

THE DÂK BUNGALOW AT DAKOR*

B.M. Croker

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B.M. Croker
(1893, To Let)

*When shall these phantoms flicker away,
Like the smoke of the guns on the wind-swept hill;
Like the sounds and colours of yesterday,
And the soul have rest, and the air be still?*

Sir A. Lyall*

“AND so you two young women are going off on a three days’ journey, all by yourselves, in a bullock tonga,* to spend Christmas with your husbands in the jungle?”

The speaker was Mrs. Duff, the wife of our deputy commissioner, and the two enterprising young women were Mrs. Goodchild, the wife of the police officer of the district, and myself, wife of the forest officer. We were the only ladies in Karwassa, a little up-country station, more than a hundred miles from the line of rail. Karwassa was a pretty place, an oasis of civilization, amid leagues and leagues of surrounding forest and jungle; it boasted a post-office, public gardens (with tennis courts), a tiny church, a few well-kept shady roads, and half a dozen thatched bungalows, surrounded by luxuriant gardens. In the hot weather all the community were at home, under the shelter of their own roof-trees and punkahs, and within reach of ice – for we actually boasted an ice machine! During these hot months we had, so to speak, our ‘season.’ The deputy commissioner, forest officer, police officer, doctor, and engineer were all ‘in,’ and our gaieties took the form of tennis at daybreak, moonlight picnics, whist-parties, little dinners, and now and then a beat for tiger, on which occasions we ladies were safely roosted in trustworthy trees.

It is whispered that in small and isolated stations the fair sex are either mortal enemies or bosom-friends! I am proud to be in a position to state that we ladies of Karwassa came under the latter head. Mrs. Goodchild and I were especially intimate; we were nearly the same age, we were young, we had been married in the same year and tasted our first experiences of India together. We lent each other books, we read each other our home letters, helped to compose one another’s dirzee-made costumes, and poured little confidences into one another’s ears. We had made numerous joint excursions in the cold season, had been out in the same camp for a month at a time, and when our husbands were in a malarious or uncivilized district, had journeyed on horseback or in a bullock tonga and joined them at some accessible spot, in the regions of dâk bungalows and bazaar fowl.

Mrs. Duff, stout, elderly, and averse to locomotion, contented herself with her comfortable bungalow at Karwassa, her weekly budget of letters from her numerous

olive-branches in England, and with adventures and thrilling experiences at secondhand.

“And so you are off tomorrow,” she continued, addressing herself to Mrs. Goodchild. “I suppose you know where you are going?”

“Yes,” returned my companion promptly, unfolding a piece of foolscap as she spoke; “I had a letter from Frank this morning, and he has enclosed a plan copied from the D. P. W. map. We go straight along the trunk road for two days, stopping at Korai bungalow the first night and Kular the second, you see; then we turn off to the left on the Old Jubbulpore Road and make a march of twenty-five miles, halting at a place called Chanda.* Frank and Mr. Loyd will meet us there on Christmas Day.”

“Chanda – Chanda,” repeated Mrs. Duff, with her hand to her head. “Isn’t there some queer story about a bungalow near there – that is unhealthy – or haunted – or something?”

Julia Goodchild and I glanced at one another significantly.

Mrs. Duff had set her face against our expedition all along; she wanted us to remain in the station and spend Christmas with her, instead of going this wild-goose chase into a part of the district we had never been in before. She assured us that we would be short of bullocks, and would probably have to walk miles; she had harangued us on the subject of fever and cholera and bad water, had warned us solemnly against dacoits,* and now she was hinting at ghosts.

“Frank says that the travellers’ bungalows after we leave the main road are not in very good repair – the road is so little used now that the new railway line comes within twenty miles; but he says that the one at Chanda is very decent, and we will push on there,” returned Julia, firmly. Julia was nothing if not firm; she particularly prided herself on never swerving from any fixed resolution or plan. “We take my bullock tonga, and Mr. Loyd’s peon Abdul,* who is a treasure, as you know; he can cook, interpret, forage for provisions, and drive bullocks if the worst comes to the worst.”

“And what about bullocks for three days’ journey – a hundred miles if it’s a yard?” inquired Mrs. Duff, sarcastically.

“Oh, the bazaar master has sent on a chuprassie* and five natives, and we shall find a pair every five miles at the usual stages. As to food, we are taking tea, bread, plenty of tinned stores, and the plum pudding. We shall have a capital outing, I assure you, and I only wish we could have persuaded you into coming with us.”

“Thank you, my dear,” said Mrs. Duff, with a patronizing smile. “I’m too old, and I hope too sensible to take a trip of a hundred Miles in a bullock tonga, risking fever and dacoits and dâk bungalows full of bandicoots, just for the sentimental pleasure of eating a pudding with my husband. However, you are both young and hardy and full of spirits, and I wish you a happy Christmas, a speedy journey and safe return. Mind you take plenty of quinine – and a revolver” and, with this cheerful parting suggestion, she conducted us into the frontverandah and dismissed us each with a kiss, that was at once a remonstrance and a valediction.

Behold us the next morning, at sunrise, jogging off, behind a pair of big white bullocks, in the highest spirits. In the front seat of the tonga we had stowed a well-filled tiffin basket, two Gladstone bags, our blankets and pillows, a hamper of provisions, and last, not least, Abdul. Julia and I and Julia's dog 'Boss' occupied the back seat, and as we rumbled past Mrs. Duff's bungalow, with its still silent compound and closed venetians, we mutually agreed that she was 'a silly old thing,' that she would have far more enjoyment of life if she was as enterprising as we were.

Our first day's journey went off without a hitch. Fresh and well-behaved cattle punctually awaited us at every stage. The country we passed through was picturesque and well wooded; doves, peacocks, and squirrels enlivened the roads; big black-faced monkeys peered at us from amid the crops that they were ravaging within a stone's throw of our route. The haunt of a well-known man-eating tiger was impressively pointed out to us by our cicerone Abdul – this beast resided in some dense jungle, that was unpleasantly close to human traffic. Morning and afternoon wore away speedily, and at sundown we found ourselves in front of the very neat travellers' bungalow at Korai. The interior was scrupulously clean, and contained the usual furniture: two beds, two tables, four chairs, lamps, baths, a motley collection of teacups and plates, and last, not least, the framed rules of the establishment and visitors' book.

The khansamah* cooked us an excellent dinner (for a travellers' bungalow), and, tired out, we soon went to bed and slept the sleep of the just. The second day was the same as the first – highly successful in every respect.

On the third morning we left the great highway and turned to the left, on to what was called the Old Jubbulpore Road, and here our troubles commenced! Bullocks were bad, lame, small, or unbroken; one of Mrs. Duff's dismal prophecies came to pass, for after enduring bullocks who lay down, who kicked and ran off the road into their owners' houses, or rushed violently down steep places, we arrived at one stage where there were no bullocks at all! It was four o'clock, and we were still sixteen miles from Chanda. After a short consultation, Julia and I agreed to walk on to the next stage or village, leaving Abdul to draw the neighbourhood for a pair of cattle and then to overtake us at express speed.

"No one coming much this road now, mem sahib," he explained apologetically; "village people never keeping tonga bullocks – only plough bullocks, and plenty bobbery."*

"Bobbery or not, get them," said Julia with much decision; "no matter if you pay four times the usual fare. We shall expect you to overtake us in half an hour." And having issued this edict we walked on, leaving Abdul, a bullock-man, and two villagers all talking together and yelling at one another at the top of their voices. Our road was dry and sandy, and lay through a perfectly flat country. It was lined here and there by rows of graceful trees, covered with wreaths of yellow flowers; now and then it was bordered by a rude thorn hedge, inside of which waved a golden field of ripe jawarri; in distant dips in the landscape we beheld noble topes of forest trees and a few red-

roofed dwellings – the abodes of the tillers of the soil; but, on the whole, the country was silent and lonely; the few people we encountered driving their primitive little carts stared hard at us in utter stupefaction, as well they might – two mem sahibs trudging along, with no escort except a panting whitedog. The insolent crows and lazy blue buffaloes all gazed at us in undisguised amazement as we wended our way through this monotonous and melancholy scene. One milestone was passed and then another, and yet another, and still no sign of Abdul, much less the tonga. At length we came in sight of a large village that stretched in a ragged way at either side of the road. There were the usual little mud hovels, shops displaying, say, two bunches of plantains and a few handfuls of grain, the usual collection of gaunt red pariah dogs, naked children, and unearthly-looking cats and poultry.

Julia and I halted afar off under a tree, preferring to wait for Abdul to chaperon us, ere we ran the gauntlet of the village streets.

Time was getting on, the sun was setting; men were returning from the fields, driving bony bullocks before them; women were returning from the well, with water and the last bit of scandal; at last, to our great relief, we beheld Abdul approaching with the tonga, and our spirits rose, for we had begun to ask one another if we were to spend the night sitting on a stone under a tamarind tree without the village. “No bullocks,” was Abdul’s explanation. The same tired pair had come on most reluctantly, and in this village of cats and cocks and hens it was the same story – “no bullocks.” Abdul brought us this heavy and unexpected intelligence after a long and animated interview with the head man of the place.

“What is to be done?” we demanded in a breath.

“Stop here all night; going on tomorrow.”

“Stop where?” we almost screamed.

“Over there,” rejoined Abdul, pointing to a grove of trees at some little distance. “There is a travellers’ bungalow; Chanda is twelve miles off.”

A travellers’ bungalow! Sure enough there was a building of some kind beyond the bamboos, and we lost no time in getting into the tonga and having ourselves driven in that direction. As we passed the village street, many came out and stared, and one old woman shook her hand in a warning manner, and called out something in a shrill cracked voice.

An avenue of feathery bamboos led to our destination, which proved to be the usual travellers’ rest-house, with white walls, red roof, and roomy verandah; but when we came closer, we discovered that the drive was as grass-grown as a field; jungle grew up to the back of the house, heavy wooden shutters closed all the windows, and the door was locked. There was a forlorn, desolate, dismal appearance about the place; it looked as if it had not been visited for years. In answer to our shouts and calls no one appeared; but, as we were fully resolved to spend the night there, we had the tonga unloaded and our effects placed in the verandah, the bullocks untackled and turned out among the long rank grass. At length an old man in dirty ragged clothes, and with a villainous expression of countenance, appeared from some back cook-

house, and seemed anything but pleased to see us. When Abdul told him of our intention of occupying the house, he would not hear of it. "The bungalow was out of repair; it had not been opened for years; it was full of rats; it was unhealthy; plenty fever coming. We must go on to Chanda." Naturally we declined his hospitable suggestion. "Was he the khansamah – caretaker of the place?" we inquired imperiously.

"Yees," he admitted with a grunt.

"Drawing government pay, and refusing to open a government travellers' bungalow!" screamed Julia. "Let us have no more of this nonsense; open the house at once and get it ready for us, or I shall report you to the commissioner sahib."

The khansamah gave her an evil look, said "Missus please," shrugged his shoulders and hobbled away – as we hoped, to get the key; but after waiting ten minutes we sent Abdul to search for him, and found that he had departed – his lair was empty. There was nothing for it but to break the padlock on the door, which Abdul effected with a stone, and as soon as the door moved slowly back on its hinges Julia and I hurried in. What a dark, damp place! What a smell of earth, and what numbers of bats; they flew right in our faces as we stood in the doorway and tried to make out the interior. Abdul and the bullock-man quickly removed the shutters and let in the light, and then we beheld the usual dâk sitting-room – a table, chairs, and two charpoys (native beds), and an old pair of candlesticks; the table and chairs were covered with mould; cobwebs hung from the ceiling in dreadful festoons, and the walls were streaked with dreary green stains. I could not restrain an involuntary shudder as I looked about me rather blankly.

"I should think this was an unhealthy place!" I remarked to Julia.

"It looks feverish; and see – the jungle comes right up to the back verandah; fever plants, castor-oil plants, young bamboos, all growing up to the very walls."

"It will do very well for tonight," she returned. "Come out and walk down the road hilst Abdul and the bullock-man clean out the rooms and get dinner. Abdul is a wonderful man – and we won't know the place in an hour's time; it's just the same as any other travellers' bungalow, only it has been neglected for years. I shall certainly report that old wretch! The idea of a dâk bungalow caretaker refusing admittance and running away with the key! What is the name of this place?" she asked, deliberately taking out her pocket-book; "did you hear?"

"Yes; I believe it is called Dakor."

"Ah, well! I shall not forget to tell Frank about the way we were treated at Dakor bungalow."

The red, red sun had set at last – gone down, as it were, abruptly behind the flat horizon; the air began to feel chilly, and the owl and the jackal were commencing to make themselves heard, so we sauntered back to the bungalow, and found it indeed transformed: swept and garnished, and clean. The table was neatly laid for dinner, and one of our own fine hurricane lamps blazed upon it; our beds had been made up with our rugs and blankets, one at either end of the room; hot water and towels were

prepared in a bathroom, and we saw a roaring fire in the cook-house in the jungle. Dinner, consisting of a sudden-death fowl, curry, bread, and pâté de foiegras, was, to our unjaded palates, an excellent meal. Our spirits rose to normal, the result of food and light, and we declared to one another that this old bungalow was a capital find, and that it was really both comfortable and cheerful, despite a slight *arrièrepensée** of earth in the atmosphere!

Before going to bed we explored the next room, a smaller one than that we occupied, and empty save for a rickety camp table, which held some dilapidated crockery and a press. Need you ask if we opened this press? The press smelt strongly of mushrooms, and contained a man'stopee,* inch-deep with mould, a tiffin basket, and the bungalow visitors' book. We carried this away with us to read at leisure, for the visitors' book in *dâk* bungalows occasionally contains some rather amusing observations. There was nothing funny in this musty old volume! Merely a statement of who came, and how long they stayed, and what they paid, with a few remarks, not by any means complimentary to the khansamah: "A dirty, lazy rascal," said one; "A murderous-looking ruffian," said another; "An insolent, drunken hound," said a third – the last entry was dated seven years previously.

"Let us write our names," said Julia, taking out her pencil, "Mrs. Goodchild and Mrs. Loyd, December 23rd. Bungalowdeserted, and very dirty khansamah. What shall we say?" she asked, glancing at me interrogatively.

"Why, there he is!" I returned with a little jump; and there he was sure enough, gazing in through the window. It was the face of some malicious animal, more than the face of a man, that glowered out beneath his filthy red turban. His eyes glared and rolled as if they would leave their sockets; his teeth were fangs, like dogs' teeth, and stood out almost perpendicularly from his hideous mouth. He surveyed us for a few seconds in savage silence, and then melted away into the surrounding darkness as suddenly as he appeared.

"He reminds me of the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland", said Julia with would be facetiousness, but I noticed that she looked rather pale.

"Let us have the shutters up at once," I replied, "and have them well barred and the doors bolted. That man looked as if he could cut our throats."

In a very short time the house was made fast. Abdul and the bullock-man spread their mats in the front verandah, and Julia and I retired for the night. Before going to bed we had a controversy about the lamp. I wished to keep it burning all night (I am a coward at heart), but Julia would not hear of this – impossible for her to sleep with a light in the room – and in the end I was compelled to be content with a candle and matches on a chair beside me. I fell asleep very soon. I fancy I must have slept long and soundly, when I was awoke by a bright light shining in my eyes. So, after the ridiculous fuss she had made, Julia had lit the candle after all! This was my first thought, but when I was fully awake I found I was mistaken, or dreaming. No, I was not dreaming, for I pinched my arm and rubbed my eyes. There was a man in the room, apparently another traveller, who appeared to be totally unaware of our

vicinity, and to have made himself completely at home. A gun-case, a tiffin basket, a bundle of pillows and rugs – the usual Indian traveller's belongings – lay carelessly scattered about on the chairs and the floor. I leant up on my elbow and gazed at the intruder in profound amazement. He did not notice me, no more than if I had no existence; true, my charpoy was in a corner of the room and rather in the shade, so was Julia's. Julia was sound asleep and (low be it spoken) snoring. The stranger was writing a letter at the table facing me. Both candles were drawn up close to him, and threw a searching light upon his features. He was young and good-looking, but very, very pale; possibly he had just recovered from some long illness. I could not see his eyes, they were bent upon the paper before him; his hands, I noticed, were well shaped, white, and very thin. He wore a signet-ring on the third finger of the left hand, and was dressed with a care and finish not often met with in the jungle. He wore some kind of light Norfolk jacket and a blue bird's-eye tie. In front of him stood an open despatch-box, very shabby and scratched, and I could see that the upper tray contained a stout roundabout bag, presumably full of rupees, a thick roll of notes, and a gold watch. When I had deliberately taken in every item, the unutterable calmness of this stranger, thus establishing himself in our room, came home to me most forcibly, and clearing my throat I coughed – a clear decided cough of expostulation, to draw his attention to the enormity of the situation.

It had no effect – he must be stone-deaf! He went on writing as indefatigably as ever. What he was writing was evidently a pleasant theme, possibly a love-letter, for he smiled as he scribbled. All at once I observed that the door was ajar. Two faces were peering in – a strange servant in a yellow turban, with cruel, greedy eyes, and the khansamah! Their gaze was riveted on the open despatch-box, the money, the roll of notes, and the watch. Presently the traveller's servant stole up behind his master noiselessly, and seemed to hold his breath; he drew a long knife from his sleeve. At this moment the stranger raised his eyes and looked at me. Oh, what a sad, strange look! a look of appeal. The next instant I saw the flash of the knife – it was buried in his back; he fell forward over his letter with a crash and a groan, and all was darkness. I tried to scream, but I could not. My tongue seemed paralyzed. I covered my head up in the clothes, and oh, how my heart beat! thump, thump, thump – surely they must hear it, and discover me? Half suffocated, at length I ventured to peer out for a second. All was still, black darkness. There was nothing to be seen, but much to be heard – the dragging of a heavy body, a dead body, across the room; then, after an appreciable pause, the sounds of digging outside the bungalow. Finally, the splashing of water – someone washing the floor. When I awoke the next morning, or came to myself – for I believe I had fainted – daylight was demanding admittance at every crevice in the shutters; night, its dark hours and its horrors, was past. The torture, the agony of fear, that had held me captive, had now released me, and, worn out, I fell fast asleep. It was actually nine o'clock when I opened my eyes. Julia was standing over me and shaking me vigorously, and saying, "Nellie, Nellie, wake; I've been up and out this two hours; I've seen the head man of the village."

“Have you?” I assented sleepily.

“Yes, and he says there are no bullocks to be had until tomorrow; we must pass another night here.”

“Never!” I almost shrieked. “Never! Oh, Julia, I’ve had such a night. I’ve seen a murder!” And straightway I commenced, and told her of my awful experiences. “That hansamah murdered him. He is buried just outside the front step,” I concluded tearfully. “Sooner than stay here another night I’ll walk to Chanda.”

“Ghosts! Murders! walk to Chanda!” she echoed scornfully. “Why, you silly girl, did I not sleep here in this very room, and sleep as sound as a top? It was all the pâté de foiegras. You know it never agrees with you.”

“I know nothing about pâté de foiegras,” I answered angrily; “but I know what I saw. Sooner than sleep another night in this room I’d die. I might as well – for such another night would kill me!”

Bath, breakfast, and Julia brought me round to a certain extent. I thought better of tearing off to Chanda alone and on foot, especially as we heard (per coolie) that our respective husbands would be with us the next morning – Christmas Day. We spent the day cooking, exploring the country, and writing for the English mail. As night fell, I became more and more nervous, and less amenable to Julia and Julia’s jokes. I would sleep in the verandah; either there, or in the compound. In the bungalow again – never. An old witch of a native woman, who was helping Abdul to cook, agreed to place her mat in the same locality as my mattress, and Julia Goodchild valiantly occupied the big room within, alone. In the middle of the night I and my protector were awake by the most piercing, frightful shrieks. We lit a candle and ran into the bungalow, and found Julia lying on the floor in a dead faint. She did not come round for more than an hour, and when she opened her eyes she gazed about her with a shudder and displayed symptoms of going off again, so I instantly hunted up our flask and administered some raw brandy, and presently she found her tongue and attacked the old native woman quite viciously.

“Tell the truth about this place!” she said fiercely. “What is it that is here, in this room?”

“Devils,” was the prompt and laconic reply.

“Nonsense! Murder has been done here; tell the truth.”

“How I knowing?” she whined. “I only poor native woman.”

“An English sahib was murdered here seven years ago; stabbed and dragged out, and buried under the steps.”

“Ah, bah! Ah, bah! How I telling? this not my country,” she wailed most piteously.

“Tell all you know,” persisted Julia. “You do know! My husband is coming today; he is a police officer. You had better tell me than him.” After much whimpering and hand-wringing, we extracted the following information in jerks and quavers: – The bungalow had a bad name, no one ever entered it, and in spite of the wooden shutters there were lights in the windows every night up to twelve o’clock. One day (so the villagers said), many years ago, a young sahib came to this bungalow and stayed three

days. He was alone. He was in the Forest Department. The last evening he sent his horses and servants on to Chanda, and said he would follow in the morning after having some shooting, he and his 'boy;' but though his people waited two weeks, he never appeared – was never seen again.

The khansamah declared that he and his servant had left in the early morning, but no one met them. The khansamah became suddenly very rich; said he had found a treasure; also, he sold a fine gold watch in Jubbulpore, and took to drink. He had a bad name, and the bungalow had a bad name. No one would stay there more than one night, and no one had stayed there for many years till we came. The khansamah lived in the cook-house; he was always drunk. People said there were devils in the house, and no one would go near it after sundown. This was all she knew. "Poor fellow, he was so good-looking!" sighed Julia when we were alone. "Poor fellow, and he was murdered and buried here!"

"So I told you," I replied, "and you would not believe me, but insisted on staying to see for yourself."

"I wish I had not – oh, I wish I had not! I shall never, never forget last night as long as I live."

"That must have been his topee and tiffin basket that we saw in the press," I exclaimed.

"As soon as your husband comes, we will tell him everything, and set him on the track of the murderers."

Breakfast on Christmas morning was a very doleful meal; our nerves were completely shattered by our recent experiences, and we could only rouse ourselves up to offer a very melancholy sort of welcome to our two husbands, when they cantered briskly into the compound. In reply to their eager questions as to the cause of our lugubrious appearance, pale faces, and general air of mourning, we favoured them with a vivid description of our two nights in the bungalow. Of course, they were loudly, rudely incredulous, and, of course, we were very angry; vainly we re-stated our case, and displayed the old topee and tiffin basket; they merely laughed still more heartily and talked of 'nightmare,' and gave themselves such airs of offensive superiority, that Julia's soul flew to arms.

"Look here," she cried passionately, "I laughed at Nellie as you laugh at us. We will go out of this compound, whilst you two dig, or get people to dig, below the front verandah and in front of the steps, and if you don't find the skeleton of a murdered man, then you may laugh at us forever."

With Julia impulse meant action, and before I could say three words I was out of the compound, with my arm wedged under hers; we went and sat on a little stone bridge within a stone's throw of the bungalow, glum and silent enough. What a Christmas Day! Half an hour's delay was as much as Julia's patience could brook. We then retraced our steps and discovered what seemed to be the whole village in the dâk bungalow compound. Frank came hurrying towards us, waving us frantically away. No need for questions; his face was enough. They had found it.

*

Frank Goodchild had known him – he was in his own department, a promising and most popular young fellow; his name was Gordon Forbes; he had been missed but never traced, and there was a report that he had been gored and killed in the jungle by a wild buffalo. In the same grave was found the battered despatch-box, by which the skeleton was identified. Mr. Goodchild and my husband re-interred the body under a tree, and read the Burial Service over it, Nellie and I and all the village patriarchs attending as mourners. The khansamah was eagerly searched for – alas! in vain. He disappeared from that part of the country, and was said to have been devoured by a tiger in the Jhanas jungles; but this is too good to be true. We left the hateful bungalow with all speed that same afternoon, and spent the remainder of the Christmas Day at Chanda; it was the least merry Christmas we ever remembered. The Goodehilds and ourselves have subscribed and placed a granite cross, with his name and the date of his death, over Gordon Forbes's lonely grave, and the news of the discovery of the skeleton was duly forwarded to the proper authorities, and also to the unfortunate young man's relations, and to these were sent the despatch-box, letters, and ring.

Mrs. Duff was full of curiosity concerning our trip. We informed her that we spent Christmas at Chanda, as we had originally intended, with our husbands, that they had provided an excellent dinner of black buck and jungle fowl, that the plum-pudding surpassed all expectations; but we never told her a word about our two nights' halt at Dakor bungalow.

