

The Tame Khaki by Dave Baker

Jack tried to move but a sharp stab of pain in his right thigh forbade it. Reaching down, he could feel bare flesh...wet.

Continuing to lie completely still on his back, Jack groaned softly as he listened to frantic shouts and loud moans amid the clatter of rifle fire and periodic shell blasts. He tried to piece things together, but couldn't focus his mind. Mercifully, a deep drowsiness began to overcome him and he vaguely recalled a violent explosion of some sort before drifting into blackness.

Jack became aware of a heavy weight being lifted from his legs. He felt a cool hand on his brow. 'Sahib ...Sahib. Can you hear me?' The voice carried a thick accent. He forced his eyes open.

Through a yellowy mist he could just make out a pair of eyes peering into his – dark eyes, the whites standing out sharply against the dark skin of the face around them.

The face looked concerned and the voice emanating from the dark face asked, urgently, 'Can you hear me, Sahib? Can you see my fingers?'

Jack could just make out two blurred shapes. Battling with the intense pain, he summoned up all his strength to say, 'Yes.'

Gradually the mist began to clear. He could see the man kneeling next to him was wearing a flowing robe and a turban. *A dhoolie*, he thought, *and another standing behind him.*

The first dhoolie was fully equipped with dressings and bandages, and was doing his best to stem the flow of blood from Jack's side and thigh. Apologising profusely for causing any pain, he then added, 'We put you now on stretcher, Sahib – take you to train. For hospital.' As the two gently lifted him onto a stretcher, Jack discovered to his horror that the weight that had been lifted from his legs was actually the butchered body of a colleague, and that his own legs were also soaked in his blood.

The ride back down the slope was bumpy and painful. The leading dhoolie apologised whenever one of them stumbled, muttering, 'Sorry, Sahib, sorry, Sahib', but his words became progressively distant as Jack gave up the struggle to remain conscious.

He woke to a rocking motion and the clickety-clacking of steel wheels on rail joints. *Must be going to hospital...Ladysmith.* He felt desperately tired and abandoned his pain-wracked, battered body to the care of his attendants.

Jack's next and only other recollection of the journey was of chaotic shouting and banging that accompanied the hissing and clanking of the train as it jerked violently to a halt. *Ladysmith: at last,* he thought. He lay still, keeping his eyes tightly shut until two dhoolies lifted his stretcher and bore him down onto the platform, where he found the din and general clamour almost unbearable.

Forcing himself to open his eyes, he saw dozens of soldiers milling about, some wrapped in bandages, some on crutches, others being carried on stretchers, all mingling with dhoolies, nurses and civilians, either arriving or meeting or attending to someone. Too many seemed to be shouting at the tops of their voices or blinding him with flashes of light from their lamps and he allowed himself to drift off into oblivion.

Emerging slowly, as if from a long and very deep sleep, Jack became aware of a radical change of environment. The raucous din of the station platform had been replaced by an idyllic sense of peace and quiet, disturbed only when a gentle female voice murmured, 'Lieutenant? Lieutenant Whitelaw? Are you awake?'

He felt relieved, safe, at peace; so much so that he was reluctant to open his eyes in case something changed. He lay still, listening to voices in the distance and breathing in the smell of disinfectant – and violets?

A hand rested lightly on his shoulder. The same angelic voice asked, 'Can you hear me?'

Curious to see the owner of the voice, Jack opened his eyes. The vision that greeted him was so enchanting that he wondered for a moment if he was dreaming. The soft glow of a paraffin lamp illuminated the beautiful face, neck and shoulders of a young woman, her gorgeous green eyes peering with concern into his.

Overwhelmed by feelings of admiration and sheer joy, he gazed back at her, and murmured, 'Please hug me.'

She responded graciously, leaning forward, smiling, with her hands resting on his shoulders as she kissed his forehead. Aware that he was in a hospital, he wondered if heaven could be any better than this.