

GROWING UP IN AN INDIAN VILLAGE

THE LUNATIC

By MANOJ DAS

Illustration by ALOKE BHATTACHARYA

The author recreates the rustic atmosphere and characters of a fast-fading milieu

LIKE a whirlwind she burst into our village — her spooky eyes shooting the creeps into our spines. She was always swearing and cursing, but it was not possible to make out who or what was her target.

Her long locks of hair had grown knotty and she had curled dark nails on all her fingers. Her lips were as red as the jawa flowers and the phenomenon was interpreted as her regularly sucking blood of her human victims.

She came of noble parentage and her husband was a money-lender who no doubt suffered much on account of her. At the beginning he used to set someone to follow her unobtrusively, but he did not care afterwards.

There was something fascinating about her, something immensely attractive in her appearance. But nobody dared to go near her or to tease her as some people often did to other lunatics.

"I'll kill the demon, yes, skin him alive, tear him to shreds." This refrain was the only distinctly audible part of her mutterings.

Who was the demon? Her lover who had ditched her, was the popular theory. There was no question of substantiating the legend with facts. But she spoke with such intensity of feeling and such inspired gesticulations that as if she was already in the process of executing her project! That was a fearful vision, perhaps because all her listeners had bits of the demon in themselves. I remember how a naked little child, surprised by her on the village road, howled and ran and how she ran after him, caught him and hugged and kissed him and laughing wildly, dumped him on the lap of his mother who, by that time, had fainted. Did she enjoy scaring people? That is what one of my teachers thought. I thought otherwise. Perhaps she felt disgusted that the people should be scared of her and she reacted in anger.

"What, do you think, caused the child to raise the howl?" the Chowkidar of a neighbouring village tested me.

I did not know. "The spirit of the child could instantly recognise the blood-sucking vampire in her," explained the Chowkidar. "In fact . . ." the Chowkidar seemed to make some calculation, "she must be sucking life out of three kids a day, on the average".

My mother was the only person before whom she not only be-

haved decently, but also sat and ate like a child.

"Beware of her. She is incorrigibly insane," once an old woman warned Mother.

"Shouldn't one rather beware of the incorrigibly sane?" Mother commented.

One day the lunatic showed a heavy and gorgeous piece of jewellery to Mother. "Everybody wants it. But why should I part with it?" She said with a chuckle, pressing the ornament to her breast.

"Won't you give it to me?" Mother asked.

"Shouldn't one rather beware of the incorrigibly sane?"

The lunatic sat thoughtful for a moment. "All right," she said, handing it over to Mother. "Keep it for yourself," she nodded affably. I was the only witness to the transaction.

Next day her husband called on us while on his way to an astrologer's house. He looked pale.

"The landlord of Gobgaon had pledged a very costly ornament and borrowed a large sum of money from me. But the ornament is missing. If I have to pay its value, I am ruined!" he said.

"I have already despatched a messenger to you enquiring if you

have lost anything valuable," said Mother, taking out the jewellery and handing it over to him.

The gentleman was in tears.

After he left, I asked Mother, "Why did you ask the woman for it if you had no design to retain it?"

"To save her from any possible harm. As she would show it to one and sundry, someone could very well rob it of her and even kill her if she resisted!"

Luckily, the woman's appearance in our village was not very frequent.

It was an October afternoon. I was returning from Kakhra, some five miles away, all alone because the young man who had accompanied me decided to spend the night there at his relative's. His decision annoyed me and I slipped away while he was trying to find an escort for me.

There were a few clouds overhead, but at first they appeared no stronger than bubbles. I was midway along the meadow when they grew dark and menacing. Soon big drops of water began to fall. I ran to my left under the impression that a hamlet was nearby. But to my dismay what I found was a lonely grove.

I changed my course and ran in the direction of my village. Now it was pouring like a cascade. The wind, if not strong, was erratic. The twilight had grown darker than a bear.

I found shelter under a large banyan tree. Someone else was already there, as the lightning revealed, covered by a palm-leaf coat which protected its user from the head down to the legs.

I shivered, lashed by draughts of chilly air. Suddenly I found myself draped with the palm-leaf coat.

"But I could do without it!" I protested, though I found much relief.

My benefactor said nothing. I concluded that he must be a man from my village. There was nothing terribly unusual in an elderly man's decision to suffer the rain to protect a small boy.

After a few minutes there was a bright flash of lightning and I looked at my benefactor.

The dreaded lunatic was laughing silently.

I threw away the palm-leaf coat at her and ran like mad. I believe I heard a cry behind, partially swept away by the howling wind — either an outburst of disgust or of despair or of ridicule.

A wandering ascetic who occasionally visited our village reported with some excitement one morning that as he was passing by the deserted cremation ground at midnight, he saw, against the dim light from a subsiding pyre, a female ghost suckling her baby. The villagers found out the truth: it was the lunatic who was trying to revive an abandoned dead child.

She began passing more and more time in the cremation ground and one day was found lying stiff dead near an ant-hill. It was only then her husband and a few of his kinsmen arrived to perform the last rites for her.

