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March was unusually wet. At last, after the drought of the summer months, the miners could return to work now that their sluices were gushing with water. Jack was particularly relieved: he had exhausted his small cash reserve weeks ago and had been borrowing from Charlie.

Working enthusiastically after the break, Jack and Charlie filled their first two bags in less than a week. They each lugged a bag to the office, where several miners were waiting their turn to have their bags weighed and their net earnings calculated.

Mr. Ah Fai weighed each bag with due ceremony, posturing, loudly shooting the beads on his abacus, clicking his tongue self-importantly and fussily double checking every calculation. After each such performance, he scribbled down some figures in his accounts book.

Charlie received twenty-eight shillings, two pennies and one farthing, 'Hmmp, less than I thought,' he grunted to Jack.

Then it was Jack's turn. Ah Fai stared at him coldly, indicating the weighing platform with a wag of his head. 'Come on, Yang, come on, I don't have all day to waste,' he snapped in Cantonese.

Another performance with abacus and tongue, then: 'For you, Yang, sixteen shillings and eightpence.'

'That's not enough!' cried Jack with dismay. This was the smallest payment he had yet received! 'I should be grateful if you would recalculate, Mr. Ah Fai.'

There were supportive rumbles from those who had just been paid and who had received less than expected.

'Yang, use your brains. Each bag isn't *exactly* one hundredweight. Sometimes they differ by several pounds. You're paid according to the real weight of your bag, in case that possibility hadn't entered your thick skull. Come now, what else would you expect? I have to weigh and adjust your payment accordingly. I have to make a very complex calculation, what with your tribute and various other deductions. You should be grateful I do it fairly. Now move along, there are men waiting behind you.'

'Yes, Mr. Ah Fai, I know you are a fair man. That is why I am asking you to reweigh and recalculate. Less than seventeen shillings! I can't live on that.'

'That is your affair. If you want more, work harder.' Ah Fai straightened up, looking beyond Jack and projecting his prized voice. 'Now listen to me, Yang.' He thrust his silver vocal spear into the group of men so that all would hear. 'You are becoming a troublemaker. I warn you that Mr. Lee will be most displeased if I have to tell him you are creating disharmony. For that, he could declare your contract null and void. And that goes for anyone else who challenges

my authority. I, you would do well to remember, am Mr. Lee's representative here. My voice is Mr. Lee's voice. And as I scarcely need remind you, Big Chan here is my enforcer.'

He jerked his head over his shoulder. As usual, Big Chan was standing behind him, massive arms folded over his huge chest. At Ah Fai's words, he lifted his upper lip in his trademark snarl. Jack was as unimpressed as he had been the first time he had seen him do it.

With his verbal spear quivering in the ground somewhere in the middle of the line of men, Mr. Ah Fai continued. 'Now, as for you, Yang and Lam, your free rental of the Ah Foy house has just this minute expired. From this day forward, you shall pay the going rate of five shillings per week. Now go, the two of you.'

Suppressing an overwhelming need to smash his fist into Ah Fai's face, Jack snatched the money. He and Charlie strode from the office.

'That bastard is cheating us, I know he is,' Jack muttered to Charlie as they walked back to their hut.

'I tend to agree, Little Brother, but let us be careful. Do not forget Big Chan—he is not just a decorative statue at the portals of Ah Fai's hell. Ah Wong's arms weren't broken by accident, you know. Ah Wong had crossed Ah Fai, who saw to it that his mining days were over. Nothing could be proven, but even if it could, no one would dare to accuse Ah Fai or Big Chan.'

Jack stopped dead. 'Damn it, Charlie, we're not back in *China*! If Ah Fai is cheating us, he must be brought to justice, Tasmanian justice. And if he were, Mr. Lee would be most displeased. Not with us, but with Ah Fai.'

'Perhaps so, but you must be certain of your facts. How do you propose proving that Ah Fai might be cheating us?'

'Well, suddenly we are receiving less for our bags. Today, all were well under one hundredweight. He *must* be saying the bags weigh less than they really do.'

'How can that be? He weighed them in front of us. I saw what mine weighed; one hundred and seven pounds. As he said, it was less than one hundredweight.'

'It's all very well for you Charlie, your deductions are much less than mine! I can scarcely afford a drink on what I received today.'

Charlie turned at the door of their hut, laying his hand on Jack's shoulder, making Jack suddenly ashamed of his petulance.

'Little Brother, let's go inside and clean our bladders with some *mai jau*.' Charlie smiled at his friend and entered their hut. He reached for a bottle of the strong rice wine from the shelf, splashed some into a couple of rice bowls and handed one to Jack. 'Here,' he handed a bowl to Jack.

Despondently, Jack threw his wine back in one gulp and rested his forehead on the palm of his hand. Suddenly, he looked up. 'Charlie, it's bloody obvious what's happened—he's recently fixed his scales to under-read! Let's weigh the bags ourselves before we take them to him. If they weigh the same, no problem. Ah Fai won't know we suspected him. If they weigh less then we've caught him with his hand under the silk.'

'Where do we obtain scales, pray?' Charlie asked with his gentle smile.

'Let's try Ah Chee's. We'll be there for our usual supplies tomorrow. He seems to sell everything else.' Jack jumped up, pacing up and down. 'Yes! We must get some scales. If Ah Chee hasn't got any then Allinghams would.'

Charlie had still to be convinced. 'So we get some scales and weigh our bags. Ah Fai isn't going to take our word that we have weighed our bags accurately. Jack, please be realistic.'

'I am being realistic, Charlie. Look, it wouldn't be only our bags. We'll have to bring several others in on this.'

'Hmmm. Who do you think might be prepared to take the risk?'

'Jimmy, Guy, Ah Woo, Ah Wing.'

'Yes, but we need someone older and generally respected ...' Charlie paused. 'What about Ah Leung? He's a cautious old ox.'

Jack slapped Charlie on the back. 'Great idea!'

They hurried to the others' huts. Jimmy, Guy, Ah Woo and Ah Wing agreed immediately, but Ah Leung counselled caution. 'If Mr. Ah Fai thinks you are plotting against the Company, you shall face catastrophic consequences. Big Chan can strike like an enraged bear, leaving you broken and unable to work. Just look at what happened to Ah Wong. Or Mr. Ah Fai could dismiss you both, as indeed he has threatened. Actually both things are possible—you could be crippled *and* jobless,' he concluded, in as sad a tone as if these dire events were already the case.

'Ah Leung,' Charlie smiled, 'you are right to be cautious. However, if we bring bags that weigh exactly one hundredweight, and they are checked in as exactly that, there is nothing to worry about. But if all *seven* bags are said to weigh less, the truth would be incontrovertible. Mr. Lee would have to be informed, and he would be pleased at our assiduity.'

'Ah yes,' Ah Leung nodded reluctantly, 'ah yes. That could well be so.'

The following day the seven men walked to Thomas Plains to buy their weekly provisions. On the way, Charlie suggested they pay a visit to Master Mou, who had a reputation for sound common sense, based it was said on a previous mining career. But of that the men knew little.

'Good idea,' said Jack, 'but without the *tseem tung* nonsense ...'

Charlie started to interrupt when Jack continued, 'But, yes, certainly, we should offer a donation.'

Master Mou received them with his usual lugubrious countenance. Each offered him a shilling; he heard their story. Notwithstanding Jack's agnostic preferences, the Master nonetheless reached for a scroll. He read silently and then looked up, a spark in his eyes. A spark of interest, of humour even, Jack thought. And this is what the Master said:

'You are many, he is one.

You need to rest when the day is done.'

Jack thought that he would have done better to have spent his shilling resting when the day was done in the public bar of the All Nations. But these impious thoughts were dispelled by the Master's next pronouncement:

'Sek Lung doth pay a mere forty shilling,

Star of Peace forty five was willing.'

Jack looked at Master Mou with newfound respect. To his surprise, the Master looked him directly in the eyes and raised a hand, as if conferring a blessing on Jack personally.

As they filed out, Charlie said, 'I don't know what you made of that. His first statement was obvious, but the second?'

Jack nodded. 'I don't think the first was quite as obvious as it sounded, but I must say he impressed me with his last pronouncement. He was telling us that Sek Lung is under-paying compared to the Star of Peace mine . . .'

'By God, so he did ...' Charlie began but Jimmy interrupted.

'"Was willing" is what he said. What's Star of Peace currently paying their miners per bag?'

As luck would have it, there were several Star of Peace miners also doing their provisioning in Ah Chee's. Jack and the others asked around. They discovered that Star of Peace used to pay forty-five shillings per bag, but when the price of tin dropped recently, they had reduced that to forty-two and sixpence—which was still half a crown more than that skinflint Ah Fai was paying!

'Now,' Jack pointed out triumphantly, 'we can argue for more, forty-two shillings say. If Ah Fai refuses, we could threaten that all forty Sek Lung miners defect to the Star of Peace mine. Sek Lung could be ruined, especially as they'd have to pay the new Government surcharge of £10 per head for any new Chinese immigrants.'

Ah Chee's store supplied the all-important item they needed. Fourteen pence each allowed them to purchase balance scales and a twenty-eight pound weight. Filling their bags in four quarter lots would be something of a nuisance, but they would know the weight of each bag to the ounce, and hence what each miner was owed to the penny.

‘That should save Mr. Ah Fai all that weighing and recalculating,’ Ah Leung said hopefully, attempting an easy smile.

‘He loves that part,’ Jack grunted, ‘it allows him to cheat further. If the weight of the bags keeps varying, how can we keep track of our repayments? I’m *certain* I’m repaying more than I should. And it’ll be worse for us next time, when the bastard slaps on the extra rent.’

‘Well, don’t expect much sympathy from me over *that*,’ Jimmy drawled. ‘I’d much prefer to live with a ghost for nothing than with five other smelly, noisy Chinamen for a shilling a week. But to be fair, you and Charlie have a contract with Ah Fai, which we all witnessed. You live in this haunted house, you pay no rent. That was the contract we heard. He can’t cancel that in a fit of pique.’ He looked around him. ‘Not that it seems too haunted to me, you lucky buggers.’

‘*Whooo! Whooo!*’ Jack emitted eerie ghost calls.

Ah Leung jerked upright, rolling his eyes, the whites showing. Jimmy lounged back and lit his pipe.

‘It’s just as well, Jack,’ Jimmy said, ‘that as I hear it, the one thing Big Chan is afraid of is ghosts. Otherwise he might visit you one night and break your arms.’