at the stone slab and was surprised to find that it was a gravestone. It was almost entirely covered by ivy; obviously no one had been near it for years. I tugged at the ivy and some of it came away in my hands. There was some indistinct lettering on the grave, half-obscured by grass and moss. I could make out a name , Rose , but little more.

I sat there for some time, pondering over my discovery, and wondering why 'Rose' should have been buried at so lonely a spot , when there was a cemetery not far away. Why hand't she been interred beside her kith and kin? Had she wished it so? And why?

Only Miss Kellner seemed willing to answer my questions, and it was to her I went, where she sat in her armchair under the pomalo tree — the armchair from which she never moved , except when she was carried bodily to her bed or bathroom by the *ayah* or a couple of her rickshaw boys. I can never forget crippled Miss Kellner in her armchair in the garden, playing patience with a well-worn pack of cards. She was always patient with me whenever I interrupted her game with endless questions about neighbours or relatives or her own history. Even as a boy, the past fascinated me. I don't mean the history of nations; I mean individual histories, the way people lived, and why then were happy or unhappy, and why they sometimes did terrible things for no apparent rhyme or reason. I supposed I was always preparing to be a writer, although I did not realise it at the time.

"Miss Kellner," I asked, "whose grave is that in the jungle behind the house?"

She looked at me over the rim of her *pince-nez*. "How would you expect me to know, child? Do I look as though I could climb walls, looking for old graves?"



Have you asked your grandmother?"

"Granny won't tell me anything. And Uncle Ken pretends to know everything when he knows nothing."

"So how should I know?"

"You've been here a long time."

"Only 20 years. That happened before I came to this house."

"What happened?"

"Oh, you are a trying boy. Why must you know everything."

"It's better than not knowing."

"Are you sure? Sometimes it's better not to know."

"Sometimes, maybe.... But I *like* to know. Who was Rose?"

"Your grandfather's first wife."

"Oh." This came as a surprise. I hadn't heard about grandfather's first marriage. "But why is she buried in such a lonely place? Why not in the cemetery?"

"Because she took her own life. And in those days a suicide couldn't be given Christian burial in a cemetery. Now is your curiosity satisfied?"

But my appetite had only been whetted for more information. "And why did she commit suicide?"

"I really don't know, child. Why would anyone? Because they are unhappy, tired of living, in distress over something or the other."

"You're not tired of living, are you? Even though you can't walk and your fingers are all crooked..."

"Don't be rude, or you won't find any meringues in my party! My fingers are good enough for writing, and for poking small boys in the ribs." And she gave me a sharp poke which made me yelp. "No, I'm not yet tired of life, but people are made differently, you know. And your grandfather isn't around to tell us. And of course he married again, your grandmother..."

"Would *she* have known the first one?"

"I don't think so. She met your grandfather much later. But she doesn't like to talk about these things."

"And how did Rose commit suicide?"

"I have no idea."



"Of course you know, Miss Kellner. You can't bluff me. You know everything!"

"I wasn't here, I tell you."

"But you heard all about it. And *I* know how she did it. She must have hanged herself from that mango tree, the tree at the end of the garden, which everyone avoids. I told you I went there one day, and it was very cold and lonely in its shade. I was frightened, you know."

"Yes," said Miss Kellner pensively. "She must have been lonely, poor thing. She wasn't very stable, I'm told. Used to wander about on her own, picking wildflowers, singing to herself, sometimes getting lost and coming home at odd hours. How does the old song go? *Lonely as the desert breeze...*In her croaky voice, Miss Kellner sang a refrain from an old ballad, before continuing: "Your grandfather was very fond of her. He wasn't a cruel man. He put up with her strange ways. But sometimes he lost patience and scolded her and once or twice had even to lock her up. *That* was frightening, because then she would start screaming. It was a mistake locking her up. Never lock anyone up, child...Something seemed to snap inside her. She became violent at times."

"How do you know all this, Miss Kellner?"

"Your grandfather would sometimes come over and tell me his troubles. I was living in another house then, a little way down the road. Poor man, he had a trying time with Rose. He was thinking of sending her to Ranchi, to the mental hospital. Then, early one morning, he found her hanging from the mango tree. Her spirit had flown away, like the bluebird she always wanted to be."

After that, I did not go near the old mango tree; I found it rather menacing, as though it had been a party to the tragedy, as though it had actually participated in that dark deed...Poor innocent tree, being saddled with the emotions of unbalanced humans! But I did visit the neglected grave and cleaned the weeds away, so that the inscription came out more clearly: 'Rose, dearly beloved wife of Henry- (my maternal grandfather's surname followed). And when Dhuki wasn't looking, I plucked a red rose from the garden and placed it on the grave.

One afternoon, when Granny was at a bridge-party and Uncle Ken was taking a walk, I rummaged through the store-room adjoining the back verandah, leafing through old scrap-books and magazines. Behind a pile of books I discovered an old wind-up gramophone, an album of well-preserved gramophone records, and a box of steel needles. I took the gramophone into the sitting-room and tried out one of the records. It sounded all right. So I played a few more. They were all songs of yesteryear, romantic ballads sung by tenors and baritones who were popular in the 1920s and '30s. Granny did not listen to music, and the gramophone had been neglected a long time. Now, for the first time in many years, the room was full of melody. *One Alone, I'll See You Again, Will You Remember?, Only A Rose...*

*Only a rose  
to give you,  
Only a song  
dying away,  
Only a simile  
to keep in memory*

It was while this tender love-song was being played that a transformation seemed to come over the room.

At first it grew darker. Then a soft pink glow suffused the room, and I saw the figure of a woman, a smiling melancholy woman in white, drifting rather than walking towards me. She stopped in the centre of the room, and appeared to be watching me. She wore the long flowing dress of an earlier day, and her hair was arranged in a sort of coiffure that I'd seen in old photographs.

As the song came to an end, the apparition vanished. The room was normal again. I put away the gramophone and the records. I felt disturbed rather than afraid, and I did not wish to conjure up further emanations from the past.

But in my dreams that night I saw the beautiful sad lady again. She was waltzing in the garden, sometimes by herself, sometimes partnered by other phantom dancers. She beckoned to me in my dream, inviting me to join her, but I remained standing on the verandah steps, until she danced away into the distance and faded from view.

And in the morning when I woke, I found a red rose, moist with dew, lying beside my pillow